Curiosity Killed the Cat, Or Did It?
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Aiden wants to know where the earthworms sleep at night. Jordan asks her mother why people die. Stephen asks his teacher how the sun got into the sky. Case hears a siren and runs toward it pointing and squealing with excitement. Breanne points at someone in a wheelchair and asks what is wrong with them. Yes, sometimes it would easier if children were not so curious. Their curiosity can be embarrassing, potentially dangerous, exhausting, and time consuming for adults who care for them. But just because something is easy for adults, does not mean it is better for children. Aren’t you glad that Albert Einstein, Thomas Edison, Ben Franklin, Leonardo da Vinci, Florence Nightingale, Annie Oakley, Maria Montessori, and Amelia Earhart were curious?

Curiosity leads to higher level thinking and problem solving which helps children develop intellectual skills. Curiosity is the drive to learn, the quest for knowledge, and the motivation to find out more. Developing observation and investigation skills integral to curiosity contributes to children’s understanding of science and math, facilitates an understanding of people (social studies and geography), and provides a vehicle for communication (language arts). Curiosity can open up new possibilities and ideas, helping children build their self-confidence.

Strategies to Support Curiosity

Most children will express curiosity and adults can choose to kill their questioning or help them use it to enjoy learning. Adults can support curiosity in children through modeling inquisitiveness, providing a rich and stimulating environment safe for exploration, and including learning activities to extend interests.

Children learn so very much from watching and listening to adults, even when adults are not directly addressing them. Modeling what you want children to do is an important teaching technique. Let children hear you ask questions like “Wonder how gigantic is spelled?” or “Where could we go to see tomatoes growing?” to another adult. Brainstorm ideas in front of children and show them how to use tools like the dictionary, encyclopedia, or Internet to discover information. Show inquisitiveness by causally posing open ended questions to children during a conversation. Examples could include something like the following.

- “What do you think would happen if you mixed the red paint with the blue paint?”
- “How many blades of grass do you guess are on the playground?”
- “Wonder why we have two hands?”
“Where do you think the rain comes from?
When children are interested in a topic help them learn more by giving correct information, using reference materials, showing them examples, asking an expert to share, or taking a field trip. Responding to interests is a great way to model your support of curiosity.

Providing a rich and stimulating environment facilitates development and learning for children in all domains (physical, social, emotional, social, cognitive, and language), and also supports curiosity. Open ended toys help children explore and expand their ideas through playing with them in many different ways without being wrong. Blocks, paint, and dress-up clothes are examples of open ended play materials. In addition to traditional play materials, providing objects that can be taken apart to see how they work creates inquiring minds. Flashlights and batteries allow children to remove and reinsert batteries to see how they make the flashlights work. Old phones, clocks, computers, and toasters (with the cord removed) can serve as learning tools when children take them apart to see what is inside. This is a cheap way to help children learn more about how things work and to foster their curiosity. Including interesting materials is part of ensuring a rich and stimulating environment, but making it safe for children to explore is another element required. Removing cords, ensuring that small parts are not handled by children under three years of age, and checking for sharp edges or hazardous materials can make the exploration safe and enjoyable.

Learning activities that are based on children’s curiosity are bound to be the most successful and fun. To peek the interests of children, adults need to really observe and listen to each child individually and find out what they want to know more about. Sometimes the interest is short lived, so being able to follow-up quickly is important. Once areas of interests are identified look around the environment to see what related materials already exist and then supplement with additional ones if needed. Decide what books, brochures, or movies can be used as a reference to extend the learning. Identify places to visit where more can be learned (museums, libraries, farmers markets, hardware stores, humane society, etc.). Read story books, sing songs, and look at pictures about the topic of interest. Ask open ended questions and guide the child in exploring and investigating. Assist children in finding ways to report their findings (photo books, videos, charts, graphs, audio recordings, etc.) so they can be reviewed at a later time for discussion.

Summary

Even when adults are embarrassed, fearful, inconvenienced, or exhausted from the curiosity of children, remember that it is instrumental in their learning. Curiosity is important enough to include every day! Promote inquisitiveness through modeling, a rich and stimulating environment safe for exploration, and fun learning activities to extend interests.
Examples of Children’s Books To Support Curiosity

Curious George
By H.A. Rey
(Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1973)

Let’s Try It Out in the Water
By Seymour Simon and Nicole Fauteux
(Simon & Schuster, 2001)

What Makes a Shadow?
By Clyde Robert Bull
(HarperCollins, 1994)

Where Does the Garbage Go?
By Paul Shower
(HarperCollins, 1994)

I Face the Wind
By Vicki Cobb
(HarperCollins, 2003)

Let’s Try It Out with Towers and Bridges
By Seymour Simon & Nicole Fauteux
(Simon & Schuster, 2003)

“I think, at a child's birth, if a mother could ask a fairy godmother to endow it with the most useful gift, that gift should be curiosity.” ~Eleanor Roosevelt

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