Toddlers: why do they ask so many questions?

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Dr Susan White gives some of the answers as to why children ask so many questions.

At 3am I am woken by my three-year-old son screaming, "Mummy! Quick, Mummy, quick!" Imagining vomit all over the bed or another impending disaster, I race into his room. "What's wrong?" I ask him. "Mummy, the sun's gone. Where has the sun gone?" he asks. "The sun is sleeping, sweetheart. Now go back to sleep," I respond. "But where, Mummy? Where is the sun sleeping?" he persists. "In the sky," I reply. "But I can't see it," he says. "Does the sun have a doona with dinosaurs on it like me? Where is the sun, Mummy?"

I am stumped. It is 3am and my head is full of sleep. I can't find the words, logic or patience to explain planetary theory to a three year old. Part of me is wondering why this has to be discussed now, in the middle of the night. Part of me is cursing that I didn't give a satisfactory answer when he asked me the same question at dinnertime. Part of me is wishing I had concentrated harder at school so I could answer the...
So what strategies can we use to handle curly questions? Is it best to ignore them, or to refer to Wikipedia prior to answering? And what do we do with the feeling that if we had only tried harder in geography class at school, we would make a better mother or father?

question better. And part of me is amazed at the ticking over of my son's thoughts, even in the middle of the night.

Preschool children ask hundreds of questions. Literally. Studies by US psychologist Professor Michelle Chouinard of preschool children observed talking with a parent measured more than 100 questions an hour. And kids seem to have a radar for topics that are tricky to explain, such as death, sex and physics. No wonder parents can feel overwhelmed, exhausted and infuriated by questions. But Professor Chouinard's research shows that questions are an essential information-gathering tool that kids use to learn. Even before a child is able to speak, they ask questions through gestures and vocalisations. Questions aid children in filling a gap in their knowledge, or in resolving a conflict between their understanding and something they observe in their world.

Questions give us clues as to what is capturing our child's attention. We have all unsuccessfully tried to educate our kids on a topic we think they should know about, and watched their eyes glaze over as we impart our pearls of wisdom. A key to understanding how kids learn is to follow their lead. Kids are ready to learn about a topic when it captures their attention. And they pick our brains through questions.

Professor Chouinard's interest in researching questions came after she participated in a study where children were forced to choose between several options, but where she was not able to assist with their choice. She noticed several consequences of this artificial situation: the children would ask questions to help them make their choice, and both she and the children were frustrated by the fact that she couldn't answer those questions. She says, "I was surprised at how unsatisfying it was for me not being able to give them an answer. This got me thinking – if this were a real situation, the children would not have to resolve this ambiguity alone. They could ask for help, for guidance. And my own discomfort at not being able to answer the children told me something too: it suggested that the person they were interacting with would be likely to be motivated to answer the child's questions. So, I decided to look in to whether or not my observations about this were tapping in to what children and the adults around them actually do,
question-answering strategy to avoid

Sydney's Child

Sydney's Child is a not-for-profit organisation that provides support to children and families in need. Sydney's Child aims to empower children and their families by offering a range of services, including counseling, education, and advocacy. The organisation is committed to ensuring that every child has access to the resources they need to thrive.

Sydney's Child operates across metropolitan Sydney and regional areas, offering a range of programs and services to meet the diverse needs of children and families. These services include mental health support, education assistance, and advocacy for children's rights. Sydney's Child also provides a range of resources to support families, including information on parenting, family law, and financial assistance.

Sydney's Child is dedicated to creating a better future for children and their families by empowering them to make informed decisions and pursue their goals. The organisation is supported by a team of dedicated professionals, including counselors, educators, and legal experts, who work tirelessly to deliver high-quality services to those in need.

If you or someone you know is in need of support, please contact Sydney's Child to learn more about our services and how we can help.

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