

A Few Suggestions for Questioning Children

Developed by

Anne Graffam Walker, Ph.D., Forensic Linguist
6404 Cavalier Corridor, Falls Church, VA 22044-1207
(703) 354-1796

General precepts:

1. Reduce the processing load that children must carry. Aim for simplicity and clarity in your questions. If the child uses simple words and short sentences, so should you.
2. Be alert for possible mis-communication. If a child's answer seems inconsistent with prior answers, or doesn't make sense to you, check out the possibility that there is some problem 1) with the way the question was phrased or ordered, 2) with a literal interpretation on the part of the child, or 3) with assumptions the question makes about the child's linguistic/cognitive development or knowledge of the adult world.

Some specifics:

1. Break long sentences/questions into shorter ones that have one main idea each.
2. Choose easy words over hard ones: use Anglo-Saxon expressions like "show," "tell me about" or "said" instead of the Latinate words "depict," "describe," or "indicated."
3. Avoid legal jargon, and "frozels" (my term for frozen legalisms) like "What if anything," "Did there come a time."
4. It is important that you and the children use words to mean the same thing, so run a check now and then on what a word means to each child. Although children generally are not good at definitions, you can still ask something like, "Tell me what you think a ___ is," or "What do you do with a ___/What does a ___ do?" Don't expect an adult-like answer, however, even if the word is well-known. The inability to define, for example, "wind" does not mean that the person does not know what the wind is. Definitions require a linguistic skill.
5. Avoid asking children directly about abstract concepts like what constitutes truth or what the difference is between the truth and a lie. In seeking to judge a young (under 9 or 10) child's knowledge of truth and lies, ask simple, concrete questions that make use of a child's experience. Ex: I forgot: how old are you? (Pause) So if someone said you are ___, is that the truth, or a lie? [Young children equate truth with fact, lies with non-fact.]
6. Avoid the question of belief entirely (Do you believe that to be true?).
7. Avoid using the word "story." (Tell me your story in your own words.) "Story" means both "narrative account of a happening" and "fiction." Adults listening to adults take both meanings into consideration. Adults listening to children, however, might well hear "story" as only the latter. "Story" is not only an ambiguous concept, it can be prejudicial.

A Few Suggestions For Questioning Children (cont'd)

8. With children, redundancy in questions is a useful thing. Repeat names and places often instead of using strings of (often ambiguous) pronouns. Avoid unanchored “that”s, and “there”s. Give verbs all of their appropriate nouns (subjects and objects), as in “[I want you to] Promise *me* that *you* will tell *me* the truth,” instead of “Promise me to tell the truth.” “Will” is an important word in that instruction, since many young children regard “will” as placing a stronger obligation on them than “promise.” So use both together.

9. Watch your pronouns carefully (including “that”). Be sure they refer either to something you can physically point at, or to something in the very immediate (spoken) past, such as in the same sentence, or in the last few seconds.

10. In a related caution, be very careful about words whose meanings depend on their relation to the speaker and the immediate situation, such as personal pronouns (I, you, we), locatives (here, there), objects (this, that), and verbs of motion (come/go; bring/take).

11. Avoid tag questions (e.g., “You did it, didn't you?”). They are confusing to children. Avoid, too, Yes/No questions that are packed with lots of propositions. (Example of a bad simple-sounding question, with propositions numbered: “[1] Do you remember [2] when Mary asked you [3] if you knew [4] what color Mark's shirt was, and [5] you said, [6] ‘Blue?’” What would a “Yes” or “No” answer tell you here?) It does not help the factfinder to rely on an answer if it's not clear what the question was.

12. See that the child stays firmly grounded in the appropriate questioning situation. If you are asking about the past, be sure the child understands that. If you shift to the present, make that clear too. If it's necessary to have the child recall a specific time/date/place in which an event occurred, keep reminding the child of the context of the questions. And avoid phrases like, “Let me direct your attention to...” Try instead, “I want you to think about/I'm going to ask you some questions about...”

13. Explain to children why they are being asked the same questions more than once by more than one person. Repeated questioning is often interpreted (by adults as well as by children) to mean that the first answer was the wrong answer, or wasn't the answer that was desired.

14. Be alert to the tendency of young children to be very literal and concrete in their language. “Did you have your clothes on?” might get a “No” answer; “Did you have your p.i.'s on?” might get a “Yes.”

15. Don't expect children under about age 9 or 10 to give “reliable” estimates of time, speed, distance, size, height, weight, color, or to have mastered any relational concept, including kinship. (Adults' ability to give many of these estimates is vastly overrated.)

16. Do not tell a child, “Just answer my question(s) yes or no.” With their literal view of language, children can interpret this to mean that only a Yes or a No answer (or even “Yes or No”!) is permitted -- period, whether or not such answers are appropriate. Under such an interpretation, children might think that answers like “I don't know/remember,” and lawfully permitted explanations would be forbidden.