Opening up Children’s Minds with Open-ended Questions
Dr. Ernie Dettore, Early Childhood Consultant

“Poppa, why do you always answer my questions with questions?” asked Marissa.

“Because what you have to say is far more important for me to know than what I will tell you” answered Poppa. In this case I am Poppa and I have used questioning techniques with children for my entire career as an early childhood educator. A child’s role should not always be as receivers or receptacles of information. Educators have long thought that questioning is especially important to develop a child’s ability to think. Fred Rogers once said that “Your questions are more important than your answers” while scientists have long used questioning in the scientific method process. Most experiments start with “What will happen when...?”

For teachers and parents, open-ended questions are wonderful tools that promote children’s creative thought, problem-solving skills, and cognitive growth. An open-ended question is designed to encourage a full, meaningful answer using the child’s own knowledge and/or feelings. It is the opposite of a closed-ended question, which encourages a short or single-word answer. Open-ended questions also tend to be more objective and less leading than closed-ended questions. They typically begin with words such as "why" and "how", or phrases such as "Tell me about...". Often they are not technically a question, but a statement which implicitly asks for a response... “Tell me about how vegetables that grow underground are different from vegetables that grow above ground.”

So what is the rationale for using open-ended questions?

During the past decade, how we view learning and instruction has changed. Subject matter has historically dominated education. Yet recent cognitive research provides evidence that conceptual understanding is more than just an accumulation of information. It depends on an active restructuring of old ideas to accommodate new experiences for real knowledge to occur.

These research findings, with their emphasis on individual experience, have resonated in the practical world. Today we see the focus shift from learning defined as content knowledge to learning defined as the ability to use and interpret knowledge critically and thoughtfully. Some experts argue that critical thinking is as relevant to literature as it is to science, social studies, and mathematics; that problem solving is not the sole purview of mathematics, and that hypothesis formulation is not limited to science.

Open-ended questions are one of the most powerful tools available to teachers and parents. We can use them to stretch children’s curiosity, reasoning ability, creativity, and independence as well as develop their growing language skills. Open-ended questions elicit fresh and sometimes even startling insights and ideas, opening minds and enabling teachers and students to build knowledge together.

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