# Open-Ended Questions

Questions that have more than one right answer, or ones than can be answered in many ways, are called open-ended or divergent questions. This way of asking questions stimulates more language use, acknowledges that there can be many solutions to one problem, affirms children's ideas, and encourages creative thinking.

Open-ended questions open up conversations. When you ask an open-ended question, you don't know what the child's answer is going to be. Close-ended questions usually limit conversation to a one or two word response, and sometimes they end the conversation. Examples:

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| Close-ended question: | "What color is this?" |
| Open-ended question: | "You used a lot of blue on your painting. What does it remind you of?" |
| Close-ended question: | "How many teddy bears are on the block?" |
| Open-ended question: | "What are those teddy bears thinking about?" |
| Close-ended question: | "What's your doll's name?" |
| Open-ended question: | "Your baby is so beautiful! Tell me about her." |

**Children must have a high level of verbal skills to respond to open-ended questions**. Because open-ended questions have a wide-range of possible answers, children are able to respond only if they have a fairly high level of verbal skills, vocabulary, and self-confidence. If the child has limited verbal skills, use parallel talk, repetition, extension, or ask a close-ended question.

**The success of open-ended questions depends on the adult's ability to understand the child's interest or focus.** The adult may be used to asking questions aimed at assessing how much a child knows (about color, number, shape or alphabet) and may find it difficult at first to ask engaging questions with no right answer. Close-ended questions usually end conversations. Open-ended questions that are too general or unfocused may be difficult for the child to respond to and may also end the conversation.

A child has been using fingerpaint on the art table, mixing together orange, blue, and yellow. A teacher approaches.

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| Close-ended question: | Teacher: "What colors are you using?"<br>Child: "Orange." |
| General open-ended question: | Teacher: "Tell me about what you are doing."<br>Child: "Mixing colors." |
| Targeted open-ended question: | Teacher:"Wow! How did you get this color? What did you do first?"<br>Child: "First I stuck my hand in the blue paint, then I stucked my other hand in the orange paint. I made the paint squeeze through my fingers. It felt yucky. Then it started changing colors!" |

**Open-ended questions that are challenging can develop children's thinking skills :** Challenging children by posing thought-provoking, open-ended questions that are rich and clear can stimulate and push at the edges of children's development. These questions are often expressed in conditional form "What will happen if you…?" Types of open-ended questions that are challenging include:

- Making predictions - *What do you think will happen if you keep adding blocks to your tower?*
- Stretching thinking - *What would happen if there were no cars, trucks, buses, planes, or boats? How would we get around?*
- Considering consequences - *What would happen if you left your drawing outside and it rained?*
- Assessing feelings - *How would you feel if that happened to you? How do you think Juan feels?*
- Thinking about similarities and differences - *How are these two blocks the same? What makes these things go together?*
- Applying knowledge to solve a problem - *What could you do to keep the paint from dripping on the floor?*
- Evaluating - *What made you decide to pick this book to read? How did this make you feel?*

**For Dual Language Learners:** Ask open-ended questions in the child's home language. This will help the child develop her cognitive skills and her home language skills. When using the child's second language, open-ended questions may be very difficult to understand and answer if the child is at a beginning level of language development. Close-ended questions, in contrast, provide limited vocabulary and simple choices that are easier for beginning English language learners to understand. As the child acquires language, the adult can gradually ask more complex close-ended questions and eventually move on to asking open-ended questions. "It helps if teachers use 'yes/no' questions with beginning English language learners, because these questions are easier than 'what' questions, and 'what' questions are easier than 'where' or 'when' questions. 'How' and 'why' questions are the most difficult for new speakers of the language." McLaughlin, Barry "Fostering Second Language Development in Young Children: Principles and Practices, National Center for Research on Cultural Diversity and Second Language Learning, 1995. www.ncela.gwu.edu/miscpubs/ncredsll/epr14.htm

*"Never ask a child a question that you already know the answer to."*
David Weikart, former president, High/Scope Educational Research Foundation

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# Types of Open-ended Questions

**Making predictions** - *What do you think will happen if you …?*

**Stretching thinking** - *What would happen if …?*

**Considering consequences** - *What would happen if you …?*

**Assessing feelings** – How would you feel if …? *How did this make you feel?*

**Thinking about similarities and differences**
*How are these the same? How are they different? What makes these things go together?*

**Applying knowledge to solve a problem**
*What could you do to …? How would you…?*

**Evaluating** – *How do you feel about what you did? What could you do differently? How would you do it next time?*

# Open-ended Question Starters:

Tell me about…

What do you think…?

I wonder why…

How did you…

How do you know?

What can you tell me about…

What do you think?

What could you do instead?

What does it remind you of?

Tell me what happened.

How are you going to do that?

What is it made of?

What could be added?

What else is like this?

How do you know that…?

Show me how you…

Can you tell me more about why…

Why did you…

What did you do first?

Can you think of another way…

What do you think would happen if…

How did you do that?

What can you do next time?

What do you call the things you're using?

Is there anything else you could use?

What do you think will happen next?

What else can this be used for?

How can you do it faster?

## Preguntas que requieren oraciones completas para Principiantes:

Dime acerca de…

¿Qué piensas de…?

Me pregunto ¿Por qué …

¿Cómo tu…

¿Cómo sabías?

¿Qué puedes decirme acerca de…

¿Qué piensas?

¿Qué harías en lugar de…?

¿A qué te hace recordar?

Dime ¿Qué pasó?

¿Cómo vas a hacer eso?

¿De qué está hecho?

¿Qué podría agregársele?

¿Qué otra cosas es como esto?

¿Cómo sabes que…?

Muéstrame ¿Cómo tu…

¿Puedes decirme más sobre por qué…

¿Por qué tú…

¿Qué hiciste primero?

¿Puedes pensar de otro modo…

¿Qué crees que pasaría si…

¿Cómo hiciste eso?

¿Qué puedes hacer la próxima vez?

¿Cómo llamas las cosas que estás usando?

¿Hay algo más que podrías usar?

¿Qué crees que pasará después?

¿En qué otra cosa puede ser usada esto?

¿Cómo puedes hacerlo tan rápido?

Prompts for open-ended questions that can be cut out and laminated onto the table where you sit with children:

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| **Tell me about…** | **I wonder why…** |
| **What do you think?** | **Why did you…** |
| **How did you…** | **How did you do that?** |
| **How do you know that…?** | **What did you do first?** |
| **What does it remind you of?** | **How do you know?** |
| **What could you do instead?** | **What can you do next time?** |
| **What could be added?** | **How are you going to do that?** |
| **What would happen if…** | **Show me how you…** |

**What happened?**

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|---|---|
| What else is this like? | How else can this be arranged? |
| What is the opposite of this? | What if nothing is done? |