What are open-ended questions?

*Questions that have no one right answer. There is also no wrong answer.*

Open-ended (or divergent) questions are a valuable educational tool to use with young children. Open-ended questions invite children to think and to give individual responses. They encourage give-and-take conversations. Open-ended questions do not look for a “correct” answer. Often there isn’t one. A question like “Do you feel sick today?” calls for a yes or no answer. But “How do you feel today?” elicits a much more accurate and personal response. “I feel OK, but my tummy hurts a little.” “Can you show me where it hurts?”

Open-ended questions provide children with opportunities to explore and to think creatively. “How did the little boy in the story find his lost kitten?” asks for a recall answer. “If you lost your kitten like the boy in the story, what might you do to find him?” invites children to think on a deeper level, to problem solve, to see connections, and to make discoveries on their own that continue the thought process.

Open-ended questions set the stage for discovery. They yield multiple solutions, and they involve children in the “why” of their thinking or their answers. Through open-ended questions, children become engaged in the thought process. “Which truck rolled down the ramp faster?” does not invite a child to become involved and to explore in the same way as, “Why do you think one truck rolled down the ramp faster than the other truck?” “Why did you try that?”

Open-ended questions, discussions, materials, and activities must be meaningful and relevant to children in order to stimulate learning. When observing a child at the sand and water table with two sizes of sieves, ask “What are you going to do with the sieves?” This question opens up pathways to learning that may not have been considered if the question had been, “Will the sand go through the big sieve or the little sieve first?”

**Tips for phrasing and using open-ended questions**

- The basis for open-ended questions is the use of wording that naturally invites critical thinking and problem solving. Asking open-ended questions often involves phrases such as...

  “What if...?”
  “How could you...?”
  “What can you...?”
“Why did you…”
“Why do you think…?”

- Questions should be pertinent to the topic, and the topic should be developmentally appropriate to the children.

- Be patient and wait for considered answers from the children. Don’t answer for them, but give them time to consider various possibilities before they respond.

- Open-ended questions should be used with respect for children – to engage them as partners in exploration and discussion. The purpose of the questions is to promote critical thinking – not to quiz children.

- Encourage children to question. Try not to dominate discussions. Listen and respond to children’s questions.

- Open-ended questions can be used to pull children in, to connect them to a conversation, or to renew interest in a topic. As always, follow the lead of the child and continue as long is there is active interest. Stop when interest wanes.

- An essential part of an adult’s role is to model critical thinking and problem solving, to trust the learner, and to learn with the child. Routinely asking open-ended questions and exploring hypotheses together create a learning environment where it is safe to think, to question, to test, to be wrong, and to try again.