As teachers, we ask a lot of questions. What color is that? Did you hang up your coat? What do you have for lunch today? If we stop and listen to ourselves we may find that all our interactions with the children in our class are made up of questions.

Language is powerful. So are our interactions with children. Combined, we have an incredible opportunity to help children grow and learn just by asking thoughtful questions that pull children more deeply into topics and ideas.

Madison is playing in the sand, exploring measuring cups, pouring sand between different sized containers. We can ask questions with obvious answers: “Which one is bigger?” “Is it full or empty?” While these let us know where Madison’s understanding about quantitative concepts maybe it doesn’t further her thinking on the topic. Try questions like, “How did you make that happen?” “What would happen if…?” “How do you know?”

Open-Ended Questions

Open-ended questions, like the ones in Madison’s story, encourage children to:

- use sentences instead of answering either yes or no, or with single words
- provide more information
- elaborate with new ideas and details
- offer creative answers
- talk about emotions
- extend the conversation

Sometimes you need to ask a closed-ended question first, and then follow up with an open-ended question that provides the opportunity for expansion.

- “Have you ever been to the dentist?”
- “What was it like?”
- “How did you feel when you were done?”

Questions During Reading

Another wonderful time to expand thinking with open-ended questions is during story book reading.

- “Why do you think that happened?”
- “How do you think that made him feel?”
- “How would you feel if that happened to you?”

Pairing closed-ended with open-ended questions works here, too.

- Which animal in this book did you like best?
- Why did you like the rabbit the most?

Ask yourself the question: "Is this just a test question, or does it further the child's thinking on this topic?"
Tip Sheets for Teachers: Practices to Promote School Readiness

Talking to Make a Difference: What Kinds of Questions?

We know that high quality early education represents one of the best investments that society can make for promoting successful educational outcomes for all children, but particularly for children who are at risk (Heckman & Masterov, 2007). Early education, it is done well, can significantly erase or minimize the achievement gaps that exist for many of our children (Barnett, 2011; Camilli, Vargas, Ryan, & Barnett, 2010; Pianta, Barnett, Burchinal, & Thornburg, 2009). The evidence is so overwhelming, that 39 of this country’s 50 states have elected to provide public-funded prekindergarten for its preschoolers (Barnett, Carolan, Fitzgerald, & Squires, 2011). The most recent report published by the National Institute for Early Education Research, The State of Preschool 2011, estimates that these 39 states provided prekindergarten services for 28% of all 4-year olds in this country. Unfortunately, Indiana is not of those states. In the absence of funding and state leadership, Indiana preschoolers have to rely on a patchwork system of services that falls short of the needed capacity to serve children who need these services most (Indiana Education Roundtable, 2012).

In 2012, we initiated a study to investigate how well existing early education programs in Indiana were doing. We were interested in seeing how our classrooms performed in relation to other states. We wanted to see how well our practices aligned with current research evidence documenting effective early education, and we were curious to see how the different programs in our state compared with one another. We sent out invitations to all Head Start programs, licensed child care centers and public school preschools in the state. Video-recorded observations were completed in 81 classrooms that were geographically and socio-economically representative: 28 licensed child care centers; 27 Head Start classrooms, and; 26 public school classrooms. We recorded only in-class, morning activities; and analyzed each observation using two tools; the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS) (Pianta, LaParo, & Hamre, 2008), and the Emerging Academic Snapshot (EAS) (Ritchie, Howes, Kraft-Sayre, & Weiser, 2002).

The CLASS focuses on three broad domains of effective teacher-child interactions that characterize children’s classroom experiences: Emotional Support, Organizational Support, and Instructional Support. Emotional Support captures how teachers help children develop positive relationships, enjoyment in learning, comfort in the classroom, and appropriate levels of independence. Classroom Organization focuses on how well teachers manage the classroom to maximize learning and keep children engaged. The Instructional Support domain involves how teachers promote children’s thinking and problem solving, use feedback to deepen understanding, and help children develop more complex language skills. The Emerging Academic Snapshot measures the types and frequency of activities and instruction to which children are exposed. The types of activities recorded include common preschool activities such as free choice time, whole group time, basic routines, small group instruction, individual work time, and meal/snack times. It further looks at children’s exposure to various curricular areas, including aesthetics (art, music, dance), literacy/language, math, science, and social studies. Some teacher actions (instruction) are also included.

We hope that the information we gained from this study benefits both policy makers and classroom practitioners. For policy makers, our goal is to establish a comparative baseline of program quality from which clear directions and decisions can be made to enhance preschool services in Indiana. For practitioners, our hope is that the insights we made about the presence (and absence) of evidence-based early education practices can inform their decisions concerning classroom schedules, curricula, and teaching practices.

This series of tip sheets looks at some of the findings of our research in a quick, one-page format. More information, including a breakdown of the data and more detailed discussion can be found on the Early Childhood Center website.