

UNDERSTANDING QUESTIONS

What is this developmental skill?

Understanding questions is the ability to recognize what information another person is requesting and respond appropriately. Different types of questions require different forms of thinking. “What,” “who,” and “where” questions usually involve concrete information, while “when,” “how,” and “why” questions often require knowledge of time, sequence, cause and effect, emotions, or intentions.

How does this normally develop?

Children first learn to respond to simple questions about familiar people, objects, and actions. As language and thinking develop, they become better able to answer questions about past events, future plans, reasons, feelings, and possibilities. This growth occurs through frequent conversations in which caregivers ask questions, allow time to respond, clarify misunderstandings, and help children organize their thoughts without turning every interaction into a test.

How can neglect interfere with its development?

Children who experience neglect may have had fewer reciprocal conversations and fewer opportunities to practice answering questions. They may also have difficulty with memory, sequencing, emotional awareness, or understanding another person's perspective. Some children learn that adult questions are associated with blame, punishment, or interrogation. As a result, they may freeze, guess, say “I don't know,” or provide an answer they believe the adult wants to hear.

What might this look like?

A child may:

- Answer a different question from the one asked.
- Repeat part of the question instead of answering.
- Say “I don't know” even when they appear to know.
- Confuse who, what, where, when, why, and how questions.
- Struggle to explain why something happened.
- Give very brief or disorganized responses.
- Guess based on facial expressions or tone.
- Become anxious when asked several questions in a row.
- Change the answer when the question is repeated.

These responses should not automatically be viewed as dishonesty or avoidance.

Parenting Implications

Caregivers can help by asking one question at a time, using concrete wording, and allowing additional processing time. Questions can be simplified or supported with choices when necessary. Rather than repeatedly asking “*Why did you do that?*” caregivers may begin with more concrete questions such as “*What happened first?*” or “*What were you feeling?*” Conversations should also include comments and shared observations so that the child does not experience communication as a constant demand for answers.

From Understanding to Attunement

Instead of thinking, “*They are avoiding the question,*” consider, “*They may not understand what is being asked or may feel unsafe answering.*” Attuned caregivers reduce pressure, offer structure, and create enough emotional safety for the child to think and respond.

