

# Improving Your Child's Ability To Answer "WH" Questions

Basic "WH" questions consist of the following:

What is it?

What is he/she doing?

Who is it? / Who is (action)

Where?

What do you do with (item)?



In order to answer one of these questions, a child must produce an answer. This answer may be produced verbally, through gestures (via pantomime or American Sign Language), or with a functional communication system such as visuals, CORE vocabulary board, or an AAC like a speech generating device. \* See the **FUNCTIONAL COMMUNICATION** tab under the Table of Contents on this website.

When attempting to increase a child's ability to answer these questions, it is best to do so in context (i.e. in play, while reading a book, etc.), not drilling them repeatedly on various WH questions.



The most basic of these questions, could be considered **"what is it?"** The main purpose of the question is for the child to label familiar items in his/her environment and increase their expressive vocabulary. During the early stages of expressive language development, a child will normally produce an approximation of a word (i.e. "beh" for bear) or use an associated environmental sound (i.e. "beep" for car) when labeling. If your child produces either of these, reinforce their attempt at labeling, accept their label, and model the correct pronunciation of the word. If your child is unable to answer this question, model the appropriate response and have them try again i.e. "what is it?" No response or incorrect answer, "I see a bear! It says grrr. What is it?" You have provided a verbal label as well as an alternative way to label the bear (by its associated sound i.e grrr). When the child imitates the label or sound, reinforce the behavior by acknowledging their answer "Yes, the brown bear says grrr!). It is important to remember to expand your child's answer by adding additional information i.e. adding information about the item such as color, size, function, sound, etc.).

The next WH question is “**What is he/she doing?**” To answer this question, the child should be using present progressive –ing verbs such as playing, building, eating, running, etc. If your child is unable to verbally name the action but is able to pantomime the correct action, accept the answer and verbally model the action. For example, if you ask the child about a boy eating and he/she pantomimes peeling a banana, taking a bite, and chewing, accept the answer and reinforce the child’s attempt by saying, “you’re right, the boy is eating a banana!”

“**Who .... ?**” This is a great one to practice while looking through a book. Chances are there may be several people or characters on 1 page. You can point to a person or character and ask your child “who is it?” or “who is (action)?” If he/she is unable to answer the question, you could point to the character, make a comment about the character, and ask the question again (a delayed model). For example, you can point the boy and say “Look, the boy is building with blocks. Who is building?” If your child says “boy” you can expand on it by saying, “yes, the boy is building a house with blocks.” You could also offer verbal choices as you point to the character, “Who is it? Is it a boy or a girl?” This is a great time to remind your child that when we ask “**who**,” we are looking for a **person or a character**.

“**Where ...?**” You can practice this skill in a variety of different ways; while playing cars, while playing hide and seek, or while reading a book. Let’s look at a few examples... while playing with cars, you can place a car in specific location such as on top of the car ramp or under a block. Ask your child “where is the blue car?” If the child says “right there” and points to the location, provide a verbal model of the exact location i.e. “the car is on the bridge/under the block, etc.). As with “who” questions, you can also provide verbal choices to scaffold (assist) your child. For example, when the child points to the car, ask him/her “is it on top of the block (point to location) or under the block (point to location). If your child answers with “top” then reinforce his answer and expand by saying “You’re right, the car is on top of the block!” This is also a great time to remind your child that when we ask “**where**” we are looking for a **location or a place**.

“**What do you do with a (target item)?**” To answer this question, your child needs to have an understanding of the function or use of items. For example, you may be coloring with your child and asking them about the different tools you are using ... “what do you do with scissors?” If your child is able to tell you “cut,” reinforce the answer and model a more complete sentence i.e. “Yes, we cut with scissors.” If he/she is unable to answer the questions, offer verbal choices, such as “do we color with scissors or cut with scissors? If your child needs additional prompting, you can provide a direct model and say “we cut with scissors.”

## **What Do I Do If My Child Has Difficulty Responding To These Questions?**

You can assist your child by prompting them or helping them find the answer.

Start with the least invasive assistance. So, if you are trying to have your child identify an item, present the question “what is it?” and wait. If your child does not respond, present the question again and offer 2 verbal choices, “what is it? Is it an elephant or a bear?” If he/she is unable to name the item, provide a direct verbal model of the name or associated sound (i.e. grrr).

You can follow this procedure to assist your child in answering any WH questions.



**Reminder: Providing expansions (verbal models as well as additional information) will facilitate your child's ability to verbally answer a variety of WH questions.**