

## Curiosity Questions: Conversational

*To see with the eyes of another, to hear with the ears of another, to feel with the heart of another; for the time being, this seems to me an admissible definition of what we call social feeling.*

Alfred Adler



"Maybe little Jack Horner became argumentative because he was backed into a corner, leaving him no options."

The root of education is *educare*—to draw forth. Too often we try to stuff instruction in by “telling,” and then wonder why our wonderful lectures go in one ear and out the other. Conversational curiosity questions help students develop the “social feeling” referred to by Alfred Adler, in the quotation above, because they feel respectfully included.

Again, it is brain science. “Telling” usually sounds like a lecture and invites resistance. The student may stiffen, and the message that goes to the brain is, “Resist.” Asking (with true curiosity) invites the listener’s body to relax, and the message that goes to the brain is, “Search for an answer.”

These questions take more time than “Motivational Curiosity Questions (Page XX) because you are doing more than inviting a child to think of a solution to a simple task that

requires attention, such as, “What do you need to do to get your work done on time?”

Conversational Curiosity Questions require just that—a conversation, as you will see in the *Tool in Action* stories.

Before engaging in motivational curiosity questions, it is important to wait until everyone has had time to calm down. Then find a quiet place where you can sit with the student and really listen to his or her responses to your questions. The Tool Tips below include a “script” for curiosity questions. These are meant to give you an idea about what curiosity questions might sound like. However, it is very important that you don’t use a script so your questions are genuine and relate to the specifics of the situation.

To increase your awareness, start noticing how often you “tell” instead of “ask,” and put a dollar in a jar every time you do. (How long would it take for you to have enough money in the jar for a nice vacation?) When you catch yourself “telling,” think about how you could turn your words into a respectful question.

### **Tool in Action from Nobleboro, Maine**

Stephen, age 4 1/2, has been having a really hard time with his classmates. He gets frustrated easily and then hits. During the morning work cycle, the teacher notices Stephen crying next to his mat. There are puzzle map pieces all over the floor. The assistant informs the teacher that Janet flipped his puzzle over after he hit her.

Teacher: “Stephen, I notice that you are very sad. What happened?”

Stephen: “Janet flipped my puzzle over, and I worked on it all morning.”

Teacher: “I can understand why you are so sad. You put a lot of work into that. What caused Janet to flip your puzzle over?”

Stephen: “Well, I hit her. She was bossing me.”

Teacher: “So, you got mad and hit her?”

Stephen: “Yeah.”

Teacher: “Then what happened?”

Stephen: “Then she flipped my puzzle map over.”

Teacher: “So, what did you learn from this?”

Stephen: “Maybe I shouldn’t hit.”

Teacher: “Janet looks sad too. What could you do to help her feel better?”

Stephen: “I could tell her I’m sorry.”

Teacher: “Would you like some help.”

Stephen: “I can do it.”

Notice the difference when a child decides to say, “I’m sorry,” instead of being told to say, “I’m sorry.” The apology comes with sincerity. Stephen came to this conclusion on his own (with a little help from curiosity questions) after feeling proud of himself for solving the problem and wanting to fix it.

*Chip DeLorenzo, M.Ed., Head of School, Damariscotta Montessori School, Certified Positive Discipline Trainer*

### **Tool in Action from Poway, California**

My ninth grade English class has followed a routine for the last three weeks: after reading, discussing and developing a plot diagram of a fiction short story, students have been assigned a three paragraph literary analysis. Students have also been provided a rubric and a model essay. The model essay for each of the assignments was reviewed and discussed in class.

Tomas (fictitious name) for the last three weeks has handed in a one paragraph essay. I had privately asked Tomas to meet with me after school on Thursday to discuss his essay. The conversation went like this:

Teacher: So Tomas how are you doing?

Student: Stammers uncomfortably and finally responds, "Okay."

Teacher: Do you know why I wanted to meet with you?

Student: Maybe, my grades?

Teacher: Let's take a look at your essays.

Student: Opens his binder to returned homework. He shuffles through a couple of pages until he comes to his essays.

Teacher: What is your understanding for what is needed in the essays?

Student: Shrugs his shoulders, and responds. I don't know.

Teacher: Do you remember getting a piece of paper that listed the essay requirements and how you would be graded?

Student: Yes.

Teacher: Can you take out that piece of paper?

The student pulls out the piece of paper and together we look at the requirements and read silently.

Student: Smiles... Oh, I didn't follow what was assigned.

Teacher: What can you do about it now?

Student: Do you think I can have until Wednesday to redo all of the essays so far for full credit?

Previously, in a class meeting, students determined that they would like the opportunity to work toward mastery on all assignments, quizzes and tests. Consequently, we decided that they could continually revise work for full credit. (Mistakes as Opportunities to Learn) We agreed to revisit this policy at the end of October. So far, it has been amazing. Because of positive discipline strategies my students are empowered and are earning good grades. My class has gone from a typical bell curve to a J curve. I have more students with As than Bs, more with Bs than Cs and no one is failing.

*Diana Loiewski, Teacher in Poway School District*

### **Tool Tips:**

1. Students will listen to you AFTER they feel listened to.
2. Stop “telling” and “ask” questions, such as (but using your own words):

“What happened?”

“How do you feel about it?”

“How do you think others feel?”

“What ideas do you have to solve this problem?”

3. See “Curiosity Questions Motivational”

### **What The Research Says:**

Dr. Dan Siegel invites constructive problem solving rather than telling statements which increase the child’s biochemical stress response (which may look like rebellion or withdrawal). Siegel and Bryson describe how asking works to integrate the “upstairs” brain, but telling activates the “downstairs” brain. Asking questions invites the upstairs brain to engage in processing choice and planning. This is optimal compared to triggering the “downstairs” brain and its reactivity. Siegel and Bryson report that when we facilitate thinking, there is a decrease in stress levels and emotional reactivity.