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Where Do All the Questions Go?

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Abstract

"There are a variety of explanations for why children ask questions and why they stop, as well as how our culture as a whole is doing at asking questions."

Posting about childrens' attempts to understand the world around them from *In All Things* - an online journal for critical reflection on faith, culture, art, and every ordinary-yet-graced square inch of God's creation.

<https://inallthings.org/where-do-all-the-questions-go/>

Keywords

In All Things, children, questions and answers, schools, creativity

Disciplines

Child Psychology

Comments

In All Things is a publication of the [Andreas Center for Reformed Scholarship and Service at Dordt University](#).

in things

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Where Do All the Questions Go?

Luralyn Helming

There are many things people warn you about children: they don't let you sleep, they have so many needs, they will make your house a mess, they will eat you out of house and home. One almost universal comment you hear is that your children will want to know why... for everything. It seems to begin as soon as they can formulate questions, although research shows children are able to use the components of requesting information even before they are verbal.¹ The questions continue—that is, until about middle school, when the questions seem to end.² There are a variety of explanations for why children ask questions and why they stop, as well as how our culture as a whole is doing at asking questions.

Why? Why do children ask all the questions? The answer is easy, because it's the same as anyone else: they want to know the answer. One research study substantiated this by assessing transcripts of both children's conversations at home and in laboratory settings. When children receive an explanatory answer to a question, they either stop asking or ask a follow-up question. When children do not receive an answer or the answer is not explanatory, they repeat the question or rephrase and repeat the question until it is answered.³ Children are capable at a very early age of making logical connections, and they want to explore the world to make those connections.⁴ There are other explanations that fit some circumstances. Sometimes children want you to pay attention to them; if your child only asks you questions while you are busy, this may be a contributing factor. Set aside some time to explain the world to them—it will help their need for your attention to be met as well as answering their questions. Sometimes children are asking out of defiance, but realize you can still answer those questions. If

they want to know why they go to bed, explain to them the importance of sleep for the development of their brains.

Children's questions are their attempts to understand the complex world in which they live.⁵ The complexity of their questions will mature with them. As children are exposed to the complexity of the world, they respond to it with questions. Children asked deeper questions about animals when at the zoo, experiencing the real thing, than when exposed to drawings or replicas of animals. The questions children ask are coming out of their existing knowledge— they are not asking questions they know the answers to, but rather questions that will build on what they already know and understand.

Given this, the best thing to do with questions is to answer them, with real, explanatory answers. If you don't know the answer, look it up. Chances are that you carry access to the internet on a little device in your pocket. Use the search for answers as an interactive, learning experience. Show them how you choose reputable sources for the answers or how you confirm the information by using more than one source. Take them to the library and find age-appropriate sources to answer the question; there is a non-fiction section in the children's section of the library. If you don't know the answer and cannot look it up in the moment, encourage their creativity by asking them why they think the world is that way. Record questions and answers where they can see them and review them. It might also help you see the development of their questions, or at least the topics worth checking out a library book on. Help them to frame deeper questions in the content area. There are many more helpful solutions to answering children's questions⁶ than ignoring them or telling them that they don't matter, because we want them to keep asking questions.

Children stop asking questions around middle school,⁷ but it is a gradual tapering off, not a sudden decrease. There are a variety of explanations for this decrease in questions. One major factor is that we do not reward questions in school, we reward answers.⁸ Whatever behavior is rewarded is the behavior that is most likely to continue. In school there frequently is not time for off-topic pondering, so teachers may discourage it. Peers may be annoyed at the student who distracts the teacher with questions because they assume it means they will have to make up the content independently. Just the attention it requires young children to follow complex instructions may mean they don't have remaining mental capacity to wonder about the world as well. Asking "stupid questions" brings criticism from peers—and sometimes teachers—which may stifle future questions.

Questions are important. Learning is the answering of questions. There is a decline in interest and engagement that happens in middle school; it is the result of the decrease in questions.⁹ While talking in a group, the person who asks questions controls the

direction of the conversation. Engaging in conversation through questions and answers helps meet the human need for interactions with others. Also, questions connect to creativity, and the US is in a creativity crisis. Creativity scores increased from when the assessment of creativity was first designed in the 1950s up until the 1990s, just like IQ scores have increased over time. Since the 1990s, however, creativity scores have been on the decline in the US.¹⁰ Many factors have been blamed for this, and probably all play a role. Much focus in curriculum has been on improving standardized test scores, which are not connected to creativity. There is the increase in television viewing, videogame playing, and access to the internet to blame as well. There is a bias in the cultural conceptualization of creativity as the purview of the arts, when creativity is about finding novel solutions to problems. Wherever this shift in creativity is happening, it is probably tied to the questions we are asking—if we are asking them—and our willingness to search out answers.

FOOTNOTES

1. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/17394580>
2. <https://bobbyalbert.com/why-do-we-stop-asking-why/>
3. <https://srcd.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/j.1467-8624.2009.01356.x>
4. <https://bobbyalbert.com/why-do-we-stop-asking-why/>
5. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/17394580>
6. <https://www.abcmouse.com/why-children-ask-why>
7. <https://bobbyalbert.com/why-do-we-stop-asking-why/>
8. <https://amorebeautifulquestion.com/why-do-kids-ask-so-many-questions-but-more-importantly-why-do-they-stop/>
9. <https://amorebeautifulquestion.com/why-do-kids-ask-so-many-questions-but-more-importantly-why-do-they-stop/>
10. <https://www.newsweek.com/creativity-crisis-74665> & <https://www.resilience.org/stories/2018-09-24/the-creativity-crisis/>