Open-Ended Questions

Why Are Open-Ended Questions Better Than Closed-Ended Questions?

Open-ended questions encourage children to:
• use language. Instead of just answering ‘yes’ or ‘no (answers closed-ended questions often prompt)’, children need to give fuller answers that draw on a wider range of vocabulary.
• think about their answers and give details to reasonably answer the question.
• elaborate with details, express thoughts or offer an opinion
• be creative
• think of new ideas
• use imagination
• give more information
• problem-solve and use cognitive (intellectual) skills. Children must search for vocabulary and form sentences which conveys thoughts, opinions, ideas, etc. rather than simply answering “yes” or “no”
• build relationships. Children become more invested in the conversation when they have to actively engage in it with full sentences. They are able to relate something of meaning and respond to the person/people with whom they are communicating. In this way, open-ended questions be used to positively build and deepen relationships.

In contrast to open-ended questions, closed-ended questions limit answers to one or two words and don’t allow for extra information, opinions, thoughts or the expansion of ideas and concepts. Closed-ended questions do not require the child actively engage in the conversation as they can remain disassociated. They do not have to give an opinion, explain thoughts, offer ideas. In reality, the thinking behind answering closed-ended questions needn’t be in-depth or take any great effort.

Open-Ended Questions & Children’s Self-Esteem

When children are asked open-ended questions, it shows them that their opinions, ideas, thought, feelings, etc, matter. After all, if you didn’t want to know, you wouldn’t ask. Therefore, asking open-ended questions says to a child that their contribution matters. You want to know what they think. You value their opinion. You are genuinely interested in their ideas. All of this goes to strengthening your child’s positive self-esteem and self-image, as well as strengthening your relationship with your child.

Using Open-Ended Questions with Closed-Ended Questions

Sometimes, it’s helpful to combine open end questions and closed questions together. For example, if you’re reading a book about a boy at the zoo, you could ask:
• Closed-ended question: Did it work?
• Open-ended question: “What could you change to make it work the way you want?”
• Closed-ended question: “Did you try using more tape?”
• Open-ended question: “How could using more tape help?”

In these examples, the closed-ended questions are used to establish facts upon which the open-ended questions can be used to expand the conversation with more information, details, thoughts, opinions, etc.