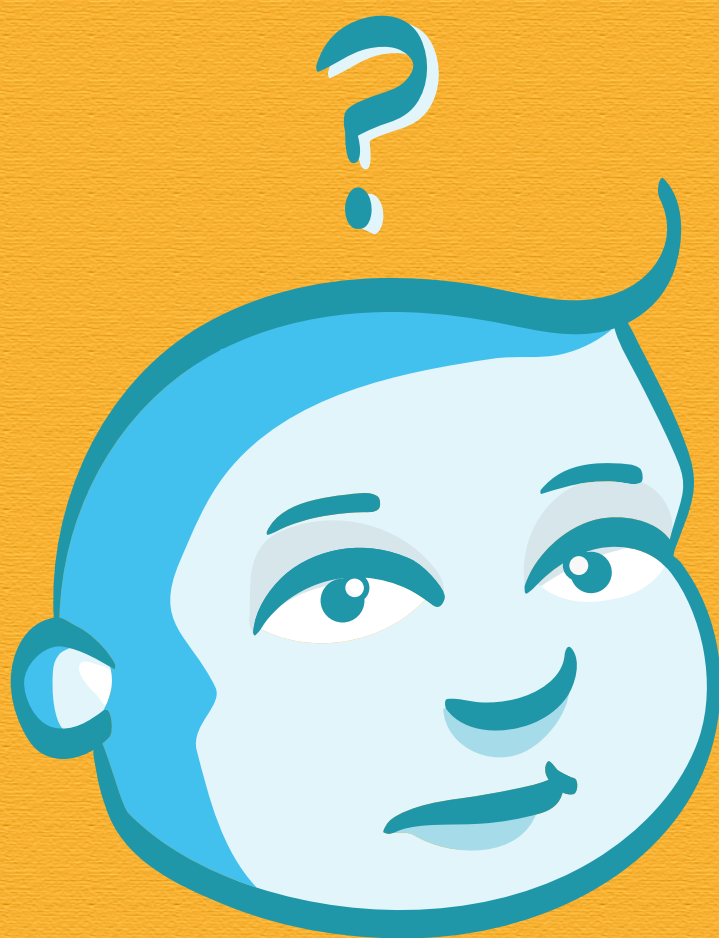




DOES EVERY QUESTION NEED AN ANSWER?

A GUIDE TO OPEN-ENDED QUESTIONING FOR PARENTS



ABOUT THIS BOOK

This booklet is provided by Young Humanists to help parents to respond to their children's enquiries about life's big questions.

Rather than providing a list of prescribed questions and answers, it acts as a practical guide to building an honest and open dialogue with your child.

We hope you find the guide useful. Please share your feedback and reflections at www.younghumanists.org.uk

INTRODUCTION

As every parent knows, children love to ask questions. Particular favourites might include what are you doing, where are you going, and how long it will take. Questions beginning with 'who', 'what', 'when' and 'where' are often easier to answer; it's the dreaded 'why' questions that can prove tricky. For example, what should a humanist tell their child in answer to the question, 'Why are we here?'

It can be tempting to believe that children need the security of a solid answer. Surely you should provide your child with secure conclusions when they're young, and save the difficult ideas for when they're older, one might think. On the contrary, the so-called security provided by a less-than-perfect truth told to a young person can cause a huge shock when it is ripped away at a later date – an experience that many humanists can relate to with regards to their earlier religious education.

The sheer number of questions asked by children can lead parents to believe that they crave hard facts. However, children can prove surprisingly pragmatic when faced with an open-ended question. In fact, compared to adults, children often display a remarkable flexibility of thought, as well as huge enjoyment in the process of thinking creatively. Furthermore,

they frequently have their own thoughts on complex matters from an early age. As adults, it is our place to draw out these germinating ideas, and to scaffold and reinforce the frames upon which they will grow.

QUESTIONING TO ENCOURAGE THINKING

An open-ended question is a question that has no right answer. It could prompt a large number of different responses. Helping our children to experience and appreciate open-ended questions is useful for two reasons. First, as humanists we want to give our children the most honest responses we can provide to the big questions in life. For most of us, this answer will encompass empirical evidence, personal experience and philosophy, as well a large number of other ideas. We each bring something different to the table, and we want our children to be able to do the same.

Secondly, Humanism is by definition interested in the human experience, a huge part of which involves understanding, tolerating, and respecting the thinking of others. When we engage with other people, especially those living their life as part of a different culture or a religion, a humanist needs the skills to learn about them and learn from them, while evaluating which are the useful lessons we can take from their way of living. While this skill is difficult to teach, open-ended questioning helps children to place themselves in another person's shoes.

GETTING STARTED

A number of things could prompt an open-ended discussion with your child. They may have questions about something they learned at school, heard from a friend or read about. They may have come to an idea of their own accord. On the other hand, as a parent you might want to initiate a discussion yourself: in this situation, family events, current affairs, storylines from books, and photographs from the news can all become great prompts for discussions.

Before you begin, it is important to remember that children appreciate a straight answer. This means giving an honest response that comes from the heart (by way of, of course, the head). Children like to feel that the adult they are talking to respects them enough to really share their ideas. As adults, this obviously includes scope for a little editing on our parts, but adopting a relaxed and open manner goes a long way to engaging a child of any age.

PICKING THE RIGHT QUESTION

The right questions to ask will depend on your child, and it might take a little practice to get used to questioning at the right level for them. Some of the questions on the next page would be suitable for young children; others would be better suited to more mature thinkers.

Remember that there is no right answer, so you can never ask a question that is too hard. If your child struggles to answer, use the opportunity to share your thoughts. Your example of how to word a good answer will develop their speaking skills for the future.

Once your child is willingly sharing their ideas in response to the questions on the next page, encourage them to begin asking you the same kinds of questions. You should praise them if you hear the same questioning style used in their everyday conversation; this is the best sign of all that these great thinking skills are sticking.

PRAISE TO BUILD SKILLS

It is important that your child feels able to share their thoughts in a warm and constructive environment, and it can be tempting to offer praise such as 'good girl!' and 'well done'. Whilst not harmful, this praise does little to explain what was successful about your child's statement.

Instead, try to use praise that picks out the strengths in your child's wording or thinking. As well as positively reinforcing what your child has done well, specific praise will help to develop speaking and listening skills. Here are a few examples:

- ***Thanks for sharing your idea. It was really original. I've never considered that possibility before, so you've given me loads to think about.***
- ***I really liked it when you used the word _____ in your explanation. That helped me to see it from your perspective.***
- ***Great thinking! I wonder if you thought about this idea more today, maybe you could come up with other interesting ideas? Let's chat again later.***

EXAMPLE QUESTIONS

The questions in the next two pages are grouped by the different skill that they help to develop. Don't feel the need to stick rigidly to one type of question, or to select evenly from all categories.

DEVELOPING SELF-AWARENESS

Your child is learning to arrange and articulate his or her own thoughts more clearly. He or she is becoming aware of the influences on our thinking.

How does thinking about this make you feel?

What do you think?

What further questions does it create in your mind?

What led you to think that?

What changed your mind?

Have you ever thought anything different?

What books/songs/films have shaped your thinking about this?

When did you begin thinking that way?

DEVELOPING EMPATHY

Your child is learning to engage with the thinking of the person they are communicating with, or the creator of a piece of work

Do you have any questions for me, about my thinking?

What challenges to the idea might I/the artist face?

Could you explain my idea back to me?

I think _____.
Do you have any comments about my idea?

How do you think I/the artist arrived at this idea?

What clues does the artist give about their feelings?

Do you think I explained my ideas well?

DEVELOPING TOLERANCE

Your child is learning to consider the thinking of others, and how they may have been influenced to think this way.

What group of people might think _____?

Why might they think that?

What might _____ think about this?

How might this way of thinking make them act?

How do you know they think that way?

What could have happened, in their life, to lead to that way of thinking?

DEVELOPING FLEXIBILITY OF THOUGHT

Your child is encouraged to think from other perspectives. He or she begins to evaluate different possible ideas.

Do you have any questions for me, about my thinking?

What could change your mind on this subject?

Now you have tried another answer, how did that perspective make you feel?

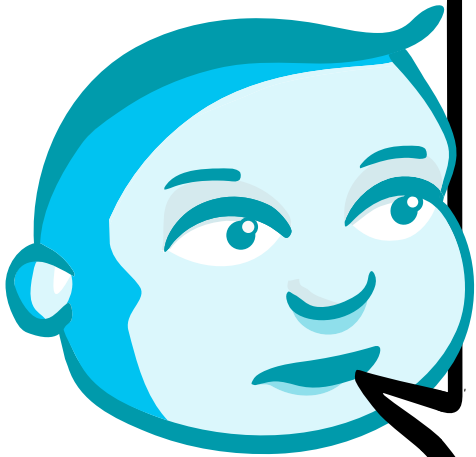
What would be another answer to this question?

List all the possible ways of answering this question, including the views you don't share.

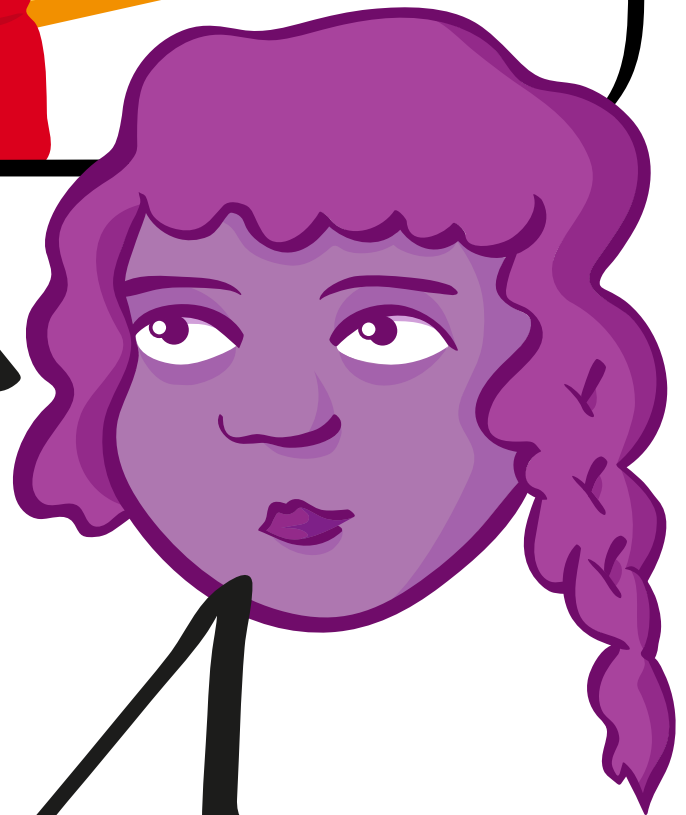
EXAMPLE DIALOGUE

The dialogue on the following pages gives an example of one way in which a parent might develop their child's thinking by using open-ended questioning.

Why does Nathan go to church on Sunday, but we don't?



That's because Nathan's family are Christian. Do you know what the word 'Christian' means?



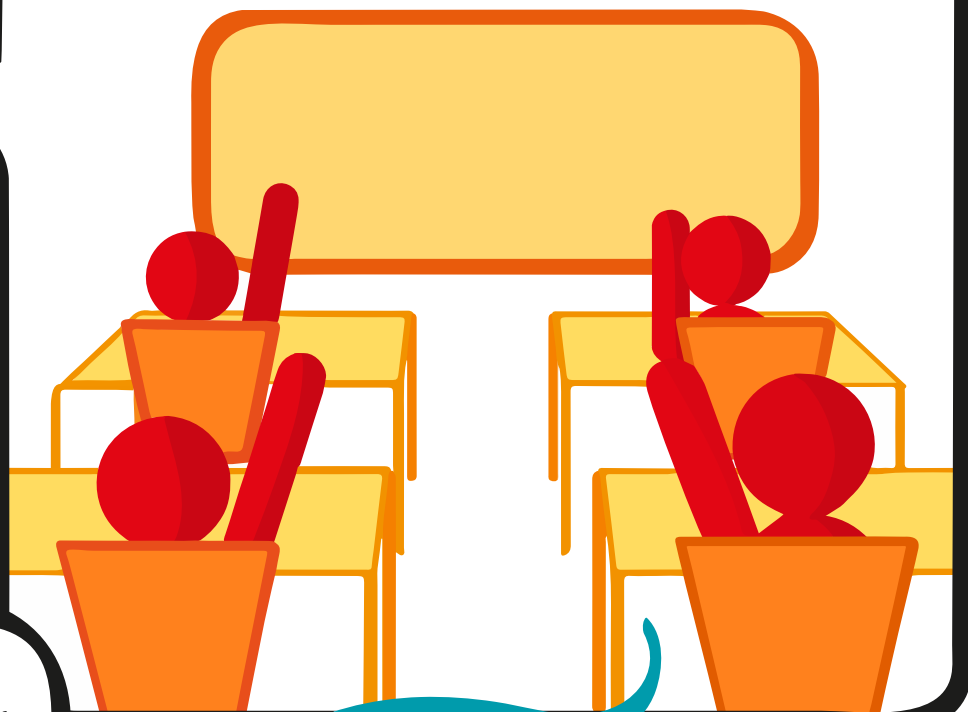
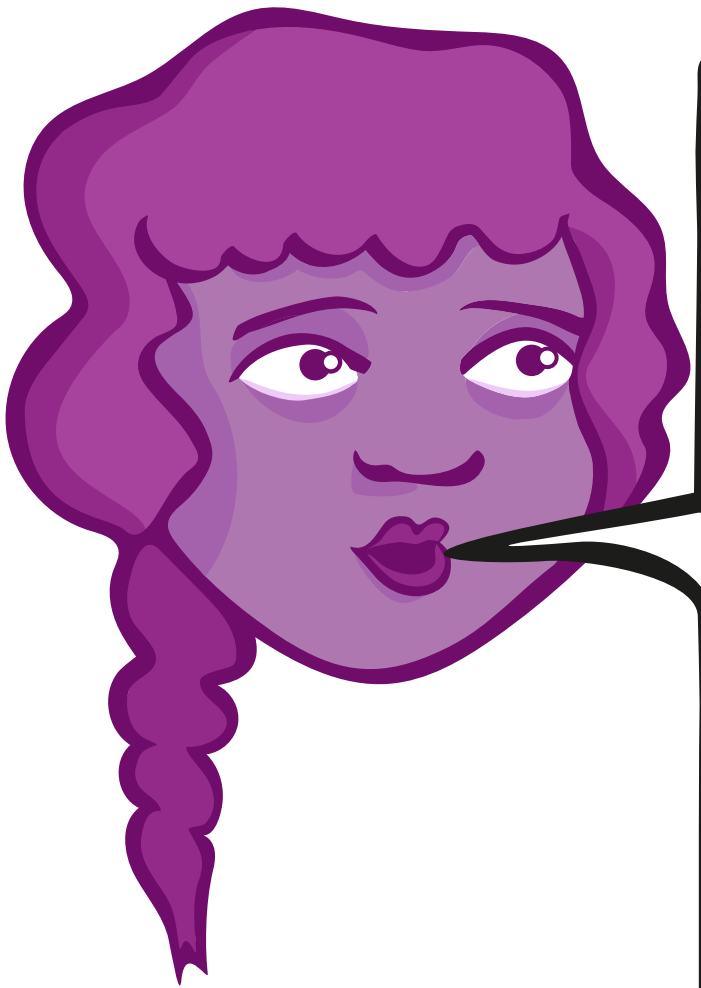
Yes, we learnt about it at school. It's the name for people who believe in god.

You're right, Christians do believe in god. They go to church on Sunday because it's important to their community – the group of people they share ideas with. It's their most special building. Other groups of people have important buildings too. Can you think of any?

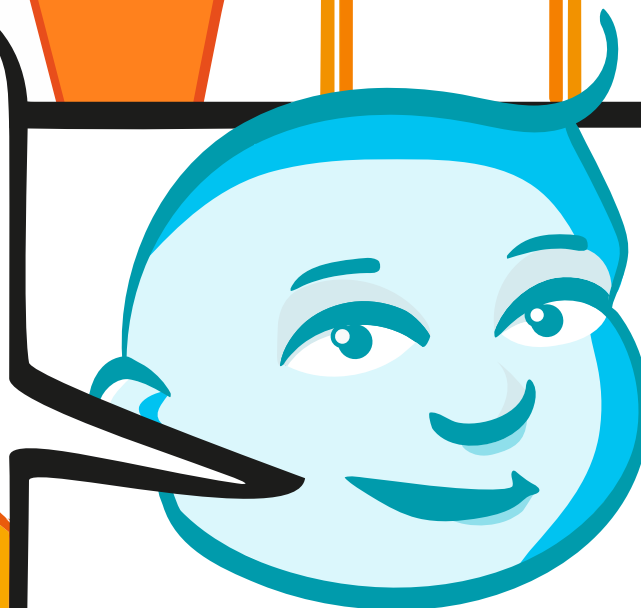
My school is an important building.



Yes, definitely. Your school building is where your school community meets. When you are at school you share ideas about learning, which makes the people there a community. Any others?



Aisha said in class that the mosque in town is special for her family.



Why did she think that the mosque was special?

She said that's where
her family prays.

They do pray there, along with
lots of other people, and that's
why it's the centre of their community.
Can you think of anything that our
family does to be part
of a community?

Well... last week
we met up with the other
families to help clean the park.

Good thinking! Yes, when we did that together we were part of
a community, because we all care about the park. And do you remember that
Nathan and Aisha's families were also there? That's because they are also part
of the park community too.



POINTS TO REMEMBER

Developing a dialogue filled with open-ended questions will be a gradual process. Be aware that at first a child may not feel comfortable when answering open-ended questions. For many people, young and old, their school experience has led them to believe that every question ends with a 'right answer', and it is their job to seek it out. They may distrust you when you refuse to provide them with this answer, as they believe you are being evasive. With a little time and practise, you will help your child to feel engaged when encountering a question that has no answer.

For you too, the process of learning to question will be gradual. Don't feel pressure to turn every question into an open-ended one. Don't try to ask every type of question on your first attempt and don't be put off if your child sometimes stares out the window or turns back to the television. Your willingness and intent is the main factor that will bring about the change in your family, even if you have to take baby steps to get there.

Above all, be confident that you have made a great choice by committing to help your child to develop their thinking skills. No parent can know what the future holds for their child, but what we can know is this: whatever life path your child

chooses, the ability to think clearly, flexibly, and articulately is one of the greatest gifts you can give them.

ABOUT HUMANISM

Humanists are non-religious people who make sense of the world using reason and experience. They base their ethics on the goals of human welfare, happiness and fulfilment, and seek to make the best of the one life they have by creating meaning and purpose in the here and now.

Whilst this guide has been written with humanist families in mind, it can also serve as a tool for promoting great dialogue between all parents and children, regardless of religion or belief.

ABOUT YOUNG HUMANISTS

Young Humanists is the 18-35s section of the British Humanist Association (BHA). Founded in 1896, the BHA is the national charity working on behalf of non-religious people who seek to live ethical and fulfilling lives on the basis of reason and humanity. We promote Humanism; provide services, support and representation to the non-religious; and promote a secular state and equal treatment in law and policy of everyone, regardless of religion or belief.



To find out more and to share your experiences of
using this guide,

visit www.younghumanists.org.uk

For more information about the BHA,

visit www.humanism.org.uk

For teaching resources,

visit www.humanismforschools.org.uk

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