

Children's Speech and Language Therapy Service

Understanding Questions

Children can understand and point as a response to a question before they can verbalise an answer. There is a developmental order so children who are unable to respond to earlier developing questions such as 'who?' won't be able to answer more complex ones such as 'when?' 'what?' (e.g. what will happen next?) 'where?' 'why?'. They may also struggle with inferencing (e.g. how do we know?) and problem solving (e.g. how do we do..?).

Children develop their understanding of questions by interacting with adults, They begin by using gestures and changing their pitch. They then repeat questions, then begin to answer.

How to simplify questions -

1) Make questions more concrete.

- Instead of asking "How do you think Cinderella felt when she lost her slipper?" (abstract question) ask "Look at her face. What is she doing?" (concrete question)

2) Relate questions to personal experiences.

- Simplify a question such as "Why do you think firefighters wear such big heavy coats?" to "What does it feel like when you stand close to a fire?"

3) Ask questions about very recent events or objects that are present.

- Instead of asking "what do you think you will do at the weekend?" ask "who did you play with today?" or "what are you doing now?"

4) Use familiar vocabulary when asking questions.

- Instead of "what is the function of a fork?" ask "what can you do with a fork?"
- Offer a choice "Is this a violin or a guitar?" instead of "what instrument is this?"

5) For older children, keep using those higher-order thinking questions (level 3 and 4)

Instead of telling your child how to solve a problem, ask questions to help them think it through on their own. If they struggle answering the question then model what the child could have said.

Questions can be categorised into 4 levels called Blank’s Levels of Questioning. They were developed by Blank, Rose and Berlin in 1978. The questions move from concrete to abstract. Understanding the complexity of questions can help in simplifying language or in appropriately developing children’s ability to use language to reason. Children need to understand and respond to all these levels of questions to function easily within a year one classroom. Ages given in brackets are averages. Some 2-year olds may cope with level 2-3 questions, while some four year olds may need questions simplified to level 1-2.

Level	Explanation	Example Questions
Level One (2-3 year olds)	Questions relate to the immediate environment and require concrete thinking. The answer is often in front of the child.	“What is that?” “What can you see?” “Find one like this” “What is — doing?” “Is it a —?” (yes/no response)
Level Two (3-4 year olds)	As children develop world knowledge about concepts e.g. words about; size, colour, category and where things are etc. they start to be able to answer questions that require them to think about classifying/grouping objects, describing and understanding object functions etc.	“Find something that can ...(cut)” “What is happening in this picture?” “Where is the...?” (requires a location response e.g. “under the table” not just pointing) “Find something that is ...(red) and ...(spiky)” “How are these different?” “Which one is ... (a fruit)?”
Level Three (4-5 year olds)	Requires children to use their own knowledge to make basic predictions, assume the role of another, or make generalisations. They begin to use higher-order thinking skills.	“What will happen next?” “How do you think he feels?” “How do I make... (a sandwich)?” “How are these the same?” “What is a ...?” (definitions)
Level Four (5+ years)	Involves problem solving, predictions, solutions and explanations. Requires own knowledge and thinking about the future and past.	Predicting changes: “What will happen if...?” Solutions: “What should we do now?” Causes: “How did that happen?” Justifying: “Why can’t we ...eat ice-cream with a knife and fork?” Explanations: “How can we tell he is sad?”