

How to Help Your Child Understand and Produce “WH” Questions

By Becky L. Spivey, M.Ed.

It is absolutely essential that children understand and be able to ask and answer WH questions. These simple questions lay the groundwork for children to participate in conversations, demonstrate knowledge, and collect information about themselves and their world. When children are learning to process and answer WH questions, they usually follow a developmental and predictable sequence. “What” is the earliest question mastered, followed by “Who” and “Where.” Finally, an understanding of “When” and “Why” develop, with “Why” being the most difficult to master.



These simple questions may be difficult for some children to answer; however, there are strategies parents can use to help their children learn them. Hints or cues can help your child answer questions or respond appropriately to a situation. We can use visual cues to help children understand and formulate WH questions. These visual cues may include showing photographs, illustrations, or actual objects to prompt a correct response to a question. For example, show your child an illustration of a lady wearing a ring and ask, “*What* do you wear on your finger?” The child examines the illustration and answers the question. It may be necessary to tell your child the answer to the question and then ask the question again. *Be sure to work on only one WH question type at a time.* In other words, be sure your child understands “What” questions before beginning to teach “Who” questions.

Here are some other activities to help your child practice and master WH questions and answers.

- While reading simple storybooks with illustrations or pictures, ask your child questions like, “*Who* is this? *What* is he/she doing? *Where* is the child going? *When* will he/she come back? *Why* is he/she leaving?” Practice these types of questions, as well as saying “The girl went to the store. *Where* did you go today? She is tying her shoes. *What* do you do when you put on your shoes? She came home from the store after lunch. *When* did you get home from school today?”

- Make small books. Have your child illustrate a book with photos or drawings with a title like "Our Family Vacation." Your child can answer each of the WH questions that you may dictate. For example, "Who went on vacation? Where did you go? When did you leave/return? What did you do on your vacation? Why did the family go on vacation?" Make books about the child's birthday, holidays, family time, shopping trips, etc.



- Ask questions about your child's day at school using WH questions. "Who did you sit with at lunch? Where did the class go for music time? When did you play outside? What did you eat for lunch? Why did you bring home your books?"
- Cut pictures from magazines/books. Make a WH chart with each type of WH question in a separate column. Show your child a picture and ask him/her to place the picture in the correct column. For example, you show the child a picture of a man - he/she puts the picture in the *Who* column. An apple - he/she places in the *What* column; a picture of a park - he/she places in the *Where* column.
- Improve your child's reading comprehension by asking WH questions during and after story time. Interrupt stories and ask a series of questions related to the story topic. Ask your child to create questions about the story with *Who*, *What*, *When*, *Where*, or *Why* as the first word of his/her question. Children learn from these prompts and will begin using these comprehension strategies while reading on their own.
- Use picture cards made from clippings of magazines or old books. Show your child a card and say, "Ask me a question about this picture." If you are showing your child "shoes," he/she may ask, "What do you wear on your feet? Why did you get new shoes? When do you buy shoes? Where do you wear shoes? Who buys your shoes?"

Your child's understanding and formulation of simple WH questions lays a foundation for developing skills in communicating, generalizing, and processing information in his/her environment. Parents have countless opportunities to give children practice in questioning and answering techniques, as well as provide visual cues for their children to help them acquire new language skills. The mastery of these simple questions is invaluable to the early learner.