

Section 6.9 - Understanding 'why' questions

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Why is this important?

'Why' questions help to develop causal relations, that is, something happened because of something else (e.g. the boy's feet are cold because he has no socks). The development of verbal reasoning in this way is very important and is a key stage in language development. It helps children move from the concrete to the more abstract use of language and also to reflect on the world around them.

What to do

- Look at picture books and/or read simple stories together.
- When you have finished, look through the book again and see if the child can tell you something about the pictures or what happened.
- Ask simple 'why' questions, e.g.
 - 'Why was the little boy crying?'
 - 'He fell in the mud.'
 - 'Why did they have to go home?'
 - 'It was raining.'
 - 'Why was the dog barking?'
 - 'The cat was stuck in the tree.'
- The child doesn't need to respond with 'because ...' as long as he/she understands that the question is looking for a reason. However, for some, eliciting 'because' helps to unlock the rest of the sentence.
N.B. Try not to ask too many questions but allow the child to lead some of the discussion about the story.

Step up

- Ask questions about emotions (e.g. why people are feeling happy/sad/angry) or questions that require more complex answers.
- Begin to introduce responding to the 'why' question with 'because ...'.

Step down

- If the child doesn't answer the question or answers inappropriately try:
 - Giving a choice (e.g. 'Is the little boy crying because he wanted a banana or because he fell in the mud?').
 - Starting to answer the question and then pause to see if the child can finish the sentence (e.g. 'They had to go home because it was rrrr ...').
 - Repeating back the question: if the child has responded correctly using one of the options above (choices or finishing the sentence), repeat the question and see if it can be answered independently.
- Use gestures or a written word visual support for 'because'.
- Try asking the question and then answering it yourself:
 - 'I wonder why the boy is running? Because he's going to meet Daddy.'

