

# Understanding Questions

Children begin to understand different types of questions at different ages or stages of their development.

Usually children will understand more concrete questions first such as 'Who?', 'What?' and 'Where?' and then develop understanding of more abstract questions such as 'When?'.

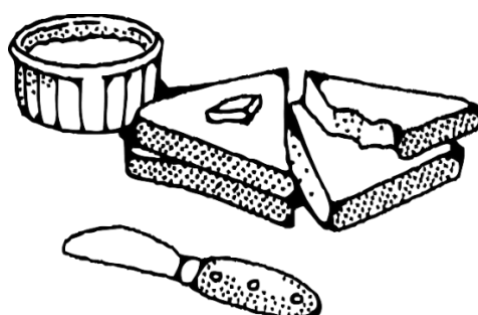
Questions involving 'How?' and 'Why' are some of the most complex types of questions we can ask as they involve children using their 'inferencing' skills and problem solving skills to work something out, that they can't see or hear, from the clues they have been given.

## Blank Level Questions

The Blank Levels (Blank, Rose and Berlin, 1978) is a useful framework for thinking about questions in four different levels. We can use this framework to determine the 'type' of questions a child can currently understand. This allows us to adapt questions when we need answers, to an appropriate level, to enable children to respond.

We can then provide support to help them move up to the next level to develop their understanding.

View the framework on the next page to see a description of the type of questions at each blank level and examples of how this could relate to an activity like 'making a sandwich'.



Blank Level	Question type	Example
1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Show me..../Point to....</li> <li>Naming things</li> <li>Find a matching object</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>"Show me the bread"/ "Point to the cheese"</li> <li>"What's this?" (tomato)</li> <li>"Find another one like this" (pointing to a slice of bread)</li> </ul>
2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Describing the function of an object</li> <li>Sentence completion</li> <li>Things that go together</li> <li>Sorting/categorising</li> <li>Describing objects/scenes</li> <li>Answering who, what, where questions</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>"What do we use to cut?"</li> <li>"You're cutting the...."</li> <li>"Knife and ...?" [fork], or "Bread and ...?" [butter]</li> <li>"Tomatoes are red. What other foods are red?"</li> <li>"Can I have a red/blue plate please?"</li> <li>"Take two slices of bread"</li> <li>"Do you want a big or little plate?"</li> <li>"What is Mrs Jones doing with the knife?"</li> <li>"What will we use to cut the bread"</li> <li>"Who said they liked ham?"</li> <li>"Where would we buy bread?"</li> </ul>
3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Following a set of directions</li> <li>Give another example BUT with an extra condition</li> <li>Arranging pictures in a sequence</li> <li>Telling a simple story/narrative</li> <li>Predicting what might happen</li> <li>Describing emotions</li> <li>Defining a word</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>"Put a slice of cucumber on a blue plate"</li> <li>"I need a plate but not a red one"</li> <li>Child is able to order three pictures, for example, going to the fridge, making the sandwich, eating the sandwich.</li> <li>"How did Susie make her sandwich?"</li> <li>"Elliot doesn't like tomatoes – what is he going to do?"</li> <li>"How does Lizzie feel?"</li> <li>"What does sharp mean?"</li> </ul>
4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Answering "Why?" or questions</li> <li>Solving a problem</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>"Why do we have to wash our hands before eating?"</li> <li>"Why did we have to throw that bread away?"</li> <li>"How can we reach the bread on the top shelf?"</li> </ul>



Blank level questions can be incorporated into the curriculum throughout lessons and can be used when talking about pictures, reading a story or carrying out an activity/ experiment.

- Level 1: Show me X?
- Level 2: What is X doing?
- Level 3: Tell me how you did that?
- Level 4: Why do we do X? / If we can use X what else could we use?

Consider using questions from each level during learning activities to support children's understanding.

If a child is struggling to respond to a question, consider the following:

- Is it the vocabulary you have used?
- OR
- Is the question type too difficult? (e.g. they are not yet understanding questions at that level)

Think about ways you can rephrase a question to make it easier for a child to respond e.g. 'How did you rip your shirt?' (Level 3 question) could be rephrased to: 'What happened to your shirt?' (Level 2 question)

Once you have identified the types of questions that the child finds difficult, practise working on these questions using pictures, stories, videos and reallife experiences in structured tasks. Make sure you are also modelling the questions in everyday activities so that the child can transfer their understanding to real life.

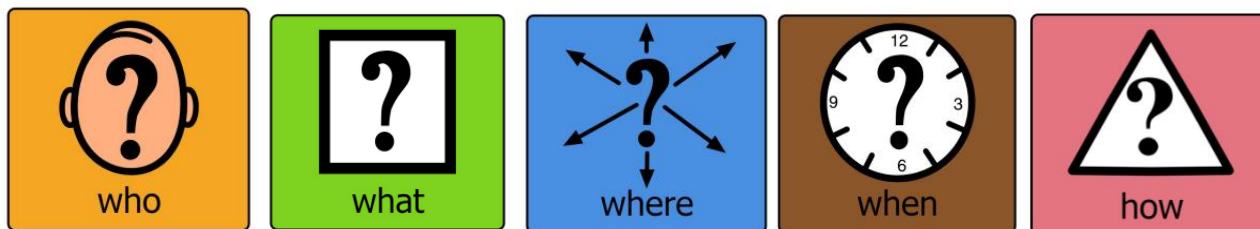
## How can we support understanding of questions?

- Pause after answering questions to see if the child is able to respond
- If they do not, you can model an answer to the questions to show them how to respond.
- Alternatively, you can offer 'forced choices' to the question to give them ideas of how to answer it e.g.
  - 'What's the weather like today?' (pause) 'Is it sunny or cloudy'
  - 'Where do we eat our lunch?' (pause) 'In the classroom or the dinner hall'

## Visual support

Visual support is a good way to support understanding of different question types. There are lots of different systems available (such as colourful semantics, Blacksheep press narrative programme, shape coding etc) just make sure you are consistent with the system you use. It would be useful to adopt a whole school approach to using the same system across school.





The symbols above are boardmaker symbols  
using the colourful semantics framework

## Ideas for supporting 'Wh' questions

### WHO questions

- Show the child that 'Who?' means we are looking for a person or animal. Start by using visual support with 'Who' pictures (e.g. using visual prompts like colourful semantics).
- Encourage the child to find 'Who?' is doing something in a picture by choosing from the visual prompts to answer the question e.g. 'Who is jumping?' .... 'The boy'.
- Do lots of modelling in real life and pictures e.g. 'Who is eating?' leave time for the child to answer the question and if they do not respond or give different information provide the answer for them e.g. 'Johnny is eating'. 'Who is jumping?' 'The girl is jumping'.
- Complete 'detective' games where you have to find 'Who' is doing certain things in the classroom e.g. 'Who is cutting?' 'Who is talking?' etc.
- Model the target 'wh' question in everyday activities throughout the day.

### WHERE questions

- As above, show the child that 'Where?' questions mean we are looking for a place/location.
- Start by using visual support to prompt answers to 'where' questions when looking at pictures e.g. 'Where are they?' Giving picture options for responses e.g. the beach, the park, the classroom.
- Model the language throughout the day 'Where are we?' 'The classroom or the playground?' 'It's lunchtime, where do we eat lunch?' 'In the dining room or the classroom'. 'Where do we clean out teeth?' 'In the bathroom or the kitchen' etc.
- As the child becomes more confident, gradually reduce the visual and verbal support until they can respond to these questions independently.



## WHEN questions

- Show the child that 'When?' questions mean we are looking for the time that something happens.
- Remember to think about the different ways we can respond to a when question e.g. this could relate to a time of day, part of the day, a time of year, a festival/celebration period (e.g. birthday/Christmas) or a season etc.
- Use activities outlined above but focussing on 'When?' questions instead.

## WHY/HOW questions

- Encourage the child to think about "how" something happened or "why" they think something might happen. You can use real life activities or sequencing pictures to generate ideas.
- Use "how"/"why" questions during classroom activities. These types of questions might be tricky for children to start with so support them to come up with appropriate responses by offering forced choices (e.g. "Do you think it's because XX or XX?") and then gradually withdraw the amount of support given to come up with appropriate answers.
- Talk about what might happen 'if' something else happens e.g. 'What would happen if the dog escaped?', 'What would happen if it was raining on sports day? etc. Practise coming up with lots of different ideas and then support the child to choose the most appropriate idea to answer the question.

## Useful resources:

- Black Sheep Press Narrative packs can be useful for working on different 'Wh' question types: [www.blacksheeppress.co.uk](http://www.blacksheeppress.co.uk)
- Twinkl provides useful resources that can be used as visual prompts to support 'wh' questions: [www.twinkl.co.uk](http://www.twinkl.co.uk)
- Language for Thinking (Speechmark): is a structured approach (similar to blank levels) that can be used to assess and support understanding of different question types.
- Test of Abstract Language Comprehension (TALC), Primary and TALC2 Secondary age, is an ELKLAN assessment using Blank level questions to identify a child's level of understanding. It also includes a range of questions at each level related to specific activities and core school subjects.

