

Talking With Your Toddler-- Development of Spoken Language and Vocabulary Development (Questioning)

What the Research Says

- Asking questions while having conversations with your toddler will encourage him to talk more, which will promote his language development.
- Asking toddlers questions helps them to focus on what they are doing and learn more from those experiences.
- Asking questions stimulate a toddler's thinking, curiosity and imagination, and it helps them begin to learn important problem solving skills.
- There are three kinds of questions adults can ask toddlers when talking or reading with them: yes/no questions, "wh" questions, and open-ended questions.
- "Yes/no" questions are considered the easiest question for children to answer and most can do so by their second birthday. For example, "Do you want a some carrots?"
- "Wh" questions start with "what," "who," and "where." For example, "What is this?" "Where's the car?" "Who is _____?" (as you point to a person)
- "Open-ended " questions can have many different answers and encourage children to think. They usually start with "how," "what if," and "why." For example, "How did you make that tower?" Toddlers are usually just beginning to answer "open-ended" questions. Most children are able to answer "open-ended" questions by three or four years.

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Activities for Families

- To teach a child to answer “yes”/”no” questions, hide a toy or other object under one of two or three bowls. Let your child watch you hide the object. Then ask, “Is it here?” and pick up one of the bowls. Nod your head and say, “Yes, it is here” or “No, it is not.” Eventually, your child will be able to answer the “Is it here?” question. As your child grows older, increase the number of bowls and don’t let him watch you hide the object. Sometimes, let him hide the object and ask you the question, “Is it here?”
- To help your child practice answering “where” questions, hide a familiar object somewhere in your home as your child watches you do so. Ask him, “Where is the ___?” As he gets older, don’t let him watch where you hide it. Then, when you ask him, “Where is it?” and he starts searching for it, tell him when he is “hot” (near the object) or “cold” (moving away from the object). You can also have your child hide an object and you look for it. During the search, keep asking, “**Where is it?**”
- With toddlers, ask questions like, “Are you a dog?” “Is your hat on your head or foot?” “Can a cat ride a bike?” The sillier the question, the more your child will like it. With younger children, accept a head nod but always encourage them to answer “yes”/”no”. As they get older, ask them to say a complete sentence, “No, I am not a dog. “
- Ask your child questions that give her a choice: “Are you a dog or a girl?”
- To help your child practice answering “who” questions, look at photograph albums together. Children love to look at family members and relive family events. Point to familiar family members and ask, “Who is that?” Don’t bombard your child with only “who” questions though. Spend time talking together about the photos. Let your child hear your voice, words, and expressions. Mix in all of three types of questions (yes/no, “wh” questions, and open-ended questions).

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Advice to Families

- Ask questions whenever you are having a conversation with your child. Turn off electronic devices during mealtimes, while running errands, and/or playing games. Take time to talk with each other.
- Follow your child's lead. Ask her questions about what she is interested in. Notice what she is looking at, listening to, touching, tasting, feeling or doing—what she is experiencing in her world. These are the things that are meaningful to her.
- After you ask a question, give your child at least 5 seconds to respond before asking another question or answering the first question yourself. Children need more time than adults to think about the question and decide how to answer it. Your child may know the answer if you give him time.
- Ask only one question at a time. You may say, "Where is your brother? Is he watching TV? Does he know it is time to eat?" Children won't know what question to answer! Ask one question and wait 5 seconds before asking another to give the child time to respond.
- If you ask your child a question and he doesn't answer, you can: 1) repeat the question and pause longer waiting for an answer, 2) rephrase the question using simpler words, 3) rephrase the question to give the child a choice: Instead of asking, "What color is your coat?" ask "Is your coat red or black?" 4) answer the question yourself.
- Although most toddlers won't be able to answer open-ended questions, get in the habit of asking them. After you ask the question, watch your child for cues indicating what he is thinking and/or feeling. Then answer the question yourself. For example, if you and your child are fixing the front door, you might say, "How can we fix the door?" If you notice your child looks at or points to the toolbox that you have with you, you could say, "That's a good idea. We can use the screwdriver and screws to fix the door."