**Asking Questions**

**Background**

Asking questions provides teachers with information about what children know. Questioning also helps teachers facilitate learning by expanding children’s language abilities and their decision-making skills. For example, by asking the right questions, adults can encourage children to fit facts together in a way they never had before or to look at a problem and generate several solutions to it.

Moore (1995) states that questions may be categorized as narrow or broad. When teachers ask narrow questions only factual recall or specific, correct answers are required. Broad questions, however, require that children go beyond simple memory and use the thinking process to generate answers. Children are required to integrate and analyze, make judgments, or produce something new from information. Over the years different sources have ranked question types in order of increasing difficulty. Generally, narrow questions such as “yes/no” and “what” questions are the easiest to answer, whereas broad questions such as “how” and “why” are more difficult.

Simply asking a child a question is not enough to help them develop these skills. There are several things to consider in formulating the right question. For example, consider: (1) what kind of question the child can comprehend, and (2) what kind of information you are seeking or want the child to seek. First and foremost, the child must be able to comprehend your question. Teachers should start with questions requiring recall of specific information and move to those requiring synthesis, analysis, and evaluation.

There are many classification systems that have been used to describe different levels of questioning. Convergent questions allow for only one right response. Divergent questions call for opinions, hypotheses, or evaluations; there are many possible correct responses.

|  | **Question type** | **Examples** |
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| Convergent | Questions about concrete facts (e.g., who, what, when, and where) | * Whose turn is it to pass out napkins? * Bonnie, what color does yellow and blue make? * Dolores, where do we keep the food? * What do we need to make a peanut butter and jelly sandwich? |
| Questions that require an alternate response (e.g., yes or no, true or false) | * Matt, did we go to the museum or the zoo yesterday? * Zane, did you get a new bike for your birthday? * Did the “Three Bears” eat cornflakes for breakfast? |
| Questions that require children to recall and integrate or analyze information to provide one correct answer | * Tony, how is a horse different from a unicorn? * Can you tell me the story of *The Very Hungry Caterpillar*? * If two children are absent, how many snacks will we need today? |
| Divergent | Open-ended questions that call for children to use their imagination, think creatively, and produce something unique | * Suzie, what are some different ways that you can use this box? * If there are not enough books for everyone to have their own, what could we do? * What should we do for our Dion on his birthday? |
| Questions that are evaluative and require children to make judgments or put a value on something. | * Cameron, which painting makes you feel happy when you look at it? * Who is your best friend? * Roy, why do you like to play basketball? |

Questions can be asked for different purposes. Teachers must be able to adapt the type of questions they use to match children’s developmental level and meet objectives. Questions can be used to focus children’s attention on a lesson or material being discussed. They may be used to check understanding, assess what children have learned, or motivate and arouse interest. For example, “We have been talking about fish this week. Let’s talk about all the facts that we have learned about fish so far. “Where do fish live, José?” José replies, “I don’t know.”

Hints and clues can be used to help children answer questions or to assist them in correcting an initial response. For example, when Jose says, “I don’t know,” the teacher could then prompt José to give a correct answer by saying, “Fish live in water. Would fish live in a river or a tree?” José says, “Fish live in a river.”

Questions also are used to probe for clarification, develop critical awareness, or refocus a correct or satisfactory response. For example, José’s teacher says, “Right, fish live in a river. What else can you tell me about fish?” José says, “fish have fins, and they swim!”

**Guidelines**

1. Ask questions that match your lesson objectives.
2. Ask different types of questions.
3. Give all children opportunities to answer questions.
4. When asking a broad question, be prepared to ask additional questions that will enable children to answer successfully.
5. Ensure you have children’s attention prior to asking the question.
6. Provide wait time following a question. Children need time to think and organize their responses.