

Skill 11 Answers “wh” questions about a story!

What does answering “wh” questions about a story mean?

Story time and reading are important parts of a child’s life. While reading together with a young child, a caregiver often stops and asks questions about the story to help gauge the child’s understanding and to build vocabulary. As a child moves toward independent reading, being able to answer ‘wh’ questions promotes critical thinking and can prompt a conversation about different topics. These ‘wh’ questions might include:

- Who questions with a focus on people or characters
 - Ex: Who is walking through the forest?
- What questions with a focus on items
 - Ex: What is on the princesses’ head?
- When questions with a focus on time
 - Ex: When do the kids get on the bus?
- Where questions with a focus on a place
 - Ex: Where does the rabbit sleep?
- Why questions with a focus on a reason
 - Ex: Why did she go into the forest?
- How questions with a focus on a process
 - Ex: How did the girl get into the castle?

Why is this skill important?

Answering questions about a story is an essential skill for language development in children. Think about what happens during story time with a very young child who is not even speaking yet. First, the caregiver sits closely and starts reading the story. As they read, a caregiver often moves their finger over the words as if to help the child connect what they are hearing with what they are seeing. After a page or two, the caregiver might stop and ask the child who is not speaking yet, “Where did the bear go?” The caregiver then points to the picture of the bear on the page point to illustrations in a story and answers their own question, “There he is!” The caregiver is essentially modeling how to ask and answer questions for their young child. As the child develops, the child is able to provide their own answer during these interactions and demonstrate that they understand

or comprehend the material or be able to discuss and predict what might happen next. Being able to answer questions about something a child has read also promotes critical thinking and can be the first step toward more complex conversations about a variety of topics.

Why is this skill difficult for children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)?

Due to the characteristics of ASD, some children may have trouble with a skill called joint attention. Joint attention is an important and complex skill that emerges early in development as children first learn to shift their attention to and from caregivers, objects, and toys in their environment. Essentially, joint attention is the sharing of attention between two people. For example, if a caregiver points to a dog, a typically developing child will look in the direction of the point, see the same dog, and hear the caregiver say, “Dog.” When this happens enough times, the child realizes that those furry creatures are called dogs! This is how children learn to label all the things around them. What often happens for children with ASD, though, is the child does not look in the direction of the point and does not see the dog the caregiver is referring to and does not associate the word ‘dog’ with the right thing. The same thing happens during story time. While a caregiver reads a story, a child with ASD may not be looking at the page at all and not connecting what they are hearing with what they are seeing.

What are some considerations for teaching this skill?

Given the importance of joint attention and the challenges children with ASD can have, it may be necessary to work on this skill before moving to the skill of answering ‘wh’ questions about a story. For more information about joint attention, please see the factsheet from the VCU-ACE Early Childhood website here: _____

Once a child is able to ‘share attention’ with the caregiver during story time, the child can follow along and connect what is being said with what they are seeing. It will be easier for the child to look at what the caregiver is pointing to in the story, reference the illustrations and / or text, understand the question, and then answer correctly. To start teaching this skill, begin with concrete and simple questions such as pointing to the bear picture and asking, “What is that?” This is a difficult skill so be patient and provide the child with lots of opportunities to practice! Once the child is able to answer concrete questions, gradually move to more abstract complex questions such as, “Why was the bear sad?”

What materials will I need?

Families might need the following for teaching a child how to ask for items / people / or activities:

- Any book or story that the child prefers and enjoys. Using books and stories the child enjoys will improve the child’s motivation to practice this skill and participate in the activities. If the child does not have an obvious preference for a book yet, choose books with characters and topics that the child prefers

and enjoys. For example, if the child enjoys playing with trains, start with a book about trains!

- White board
- Markers
- Pre-printed visual supports to include cue cards or sentence strips
- Choice board for topics to discuss during the conversation or for choices on different ways to say goodbye.
- For Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) users, be sure the child has access to the vocabulary needed to participate including sign language, picture exchange items, or a communication device that is programmed with the appropriate pictures and words.

Activity #1 Concrete “Wh” Questions

- Choose a book or have a child choose a book. Start with a book the child clearly prefers. If the child does not have a preference yet, choose a book with a character or topic that the child enjoys.
- As you read the story together, stop and ask the child a concrete ‘wh’ question such as “What is that?” or “Who is that?” while pointing to an item or person in the story. For example, if reading the book “Brown Bear, Brown Bear” stop and ask the child what the animal is after reading the page or ask what color the animal is before turning the page.
- If the child responds to your ‘wh’ question, provide reinforcement such as praise or high fives.
- If the child does not respond to your ‘wh’ question, you can prompt the child by:
 - Pointing to the picture in the book (for example, if asking what color is the bear, point to the bear)
 - Repeating the question and waiting a few seconds
- If the child responds, provide praise or a high five.
- If the child does not respond, model the answer by saying, “The bear is brown.” If the child uses AAC, be sure to model how to use sign language, picture exchange, or pushing a button on a device.
- Initially, try to work on one type of ‘wh’ question at a time. Starting with ‘what’ questions may be the easiest.
- Be careful not to ask too many questions. This is just a way to encourage the child to interact with you about the story and practice answering questions. This process should be fun and exciting and should not feel like a pop quiz.
- Once the child is successful with ‘what’ questions, gradually move to the next type such as ‘where’ and so on.

Activity #2 Abstract “Wh” Questions

- Choose a book or have a child choose a book. Start with a book the child clearly prefers. If the child does not have a preference yet, choose a book with a character or topic that the child enjoys.
- Once the child is comfortable with answering more concrete questions, progress to asking more abstract questions that start with why or how. Abstract questions cannot be found directly on the pages of the book and requires more processing from the child. In other words, the child has to interpret information from the story and make an inference (or guess based off what they know). These types of questions can sometimes be difficult for children with ASD so this may take a lot of practice!
- As you read the story together, stop and ask the child a more abstract ‘wh’ question such as such as “Why do you think she is sad?” or “How did the dragon get to the castle?” while pointing to an item or character in the story.
- If the child responds to your ‘wh’ question, provide reinforcement such as praise or high fives.
- If the child does not respond to your ‘wh’ question, you can prompt the child by:
 - Pointing to the picture in the book (for example, if asking why the girl is sad, point to the girl)
 - Repeating the question and waiting a few seconds
- If the child responds, provide praise or a high five.
- If the child does not respond, model the answer by saying, “The girl is sad because she didn’t get the toy she wanted.” If the child uses AAC, be sure to model how to use sign language, picture exchange, or pushing a button on a device.
- If the child does not respond or responds incorrectly, model the correct answer and walk them through the process. Practice makes perfect.
- Repeat the same question across different scenarios to provide multiple opportunities for practice.
- Be careful not to ask too many questions. This is just a way to encourage the child to interact with you about the story and practice answering questions. This process should be fun and exciting and should not feel like a pop quiz.

Activity #3 Asking Questions in a Conversation

- Once the child can answer both concrete and abstract questions about the story as you turn each page, now move to asking questions after the story is over and starting a conversation with the child about the events and characters in the book.
- This is a more difficult skill than answering questions with the story and images in front of the child. To support the child as they learn this skill, print pictures of characters or events from the

story and place them in front of the child. This can also help the child as they sequence the events in the story about what happened first, second, and last as they can put the pictures in order.

- Some children may have difficulty coming up with phrases or sentences to help answer the questions. If the child uses AAC, be sure the child has access to the vocabulary needed to answer fully. If the child does not use AAC but has difficulty thinking of certain phrases, use a white board with written options, sentence strips, or a choice board with visual options.
- Once the child does well with answering these questions with a preferred book, try it with a book that your child does not know or may not be their favorite.

Social Skill Extension

- In order to help generalize the skill, it will be important to practice with a variety of stories, with different people, and in different settings. Some ways to provide more practice opportunities include:
 - Use family mealtimes as opportunities to discuss stories and everyone can take a turn talking describing a book as well as asking and answering questions.
 - Use conversation dice to promote conversation and dialog about a story. Pick one friend or a group of friends who may be reading the same book for school. The dice can have who, what, when, where, why, and how on each side. As each person rolls the dice, it allows everyone to ask or answer different questions. This activity is a great first step for answering 'wh' questions with peers and can lead to natural conversations with friends about books. This activity also promotes conversational skills and helps build friendships.

Links to resources on our website!

- View Video - VCU Autism Center for Excellence
https://vcuautismcenter.org/te/how_to/simpleVideo.cfm?video=27
- Autism Q & A: Providing Choices
<https://vcuautismcenter.org/resources/factsheets/printView.cfm/1194>
- Autism Q&A: Introduction to Teaching Young Children with Autism ...
<https://vcuautismcenter.org/resources/factsheets/printView.cfm/1077>
- Functions of Communication - VCU Autism Center for Excellence
<https://vcuautismcenter.org/ta/vagoals/communication/...to.../functions.cfm>
- How To Video Series - VCU Autism Center for Excellence
https://vcuautismcenter.org/te/how_to/
- Evidence-Based Practices - VCU Autism Center for Excellence
<https://vcuautismcenter.org/te/topics/evidence.cfm>
- Communication - VCU Autism Center for Excellence
<https://vcuautismcenter.org/resources/communication.cfm>

