

# MIND in the Making

## The Seven Essential Life Skills Every Child Needs

### PRESCRIPTIONS FOR LEARNING

#### Constantly Asking Questions

Promoting the Life Skill of Self-Directed, Engaged Learning in School Age Children

Six Strategies That Work in Moving from Managing Children's Behavior to Promoting Life Skills

**Question:** My daughter is constantly asking questions and even questioning what I ask her to do. I feel like she is turning into a defiant child. Should I make her stop questioning everything?

It can be exhausting to keep up with your child's constant questioning, especially when she questions what you are doing. Your child's questioning is actually a sign of her desire to understand her experience. Rather than stopping your child's questions, you can help her begin to answer them on her own by promoting Self-Directed, Engaged Learning. With your support, you can help your child take the lead in her own learning.

**Learning and growth, according to Kurt Fischer of Harvard University, happen in spurts that actually change the brain. Fischer notes that these surges of brain activity mean children are strengthening their knowledge or abilities:**

*When we look at how people build knowledge in the short term, one of the most basic processes we see is that people need to build knowledge over and over and over in order to get more general stable knowledge.*

**1. Pay attention to what your child is really asking.** What is she trying to figure out? Is she trying to understand something, or is it mainly about questioning you?

If she is trying to understand something besides your requests, encourage her to begin to explore her own ideas.

- When your child asks you a question, instead of immediately trying to answer it, give her the opportunity to think more deeply about her question. Say something like: "I wonder why that is?" Or ask: "What are your ideas?"

If she is questioning what you ask her to do, it's best not to be defensive, but to simply state the reasons behind your request, such as: "I want you to wear nice clothes when we go to see your grandmother because nice clothes matter to your grandmother." Explaining doesn't mean that you are letting your daughter do whatever she likes, but helping her understand the "whys" behind your requests. Studies have found that children are more likely to do what you say when they have this understanding.

If she does become defiant, you can say:

- "I don't like you to talk to me in that tone of voice. I will be happy to talk about this, but you have to use a voice that is less angry. Let me know when you are ready to talk in a more respectful way, and then we can have this conversation."

There may be some times when she does raise a good point with a question, and you want to listen to her. You can say:

- "I hadn't thought about the point you are making. You are right. So, let's do this the way you suggest."

**2. Demonstrate respect for the importance of asking question and finding answers.** Ultimately, asking questions is the way we all learn, so it is behavior you want to encourage. In other words, you don't want to stop her from asking

questions, but rather to help her ask them in ways that make people want to help her find the answers.

**The research of Patricia Bauer of Emory University shows that children are more likely to learn and remember when they have multiple experiences, when they are directly involved—rather than act as bystanders—and when these experiences are meaningful and purposeful.**

**3. Have your child conduct research or set up experiments to answer her own questions.** Experiments are great for practicing problem-solving skills. They help your child develop her ability to think critically to satisfy her curiosity. When your child has a question, ask her for ideas she might have for how to find the answer through research. For example:

- Show your child how to use reliable sources to find answers to her questions. Go to the local library and look for nonfiction books, biographies or trusted websites on topics she is interested in.

Also, help her answer her questions by setting up her experiments.

- Does your child ask questions that can be answered by a science experiment, such as: “Why do we always close the refrigerator door?” You can leave ice out and look at what happens when it’s not kept cold.
- There are even some questions where she is questioning you that could be answered by an experiment, if you wish. For example, if your child questions why she has to put her clothes away, you may want to try a few days’ experiment where she doesn’t clean up. What happens? Can she find the clothes she needs? Are they clean and ready to wear?

**Maureen Callanan of the University of California at Santa Cruz has been examining the role of parents in promoting children’s scientific reasoning in everyday activities. Callanan says that when parents search for answers, they demonstrate a process for investigation to their children:**

*What I think is important about the way parents tend to respond is that they are usually encouraging the kids to do this kind of questioning, guiding them in thinking about how [to find] answers to questions.*

Enjoy the search for answers with her. And don’t be afraid to tell your child that you don’t have the answers. Your child trusts you to give her accurate information. Moments where both of you are asking questions are opportunities for you and your child to learn together. Show your child your own strategies for finding answers, like going to the library, writing down your thoughts or asking other people.

**Frank Kiel of Yale University has done research with adults that indicates:**

*[W]e underestimate just how little we understand about the world. We are incredibly dependent on knowledge in others’ minds; we lean on others’ minds; we outsource our understandings all the time.*

**4. Find other “experts” to help answer your child’s questions.** Build on your child’s impulse to turn to others for information and encourage her to find many different people to talk to or interview. Think of your friends, neighbors, family members and colleagues as resources for you and your child. She is likely to learn something while you get a break!

**Patricia Kuhl, a scientist at the University of Washington, believes that children are born engaged in learning and encourages parents to pay attention to what excites their children:**

*As I’ve watched my own child grow, there are various times and various things that light her up. As parents and as caretakers of a whole generation of kids, we have to be tuned in to the engagement process.*

**5. Expand on her interests.** What does your child typically ask you about? Is she interested in how things work? Does she ask questions about people or animals? Look for what makes her eyes light up. These interests can be built upon to open up a world of knowledge for your child and help her become a lifelong learner.

- Encourage your child to express what she is passionate or curious about through art, like painting, drawing, writing, photography or music.
- Ask your child to write a paper as an “expert” on a topic or question and share it with others like a newscaster or journalist.

**6. Encourage your child to think about different perspectives.** Do the best you can to explain the “why” of different situations and help your child see the reasons behind things, like other people’s behavior or rule setting.

- Point out the connections between people’s thoughts, feelings and actions. For example, you could say something like: “We are not allowed to bring our food and drinks into the store because they don’t want any of the clothes for sale to get ruined. Then, they won’t be able to sell them.”

**These six strategies will promote the life skill of Self-Directed, Engaged Learning and move from managing children’s behavior to promoting life skills in fun and doable ways.**

**Self-Directed, Engaged Learning:** It is through learning that we can realize our potential. As the world changes, so can we, for as long as we live—as long as we learn.

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**Mind in the Making (MITM)**, at The Bezos Family Foundation, is an unprecedented effort to share the science of children’s learning with the general public, families and professionals who work with them. Based on *Mind in the Making: The Seven Essential Life Skills Every Child Needs* (HarperCollins, 2010) by Ellen Galinsky, Chief Science Officer at The Bezos Family Foundation, its mission is to promote Executive Function life skills in adults and through them in children in order to keep the fire for learning burning brightly in all of us.

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