



ILLUSTRATION BY JON PEARSON

Teaching Children to Think and Question at Home

How can parents encourage their children to ask questions? To challenge others' opinions or arguments with respect? To become good conversationalists? To develop good thinking skills?

Authors of *Cradles of Eminence* studied the childhoods of more than 700 famous people to discover common threads that may have contributed to their adult success. The subjects included people from earlier generations, like Eleanor Roosevelt and Gandhi, as well as people still living, like Hillary Clinton and Bill Gates.

By reading biographies of hundreds of eminent people, the authors found that (1) these individuals had all loved learning as children (though they often disliked school), (2) the families of these individuals had books and other educational materials in the home, and they talked about books and ideas, (3) the families often had strong opinions along with heated discussions, and (4) the parents encouraged the children and supported their interests.

How can parents use this research in teaching children to question? Modeling seems obvious, with opportunities for children to practice talking and questioning at home and in the family—during everyday conversation, while preparing meals or setting the table, driving to soccer, or whenever parents and children sit together to talk and listen. Relaxed family meals don't exist for many children today, and children who experience family meals with good conversation are lucky. When children hear the back-and-forth questions, conversations, and friendly debate between family members, they absorb the strategies of critical thinking, argument, and phrasing of questions, as well as respectful language.

With the distractions of technology and multitasking that surround us these days, how can we as parents encourage our children to continue to wonder, ask questions, and improve their thinking and conversational skills—skills they will need as they attend school and prepare for a career and a future?

Gifted children come into this world with a need to know, and questions come naturally to them. They ask “What’s that?” and “Why?” incessantly and learn from our answers. They also learn from our questions to them. As children’s first and most important teachers, parents should encourage—not discourage—their many questions: “That’s a good question. What do you think?” Or “I don’t know; let’s look it up.” Even when our ears are tired from hearing “Why?” and then “But why?” on and on, we should do our best to listen and respond to children’s questions; we don’t want them to stop asking. If the timing isn’t good, offer to address the question later. “That’s an interesting issue, and I don’t know the answer. Since I’m busy cooking, can we look for the answer together after dinner? If I forget, please remind me.” These words show your child that you think his curiosity is valid and important. When we converse with our children and answer their questions, we teach them over time how to formulate, ask, and respond to various questions and situations.

When children are small, we teach them to think for themselves and to gain confidence through offering “choice questions.” We ask, “Which book would you like to read tonight?” Then we can ask some “thought questions”: “What do you think this story is about?” “What do you think will happen in this story?” “What do you think might happen next?” “What clues do we have?” “Let’s see if you’re right.”

We can encourage children to give detailed answers by asking more open-ended questions. If you ask, “How was school today?” the child can say, “Fine,” and that ends the conversation. If you phrase the question, “What was the best thing that happened at school today?” the conversation will likely continue.

Questions that ask “why” help our children develop their critical, creative, and analytical thinking skills: “Why do you think some children tease or are mean to others?” “Why does this hurt so much?” “Why do others tolerate it?” “What can people do to stop the teasing?”

Parents can also ask questions that help children learn to clarify their thinking, develop support for their statements, and advocate for themselves: "Why do you think teacher M is unfair?" "What do you dislike about the assignment?" "What would you like him to do (or say) instead?" "How do you think you could approach teacher M to ask if you could do an alternate assignment?"

As children get older, we can discuss other school or community issues that interest them, for example, "What do you think our neighborhood should do to stop the vandalism at the new park?" Questions about real problems like these encourage children to learn to think creatively and productively about possible solutions. Is there a problem at your house that needs to be solved? Bring it up at the dinner table. "How can we remember to lock the back door before we go to bed at night?" Or, "The kitchen cupboard doors slam too loudly. Is there a way to fix that? Who has some ideas?" Consider all the ideas, and choose the one that seems best.

Even elementary-age children can have input in family trips or a special event. "What ideas do you have for our summer vacation? Where would you like to go? What activities would you like to participate in?" Their world expands as they learn about possibilities for travel. They can then be involved in the decision making and planning. Your child can find activities and attractions in various locations by searching online. They can learn about costs of transportation, food, lodging, activities offered, and so on. "How much will this activity cost? Will it fit in our budget? If not, is there another option?" Planning a vacation with kids input like this takes longer than if mom and dad do it, but what children learn from the process is priceless.

"Are there other options?" is always a good question for almost any problem. In the family, it gets everyone involved and teaches evaluation and compromise. When making decisions on their own and having to choose from multiple options, children learn to use criteria to narrow the choices. This is the same process they will need to use later when the stakes are higher, such as when they choose a college or buy a house.

What about natural disasters? Other news events? By discussing local or world events, parents can help children become aware of the complexity of these issues and how they involve facts and science from many disciplines. Events such as the earthquake in Japan prompt a deluge of questions. In finding answers, children learn about the causes of earthquakes and tsunamis, how earthquakes are measured and predicted, other locations where quakes have occurred, and where they may occur again. Societal problems such as air pollution, the high cost of gasoline, the depletion of rainforests, and coral reefs dying in the oceans, are all issues gifted children can take on and learn about.

With almost any big problem, children may be interested in going further—for example, discussing not only the causes, but also the short—and long-term effects of certain events. Many children watched the tsunami in Japan in March 2011 roll in and destroy homes and businesses while the people scrambled to higher ground. The images were striking and disturbing. The effects were immediately obvious—people losing their homes, their jobs, their possessions, and the problems of contaminated water, costs of cleanup, and damage to the economy.

Because of the sensitivity of gifted children, serious problems like these may evoke an emotional reaction, and it is important for parents to emphasize that many people are working to solve these problems. Scientists are searching for better ways to predict tsunamis. Although events like earthquakes and flooding are terrible tragedies, the human spirit to help others and to rebuild is strong. Parents can talk about humanitarian efforts that occur following natural disasters and the importance of resiliency, and children may want to send a donation to the Red Cross or another charity to feel as though they are doing something to help.

Another good way to practice questioning and conversation is through discussing books with your child; it could be Harry Potter, Mary Poppins, or just about any substantive book. In her annotated bibliography *Some of My Best Friends Are Books*, Judith Halsted recommends that parents look for books with advanced vocabulary and complex characters and plots that are slightly above the child's current reading level for some added interest and challenge, then read the book aloud and discuss it together. Discussion questions should be open ended, e.g., "What traits did you admire in Dan? Why? Why was it hard for him to confess what he had done?"

Speaking and thinking skills begin and develop in the home—through reading and talking about books and in everyday conversations about many different topics. Parents who respond sincerely to children's questions show children that they value learning, and parents who ask children "thought questions" help develop their children's creative and analytical thinking skills. Strong communication skills within the family that include questioning, analytical thinking, looking at options, using criteria to make decisions, and showing respect for other opinions will be valuable as children grow into their teen and adult years. ■

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