

Questions That Promote Positive Change

“**T**WO, FOUR, SIX, EIGHT, who do we appreciate?” This old chant, recited by countless cheerleaders to encourage their teams to victory, contains a motivational key for many situations: asking a question that inspires positive action. The phrase “Who do we appreciate?” focuses on who or what is going well in the moment. Using the example of sports, contrast this approach with a problem-oriented question like “Why is our team messing up?” “What are we doing right and how can we do even better?”

Blaming bogs us down and clouds our vision of new possibilities. For parents and teachers, learning how to formulate queries that promote positive outcomes is an important ability. It’s also a skill we can develop in children. Questions that result in defensiveness are easy to think of: “Why would you do that?” “Why haven’t you done what I asked you?” Here are some examples of positive queries that promote creative thinking.

Positive questions for an upset child. In preschool, a child was upset when another child got to put the picture of penguins on the bulletin board. After the boy stopped crying, a classmate asked, “Have you been able to think of another animal you’d like to put up?” The discouraged child immediately perked up and thought of a different animal he could pick for the presentation.

Preschoolers aren’t renowned for their question-asking abilities, especially phrasing that shows such empathy. For example, it would be easy for a child, or even an adult, to ask, “Why would you cry about that?” Instead, the classmate’s positive query implies acceptance of the sadness and a vision of how his friend might move on. Others might be “Have you gotten another idea?” “What helps you when you feel disappointed?” “Are you thinking of something that makes you happier?”

Questions for a child who complains about a classmate or sibling bothering her. “He’s mean to me.” “She won’t listen to me.” To acquire social skills, children need to learn to gradually step out of their own narrow point of view and think of the other person. We might ask “When do you two have fun together?” or “Are there times that you like to share?” Adults can also teach children to ask questions that encourage communication and collaborative problem solving: “Why don’t you ask your friend what her favorite game is?”

Questions for children who need to pay more attention to an issue like clean-up. Remember hearing “How many times have I asked you to clean up?” What kind of response does this request encourage? The phrasing itself implies defeat since the speaker is pointing out her own ineffectiveness. Positive solutions grow more readily out of discussions of previous success than failure. “What are the times we’ve worked together well to get things tidied up?” “When have we worked as a team and gotten things done quickly?”

January 11, 2012