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Primer on Open-Ended Questions for Youth

Adapted from Marin County Office of Education

What are open-ended questions?

Questions that have more than one right answer, or ones that can be answered in many ways, are called open-ended or divergent questions. This way of asking questions stimulates more language use, acknowledges that there can be many solutions to one problem, affirms children's ideas, and encourages creative thinking.

Why is it important to use open-ended questions?

Open-ended questions open up conversations. When you ask an open-ended question, you don't know what the child's answer is going to be. Close-ended questions usually limit conversation to a one or two word response, and sometimes end the conversation. Examples:

Close-ended question: "What color is this?"

Open-ended question: "You used a lot of blue on your painting. What does it remind you of?"

Close-ended question: "How many teddy bears are on the block?"

Open-ended question: "What are those teddy bears thinking about?"

Children must have a high level of verbal skills to respond to open-ended questions. Because open-ended questions have a wide-range of possible answers, children are able to respond only if they have a fairly high level of verbal skills, vocabulary, and self-confidence. Keep this in mind, so if the child has limited verbal skills close-ended questions may be more appropriate.

How do I effectively use open-ended questions?

The success of open-ended questions depends on the adult's ability to understand the child's interest or focus. The adult may be used to asking questions aimed at assessing how much a child knows (about color, number, shape or alphabet) and may find it difficult at first to ask engaging questions with no right answer. Close-ended questions usually end conversations. Open-ended questions that are too general or unfocused may be difficult for the child to respond to and may also end the conversation. Example:

A child has been using finger paint on the art table, mixing together orange, blue, and yellow.

Close-ended question: Adult: "What colors are you using?"
Child: "Orange."

General open-ended question: Adult: "Tell me about what you are doing."
Child: "Mixing colors."

Targeted open-ended question: Adult: "Wow! How did you get this color? What did you do first?"
Child: "First I stuck my hand in the blue paint, then I stuck my other hand in the orange paint. I made the paint squeeze through my fingers. It felt yucky. Then it started changing colors!"

Open-ended questions that are challenging can develop children's thinking skills:

Challenging children by posing thought-provoking, open-ended questions that are rich and clear can stimulate and push at the edges of children's development. These questions are often expressed in conditional form "What will happen if you...?" Types of open-ended questions that are challenging include:

- **Making predictions:** What do you think will happen if you keep adding blocks to your tower?
- **Stretching thinking:** What would happen if there were no cars, trucks, buses, planes, or boats? How would we get around?
- **Considering consequences:** What would happen if you left your drawing outside and it rained?
- **Assessing feelings:** How would you feel if that happened to you? How do you think Juan feels?
- **Thinking about similarities and differences:** How are these two blocks the same? What makes these things go together?
- **Applying knowledge to solve a problem:** What could you do to keep the paint from dripping on the floor?
- **Evaluating:** What made you decide to pick this book to read? How did this make you feel?

For Dual Language Learners: When using the child's second language, open-ended questions may be very difficult to understand and answer if the child is at a beginning level of language development. Close-ended questions, in contrast, provide limited vocabulary and simple choices that are easier for beginning English language learners to understand. As the child acquires language, the adult can gradually ask more complex close-ended questions and eventually move on to asking open-ended questions. "It helps if adults use 'yes/no' questions with beginning English language learners, because these questions are easier than 'what' questions, and 'what' questions are easier than 'where' or 'when' questions. 'How' and 'why' questions are the most difficult for new speakers of the language."

Sources:

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Prompts for Open-Ended Questions

Tell me about...
How do you know that...?
What do you think about...?
Show me how you...
I wonder why...
Can you tell me more about why...
How did you...
Why did you...
How do you know?
What did you do first?
What can you tell me about...
Can you think of another way...
What do you think?
What do you think would happen if...

What could you do instead?
How did you do that?
What does it remind you of?
What can you do next time?
Tell me what happened.
What do you call the things you're using?
How are you going to do that?
Is there anything else you could use?
What is it made of?
What do you think will happen next?
What could be added?
What else can this be used for?
What else is like this?
How can you do it faster?

Spanish: Preguntas que requieren oraciones completas para principiantes

Dime acerca de...
¿Cómo sabes que...?
¿Qué piensas de...?
Muéstrame ¿Cómo tu...
Me pregunto ¿Por qué ...
¿Puedes decirme más sobre por qué...
¿Cómo tu...
¿Por qué tú...
¿Cómo sabías?
¿Qué hiciste primero?
¿Qué puedes decirme acerca de...
¿Puedes pensar de otro modo...
¿Qué piensas?
¿Qué crees que pasaría si...

¿Qué harías en lugar de...?
¿Cómo hiciste eso?
¿A qué te hace recordar?
¿Qué puedes hacer la próxima vez?
Dime ¿Qué pasó?
¿Cómo llamas las cosas que estás usando?
¿Cómo vas a hacer eso?
¿Hay algo más que podrías usar?
¿De qué está hecho?
¿Qué crees que pasará después?
¿Qué podría agregarse?
¿En qué otra cosa puede ser usada esto?
¿Qué otras cosas es como esto?
¿Cómo puedes hacerlo tan rápido?