

What and How Questions

Have you ever been lectured by an adult? Do you remember it as being particularly effective, or did you feel a little like Charlie Brown listening to his teacher? “Waaa, waaa, waaa, waaa...” Most of us have had this experience.

Have you ever found yourself lecturing a child, with the best of intentions, in an attempt to help them learn a lesson or process a situation in a manner that you feel will be productive? It might sound something like this, “Stephen, Janet is mad because you didn’t keep your hands on your own body. If you keep your hands on your own body I’m sure your friends will respect your work. We always keep our hands on our own body in our classroom.” Well, apparently Stephen doesn’t! Making the connection that other people are affected by our actions is an important life lesson. However, what might Stephen’s reaction be in this situation to this important life lesson given by his teacher?

What and How Questions are an incredible tool to help children process an experience, event or natural consequence so that they can draw their own conclusions and learn from their mistakes. To use Montessori terms, the adult uses *What and How Questions* as a control of error so that the child learns through self-discovery.

Here are some *What and How Questions*:

- “I noticed _____ . What happened?” (Listen)
- “How did that happen?” (Listen)
- “What caused that to happen?” (Listen)
- “What did you learn from this experience?” (Listen)
- “How do you plan to solve the problem?” (Listen)
- “What ideas do you have to prevent this from happening in the future?” (Listen)
- “How can I help?” (Listen)

Here are a couple of examples:

Natural Consequence

(True story) Quinn was taking some milk out of the refrigerator, and picked up the gallon of milk by the cap. His dad heard a loud thump, followed by the sound of milk dumping onto the floor – glug, glug, glug. By the time Quinn’s dad got to the refrigerator Quinn had picked up the milk and placed it on the table, right above the new milk lake on the kitchen floor. Instead of a scolding, followed by a lecture, his father used *What and How Questions*:

Dad: “Quinn, what happened?”

Quinn: “I spilled a lot of milk.”

Dad: "How did that happen?"

Quinn: "I picked it up by the top and the cap came off, and then it fell on the floor."

Dad: "Wow, that's a lot of milk on the floor. What did you learn from this experience?"

Quinn: "I think I'll use the handle next time."

Dad: "Here's a towel. Would you like some help?"

Social Difficulty

Let's use the example from above. Stephen, age 4 1/2, has been having a real hard time with his classmates. He gets frustrated easily and then hits. During the morning work cycle, the teacher notices Stephen crying next to his mat. There are puzzle map pieces all over the floor. The assistant informs the teacher that Janet flipped his puzzle over after he hit her.

Teacher: "Stephen, I notice that you are very sad. What happened?"

Stephen: "Janet flipped my puzzle over, and I worked on it all morning."

Teacher: "I can understand why you are so sad. You put a lot of work into that. What caused Janet to flip your puzzle over?"

Stephen: "Well, I hit her. She was bossing me."

Teacher: "So, you got mad and hit her?"

Stephen: "Yeah."

Teacher: "Then what happened?"

Stephen: "Then she flipped my puzzle map over."

Teacher: "So, what did you learn from this?"

Stephen: "Maybe I shouldn't hit."

Teacher: "Would you some help talking to Janet. She looks sad too."

Younger Children

The above examples are children who are older than 4. Younger children sometimes need more prompting, as they are still very concrete thinkers. For example:

"What would happen if you brought Janet the Peace Rose instead of hitting her?"

"What would happen if you picked up the milk by the handle?"

"How would she respond if you asked nicely?"

Avoid "Why" Questions

Quite simply, what do children often say when we ask "why"? ~ "I don't know."

Results

We can't make children learn important life lessons, but we can prepare the social/emotional environment to increase their chances of making healthy decisions and learning from their mistakes. It's important to note, that children don't always answer the *What and How Questions* exactly the way would like them to. But as we well know as

Montessorians, that stare into the distance that shows they're thinking about and processing the situation is far more important than the "correct answer."