Project Approach: Helping Children Ask Questions

The main purpose of a project is to find answers to questions about the topic the children are investigating, but teachers often find that preschool-age children have trouble formulating questions. Here are some ways to help children develop and express their own questions during each phase of project work.

In Phase 1 of project work, engage children's curiosity about the topic.

- During large group, ask questions such as "What are some things you want to find out about the doctor's office?" or "What do you wonder about the doctor's office?"
- Invite children to respond to classmates' ideas. Listen carefully—especially to disagreements or confusion. Then restate their comments as questions. "Trey says he went to the doctor and didn't get a shot. But Rob says his doctor always gives shots. So, one question could be, 'Just when does a doctor give shots?'"
- Write out what children ask so they see their questions in print.
- Help the children group similar questions together so that they can form an overarching big question.

During Phase 2, let children formulate questions related to fieldwork.

- Invite children to express questions by drawing. For example, before a doctor comes to visit, you could say, "Tomorrow, Dr. Patel will be here to talk about how she takes care of children in her office. Please make a drawing to show what you would like to find out from her." One child might draw a stethoscope to show they want to learn about hearing a heartbeat, while another might draw a computer to indicate their interest in how the doctor keeps track of information. Be sure and write their question on the back of their drawing so you can help them remember it.
- Help children put their wonderings into words before, during, and after fieldwork. For example, before a site visit to a health clinic, you might ask Sara, "When we go to the clinic, what do you want the nurse to show us?" If she says, "I want to see how they fix bones that break," you can then reframe her statement: "So your question is, 'How do you fix broken bones?'"
- Ask your own questions. You could say, "I've always wanted to know what doctors mean by the word "fractured." So my question for the doctor will be, "What is a fractured bone?"

During Phase 3, let children plan ways to show others what they asked and what they found out.

- Ask children to think about questions that other people might have about the project. "What are some things Mr. Jay's class might want to know about the doctor's office?" That process can help them decide what to include in displays.
- Help the children make charts that match the questions to the answers they found. Invite the class to decide how to display the charts.

Any opinions, findings, conclusions, or recommendations expressed in this tip sheet are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Illinois State Board of Education.

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