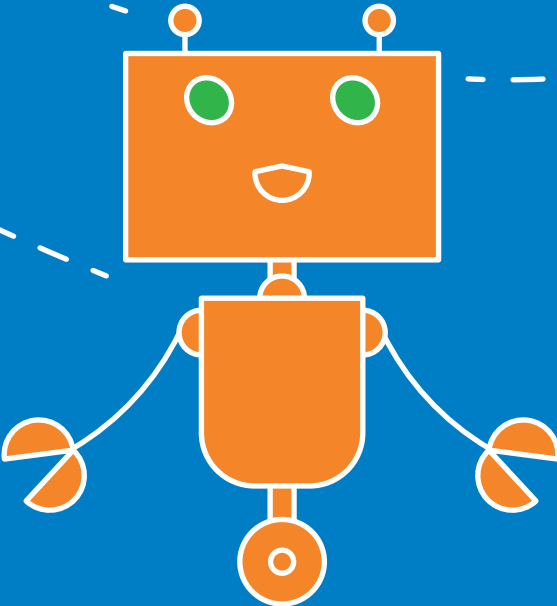


Chapter 2

Thought Provoking Questions



Introduction

I'm excited to share my story about parenting in a world filled with technology, distractions and lots of opportunities. I have three beautiful kids, each with their own amazing talents and challenges. My oldest son Mike is a junior in high school. He is a talented football player and wants to play in college, but he has a hard time keeping his grades up. Brittany is in middle school. I'm sure she will be the CEO of a major company one day, but sometimes I worry that she spends all of her time studying, and there's no time left for being a kid. My youngest, Jackson, is my baby boy. He is full of life and curiosity.

Over the past year, I stepped out of my comfort zone and started learning how to be a better parent. I started attending school meetings, taking classes at church and reading stories online about successful parenting. Everything I have learned has changed our lives in a positive way.

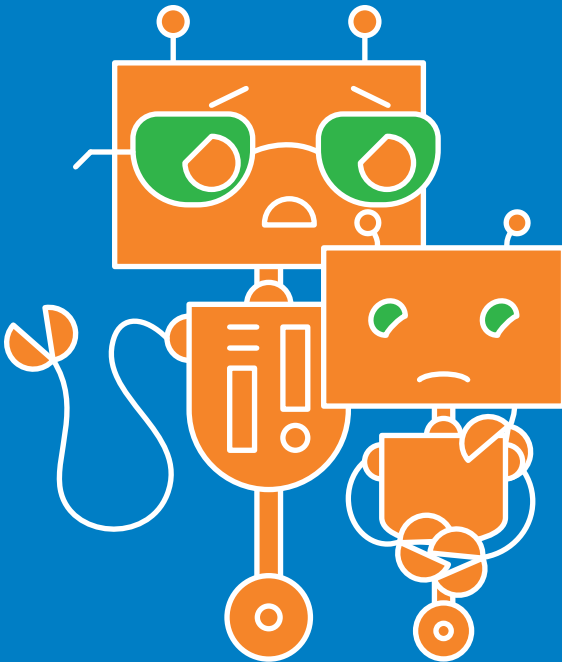
It's my hope that in sharing my experiences and what I've learned this year, other parents who feel like I did will be able to apply some of those lessons to their lives. Ok...let's get started!

With love,
Alisha



Thought Provoking Questions

I try to attend PTA meetings and other school events, but I work two jobs. Last Monday I traded shifts with my coworker, so I was able to attend a parent-teacher conference at my son Jackson's school. It's hard to believe my youngest started fifth grade! To my surprise, Jackson's teacher said that he sometimes gets into arguments with another student, Mason. This really surprised me because Jackson and Mason are



When his teacher told me that Jackson and Mason were sent to the principal's office for disrupting class last week, I got upset. She thought I knew because they sent him home with a letter for my signature. I never received it, but my mother helps me with the kids when I work and study. I decided to ask her about the letter when I got home.

My mother said that Jackson never gave her a letter, but she did notice a change in his attitude. He has been short with her and spending more time in his room. I asked why she didn't tell me, and she simply replied, "I handled it." My mother is old school, so I'm sure "handling it" meant a lecture!

I sat Jackson down to see what was happening between him and Mason and asked why he did not give the letter to Grandma or me. He tried to act like it was not a big deal and eventually became upset because I kept asking questions. His responses were always short, "no, mom," "yes, mom," "ok, mom." Frustrated, I decided to email the teacher.

His teacher said that sometimes kids don't want to talk about things with parents because they are embarrassed or afraid of getting in trouble. His teacher gently recommended that I change how I ask questions. Instead of asking questions that can be answered with one or two words, I should ask "open-ended questions" that would require an explanation or discussion. If we want to have meaningful conversations with our kids we have to allow them to think before they speak and give them an opportunity to fully express themselves.

Types of Questions

I learned that the way I ask questions changes the type of response I get. I could try asking more *Open-Ended Questions* to get Jackson to tell me more about what was wrong.

Closed Questions can be answered with a simple yes or no. They are good for quick, short answers rather than deep discussions, and do not encourage children to include details or think critically to respond. For example:

Do you have homework?

Did you have a good day at school?

Did you have trouble with math class today?

Open-Ended Questions have unlimited possible answers. They are perfect when you want someone to think critically about their answer, provide details, or share their thought process. These questions encourage children to organize their thoughts and ideas to giving an answer. For example:

What is your homework for today?

What was your favorite thing you did today?

What could you do differently to do better in math class?

During dinner that night I decided to try a different approach to my usual questions. Most nights when I ask, “Did you have a good day at school today?” I end up getting a straight yes and nothing else. This time I decided to ask, “What was your day like?” Brittany was the first to respond. She has no problem with talking my ear off about the drama in her pre-teen life! I tried to channel that energy and switch the conversation over to Jackson by asking him, “What did you and Mason do today?” Although he hesitated at first, Jackson eventually told me he embarrassed Mason in front of their friends.

That evening, I continued asking open-ended questions in order to work through the problem and eventually Jackson found a solution. It didn’t take long for their friendship to recover, and I also learned a lesson that I will never forget.

Asking questions that encourage conversation can help you understand the problem your child is facing and can even prevent situations from getting worse. After changing my approach to asking open-ended questions for the past few weeks, I feel like I know my kids better. We talk more about how their days went, what makes them happy and sad, and our dinner conversations are a lot more interesting! I thanked Jackson’s teacher for the help and told her about the success I had with her advice. I suggested she do a workshop about asking better questions and she did! She focused on open-ended questions and how they are a great way to help your child reflect on their day or a problem they are facing.

The first time I talked to my son, he only responded to my

The Power of Open-Ended Questions

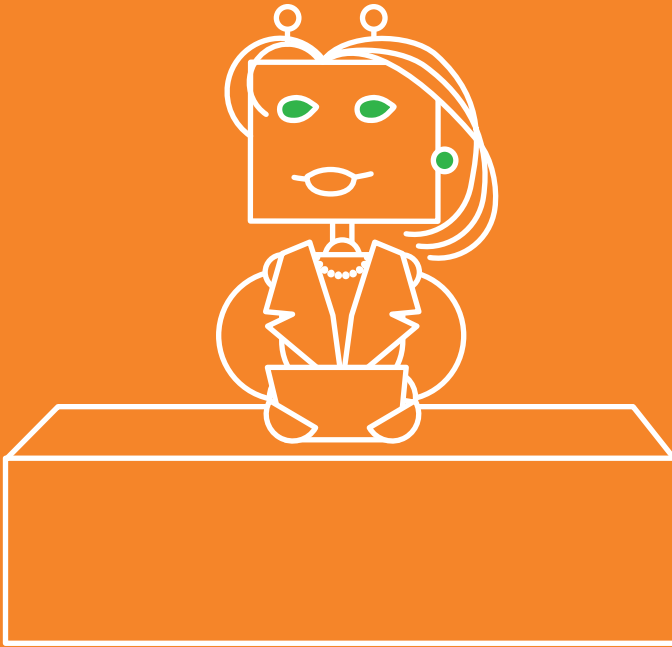
questions with one or two words like, “no, mom” and “ok, mom.” That’s because I was using closed questions. Closed questions are really only useful if you need a quick or fact-based answer, like asking if they fed the dog or how old they are. If you want to have a deeper conversation with your child, try to avoid closed questions.

Learning about the different types of questions and how they can affect my conversations was eye-opening; I never realized how much of a difference changing a couple of words could make! She encouraged us to use open-ended questions at home and shared some of the benefits she learned from teacher and educational psychologist, Dr. Jane M. Healy in her book *Is Your Bed Still There When You Close the Door?*

Asking children open-ended questions helps to:

- Improve brain function and language skills
- Develop mental skills that lead to academic success
- Lay the groundwork for mathematical and scientific reasoning as well as for reading and writing
- Teach children to express themselves effectively
- Help children analyze and process information
- Develop creativity and problem solving abilities

It’s not an easy change to make, but Jackson’s teacher gave us a few exercises to practice at home.



In the 1950's, Barbara Walters became a pioneer in the news industry, developing an interview technique that led to her promotion to co-anchor of the evening news—a first for a woman in the United States. She is known for her ability to ask questions in a way that encourages people to think deeply about their responses, and sometimes even reveal personal struggles. When asked about her interviewing technique, she stresses the importance of listening closely to what the other person says, and following up by asking a question like, “What did you mean by that?”

“I try to ask questions that people are not asked all the time, that make them think, that tell me something I haven't heard before.”

– Barbara Walters



Activity 1

Look at the following scenarios and write how you would normally ask the questions when talking to your children. Then try to identify whether your questions are closed or open-ended. Remember, there is no right or wrong question. This activity is designed to help you determine if you are using the best questions for each scenario.

Scenario 1

You want to ask you child about their day.

Your question:

Scenario 2

Your child is having difficulty with homework.

Your question:

Scenario 3

You want to encourage your child to find a solution to a problem they are facing.

Your question:

Scenario 4

You want to learn more about your child's interests.

Your question:

Let's look at the main characteristics of open-ended questions. You can identify open-ended questions by the following characteristics:

- Requires child to pause and reflect before answering
- Encourages child to share based on personal feelings, opinions, and ideas
- Requires the child to think critically by actively reflecting and structuring their answer mentally before responding
- Allows the response to be as important to the conversation as the question
- Usually starts with *why, how, describe, tell me about, what do you think about...*

Based on these characteristics, what sort of questions were you asking for each scenario?

Scenario 1

Open-Ended Closed

Scenario 3

Open-Ended Closed

Scenario 2

Open-Ended Closed

Scenario 4

Open-Ended Closed

If any of your questions were closed questions, you can make them open-ended by:

- Changing the first word of the question
- Asking yourself the question to ensure there is more than one way of answering it.
- Not implying the answer in your question. For example, "Do you think it was a bad idea to argue with Mason?"

With practice, I've gotten better at asking my children open-ended questions.

The exercise helped me realize how often I use the wrong type of questions when trying to start a conversation with my kids, but it's often because I'm just so busy. Work, kids, chores; I'm stuck in a daily routine that makes me feel like a robot! But now I feel better prepared to make small changes and have more meaningful conversations. Especially with my kids, I want to know everything that's going on with them! I know there's some things they just won't tell me, but I want them to feel comfortable talking to me and I can start by asking questions that will encourage them to talk more.

During the parent workshop, I learned how important it is for us as parents to 1) allow enough time for our children to reply and 2) be ok with whatever response they give us. Similar to what we learned about growth mindset, the main goal of asking open-ended questions is not to get the right answer from our child but to give them an opportunity to exercise their critical thinking skills.

Professor Mary Budd Rowe researched *wait time* in classrooms. Wait time is the amount of silent time given after a question is asked. Experts suggest giving a child about 3-5 seconds so they can formulate their response in their head before verbalizing it.

Benefits of wait time:

- The accuracy of their responses increase.
- The number of their "I don't know" decreases.
- Failure to respond decreases
- Confidence increases

footnote



Activity 2

To practice your ability to provide your child with enough wait-time ask your child the following open-ended questions one by one and try to wait at least five seconds for them to form a response:

- What was your favorite part of the day and why?
- What did you do during lunchtime?
- I want to learn about what you did in science class. Can you explain it to me?
- What are you most excited to do tomorrow?

Remember, the goal of this exercise is for you to practice your ability to give your child enough time to respond, not for you to evaluate your child's response or get antsy that they are not engaging with you the way you want them to.

I loved doing this activity with my kids. At first, our conversations were a little awkward because we were all staring at each other silently, but eventually we got used to having longer conversations and came to really enjoy them. By providing my kids with a little more time to think, we ended up having much more meaningful conversations. I've had a little more trouble getting my oldest son, Mike, on board with my new open-ended questions. He was so used to grunting being an acceptable answer to my questions. I've been trying to be patient with him because I do want to know more about what's going on with his life. Sometimes it takes one or two follow-up questions to get him talking. I have to ask *why* and *how* and I make my questions as open as possible. When all else fails I gear my questions towards football and that always works! It takes a lot of creativity to be a parent.

The teacher told us that listening is work because it requires our full attention. Many times we are coming up with responses in our head, instead of listening to what is being said to us. I was certainly guilty of doing that. She said that young people might not call us out for not listening but they pick up on the cues and this can affect them in a negative way. I wanted to make sure I didn't make my children feel that I was not listening to them. As a rule of thumb, I decided that anytime I ask my children an open-ended question I would not judge them for their response or try to correct them, but rather listen to what they wanted to share with me.

Simply by listening, you're giving your child an opportunity to share based on their own experiences, personal feelings, opinions, and ideas. Not only are they thinking critically about their answer, but you're letting your child know that what they have to say is important. This next activity is really easy. I tried it with my kids and I think we ended up having the longest conversation we've ever had!



Activity 3

When you're talking to your kids, repeat a part of what they just said. If you like, you can build on their response by restating something they said as a question. For example:

Mom "What was your favorite part of the day?"

Child "Seeing my paper plane fly."

Mom "Why was seeing your plane fly so special?"

This activity made me think more critically, and my kids were happier, too! Asking questions this way shows that you're paying attention and thinking about what they are telling you. Believe it or not, kids care about these things! They want to know that what they have to say is important.

I'm learning more and more that I can have a big impact on my kids' education. Even the smallest effort from me can make a difference. I now try to use open-ended questions whenever I can.



Family Science Activity

While you're building with your children, ask them questions that really get them to think critically about the work that they're doing. Challenge them to try new things and guide them to find a solutions on their own.

Design Challenge: Build a Vertical Jumping Machine

Make a machine that can jump up more than 3 feet.

Suggested Materials

Estimated cost: up to \$2

Recommended

- Cups of different sizes
- Rubber bands of different sizes and strengths
- Scissors
- Tape

Optional

- Hole puncher

Testing Station

- Yard stick for measuring height

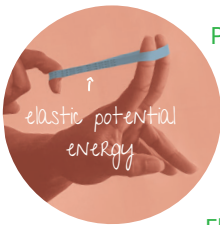
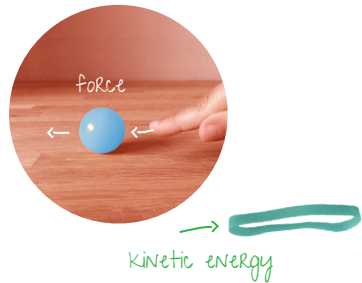
Inspiration

Biomechanics explores at how different systems in the body work together to perform a task. In order to understand the movements of the human body, we must look at how each individual part of the body is able to move and how forces make them move. A movement that might seem simple, like jumping, is actually a very complicated combination of different muscles, bones and joints working together.

Before you make a plan for your vertical jumping machine, research different mammals (this includes humans!) and how high they can jump. Why do you think some mammals are able to jump higher than others?

Keep in mind these terms as you get inspired for your design:

Force: A force is something that can make an object move.



Potential Energy: Energy that is stored in an object and waiting to be used.

Kinetic Energy: potential energy converted into movement.

Elasticity: Elasticity is how stretchy an object is and depends on the materials. The more an object is stretched, the more elastic potential energy is stored.

Plan

In this design challenge, you are going to make a machine that is able to jump at least three feet in the air. You'll do this by taking advantage of the potential energy that can be stored in elastic bands.

Take time to ask your child what you will engineer and be sure they understand the materials!

While you plan, consider the different materials you have and how they can have an impact on your design. Here are some open-ended questions you can use to get your child thinking:

- What materials can you use that will act like the muscles used when a person jumps?
- What object will be the “body” that makes the jump?
- Weight is a force that needs to be overcome in order to jump. How will this information change your design?

Have your child stretch and release different sizes of rubber bands to see if they notice a difference in how far they go. Ask them why they think some rubber bands are able to go further than others.

After they sketch out their designs and decide on what materials they want to use, they can move on to the building!

If you need help getting started, you can find video and an inspiration gallery for this design challenge by creating a free account at curiositymachine.org/challenges/102

Build

Talk to your children about their design and help them build a few models. It's okay if they still don't understand how to make their design jump more than 3 ft. Remember, it's important to keep a growth mindset and there's nothing wrong with failing!

Test

Check to see if your vertical jumping machine can jump at

least three feet in the air. If it does, great! If it doesn't, make sure you record if it is able to get off the table or how far it can go. Also, note the direction it is going. Encourage your child to record any other observations they think are interesting.

Redesign

No one expects the design to be perfect the first time! Have your child choose at least one thing to improve. If their design was able to jump three feet in the air, encourage them to make their design better by finding a way to make it jump higher or changing the direction in which it is going. Here are some tips for improving:

- You may want to make more than two design to compare which design works the best
- When you let go of the prototype, make sure you can move your hands away as quickly as possible to prevent blocking the jump
- Using a solid surface for testing and rigid materials to build the prototype can increase the force on the object.

Reflection

Ask your child these questions to see what they've learned:

- Did your prototype generate enough force to jump 3 feet? Why or why not?
- How would you redesign in order to make it jump 6 feet?
- If you could have any material on the planet for your prototype, what would you choose and why?
- What part of this design challenge did you have a fixed mindset attitude about? How did you persevere to continue learning?

Summary

Since I started using more open-ended questions with my children, our conversations have improved a lot. I can tell they know that I really do care about their thoughts! Here's a few quick reminders I use:

- Closed questions can often be answered with a simple *yes* or *no*.
- Open-ended questions have unlimited possible answers and encourage children to organize their thoughts and ideas.
- A goal of asking open-ended questions is to give kids an opportunity to exercise their critical thinking skills.
- We should give a child about 3-5 seconds of wait-time so they can formulate their response in their head before verbalizing it.
- Remember, it's not about getting right answers but about improving communication!