

Learning-oriented talk: Professional learning resource 1

Questions

What are questions and why are they important?

Questions are used to seek information from others. When children use questions, they show their ability to request information in order to learn from others. When they receive answers to their questions, children's curiosity is sparked and this motivates them to ask more questions. In this way, children's questions help them to deepen their understandings about their world.

Questions come in different forms. **Yes-No questions** seek agreement, confirmation or permission as a simple 'yes' or 'no' response. Yes-No instrumental requests for action or things (e.g., *Can I have more sausage? Can you get me my bag?*) are not classified as learning-oriented talk. In contrast, **Yes-No information questions**, which seek confirmation or agreement about an object or situation (e.g., *Is that a duck? Is she your friend?*) can promote children's learning. **Wh- questions** start with 'what', 'who', 'when', 'where' or 'how' (e.g., *What is this? Who is at the door? When are they coming? Where are you going? How did you go to granny's place?*) and request the name of an object or other specific information in response. **Why questions** are a type of wh- question that require more complex answers as they seek explanations. A why question starts with 'why' or 'how' (*Why is Sonia crying? How does this toy work?*) and the response often contains the word 'because'.

How does children's use of questions develop over time?

Most children start to use information-seeking questions between the age of 2 and 3 years. Of the ToddlerTaLK children, 75% used **Wh- questions** at 2½ years. At this age, questions such as "What's this?", which ask for things to be named and help expand children's vocabulary, are most prevalent (see example 1 below).

Yes-No information questions were less frequently observed at the start, but increased rapidly, so that by 3½ years, nearly all the children in the study used this kind of question. **Why questions** were the least common, used by only a few children before age 3. However, more children began to use Why questions after they turned 3 and at age 3½ 60% of the children used explanation-seeking questions (See Figure 1.1)

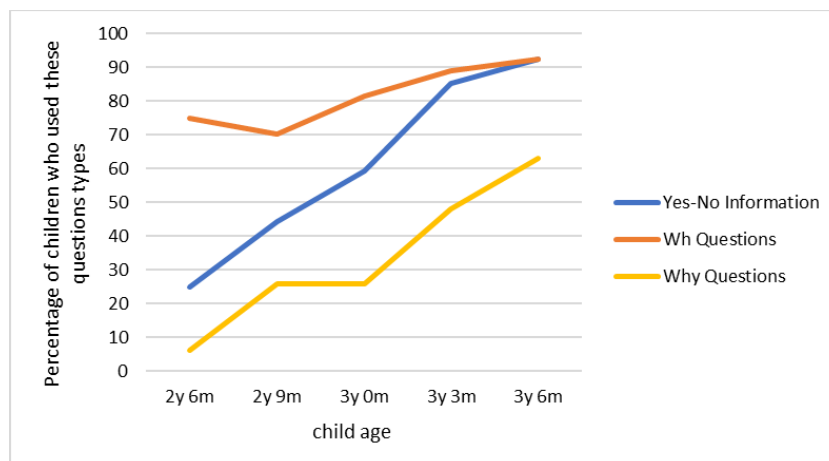


Figure 1:1. Development in ToddlerTaLK children's use of questions from 2½ to 3½ years.

Children's use of questions in practice

Example 1	Interpretation
<p>Aaron (2y 9m), Karen (2y 8m) and other children are having lunch. Educator is sitting next to Aaron.</p> <p>Aaron: <u>What's this?</u> Educator: It's a bean. Aaron: A bean. Educator: A kidney bean. Aaron: <u>What's this?</u> Karen: It's a bean. Educator: It's another bean indeed. Aaron: <u>What's this?</u> Karen: It's a piece of tomato. Aaron: <u>What's this?</u> Educator: Oh, it is a chickpea. Aaron: <u>What's this?</u> Educator: It's a bean. Aaron: Ah.</p>	<p>Aaron asks the Wh- question 'What's this?' to request information about the food in his bowl. As Figure 1 shows, most children in the study used Wh- questions in the first observations. Aaron appears to know that the best way to learn new things is to ask a question. Aaron shows "initiative by seeking information and asking questions" (EYLF, p. 33, Outcome 2: Children are connected with and contribute to their world).</p>
Example 2	Interpretation
<p>Aaron (3y 6m), Jack (3y 6m) and other children are having lunch. Educator is sitting next to Jack.</p> <p>Aaron: <u>Why did you come back?</u> Educator: Because I need to record children. Aaron: You stay here and <u>then are you going home?</u> Educator: No, I'm going to my office after. Jack: <u>Where is your office?</u> Educator: My office is in the University. Jack: My office is at Little Stars [the centre]. <u>What's in your office?</u> Educator: There are a few desks, a few computers, because I'm sharing my office with other teachers as well. Jack: <u>How do you get there?</u> Educator: I just walk there. I live nearby. Jack: I live in one of those towers [pointing at the high-rises seen from the centre]. Educator: Me too. We are neighbours.</p>	<p>Aaron and Jack ask questions such as 'Are you going home?' (Yes-No information), 'Where is your office?' (Wh- question) and 'Why did you come back?' (Why question). As Figure 1 shows, by 3½ years most children can use different types of questions and can use these to extend their interactions. Note how this example seems more diverse and complex in comparison with the example above, recorded when Aaron was younger. Questions allow Aaron to show interest in others and world around him. This supports the child's capacity to be "connected with and contribute to their world" (Outcome 2: Children are connected with and contribute to their world) and demonstrate involvement in learning (Outcome 4: Children are confident and involved learners). Questions allow children to participate in and lead sustained shared interactions (Outcome 5: Children are effective communicators).</p>

Educators can encourage children to use questions by:

- Creating a culture of responsiveness where children’s questions are welcome. This gives children the confidence to seek information from others.
- Asking questions in different contexts. This provides models for asking questions and motivates children’s curiosity and encourages them talk about what they know and think.
- Ensuring that children’s questions receive at least short answers, and whenever possible more extended ones. An extended answer is essentially an answer followed by a statement or another question to extend the topic. The child’s question can be used as a springboard for starting a conversation. For example:
Leo (3y 3m) asks the educator about an adult who has left the room.
Leo: Is she your friend?
Educator: She is my friend. Her name is Nina. Do you like Sharon [a different educator]? Yes?
Leo: Yes.
Educator: Then you’ll like Nina too. She is nice. She is a really nice friend.
- Drawing children’s attention to their own and their peers’ use of questions. Phrases such as ‘That’s a great question. Let’s see what we can discover.’ or ‘Jacob wants to know about How can we help him find out?’ create learning-oriented conversations that encourage curiosity and active learning.

How do questions support learning in early childhood services?

The EYLF (2022) highlights the valuable opportunities that play-based learning offers children to “ask questions, solve problems and engage in critical thinking” (p.21). Children “show initiative by seeking information and asking questions”, which helps develop their sense of identity (EYLF, p. 33, Outcome 2: Children are connected with and contribute to their world). By asking questions, children also “express wonder and interest in their environments” and are “actively engaged in their learning” (EYLF, p.51, Outcome 4: Children are confident and involved learners). Effective communication skills (Outcome 5), too, are evident and fostered through children and educators exchanging ideas and information, asking and responding to questions. Questions can be used across a range of activities, including not only literacy experiences such as shared reading, but also play, group time, mealtime and everyday routines.

How do questions support learning when children start school?

Questions are key to several Early Stage 1 outcomes in the NSW English Syllabus (NESA, 2022). By “responding to questions to indicate choices” and asking “questions about people, events or objects in the present” children demonstrate their ability to listen for understanding and overall ‘oral language and communication skills’ (ENE-OLC-01). Asking questions is an important strategy for engaging in social and learning interactions. Questions can help start and sustain a conversation and recall details of events or stories.

Questions support children’s reading comprehension (ENE-RECOM-01) too. For example, when they “identify words that represent who, what, when, where and why in texts”, children demonstrate ability to understand and connect sentences. Children’s comprehension skills are also evident when they ask questions to clarify meaning in the texts they read, respond to questions that require them to “use background knowledge when identifying connections between a text, own life, other texts and/or the world”, make predictions about a text, and “use information or events from different parts of the text to form an opinion”.

To support ‘Understanding and responding to literature’ (ENE-UARL-01), the syllabus advises teachers to “engage children in rich talk about literature by asking ‘powerful questions’” that invite students to “make critical connections to read-aloud texts”.