



Questions About the Mysteries of Life

by Ruth A. Wilson

“What makes a seed?” asked my six-year-old grandson, Ryland, as we walked to a neighborhood park. While the question seemed, at first, to emerge from scientific curiosity, further discussion indicated that Ryland was actually pondering one of the mysteries of life. Ryland had already been introduced



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to the idea of planting seeds to grow flowers and vegetables; so he basically understood the nature and function of seeds.

My first response to Ryland's question was to tell him that flowers help to make seeds. I gave him an example of how apple trees first get flowers and then, after the petals drop off, the apple, with seeds inside, begin to grow. I also gave him the example of a sunflower where the seeds grow inside the flower.

“I know about flowers and seeds,” said Ryland. “What I want to know is where the seeds first came from. How did they get here before the plants?”

With this question, I was uncertain about how to respond. I could go back billions of years and talk about the world before there were any plants and how a combination of chemicals got together in the ocean or a pond and made a type of soup from which plants eventually developed. This explanation (with a lot more detail!) is sometimes referred to as the Primordial Soup Theory. I could use this theory to explain to Ryland how, in this soup, there was a lot of motion and energy and chaos and cooperation going on to eventually produce a plant with seeds to start new plants.

But I doubt that the Primordial Soup explanation would make a lot of sense to Ryland. I also knew that if I presented

this theory to Ryland, he might follow it up with another question: "So how did the water and chemicals get here to make the soup?" So what I said instead is that scientists have been studying this for a long time and that other people, too, have come up with ideas about how seeds and plants and animals and everything else on Earth got to be here. I explained how not everyone agrees about how the world and everything on it started. "But that's okay," I said, "because there are some things we don't really know for sure."

I told Ryland that people sometimes make up stories about things they wonder about — like how the stars got in the sky. I then shared a Native American legend with him about stars hiding in the branches of cottonwood trees.

"According to this legend, curious little stars hid in the cottonwood tree so they could be close to the people on Earth. The stars liked to listen to the people laughing and to hear the beautiful music the people made. But the night sky was dark, with only a few stars to make it bright. The Spirit of the Night Sky wanted more stars and asked the Spirit of the Wind to help. The Spirit of the Wind knew the little stars were hiding in the branches of the cottonwood trees, so the Spirit of the Wind started to blow and kept blowing harder and harder until some of the branches of the cottonwood broke off right where the stars were hiding. The wind blew the stars out of the branches, and they filled the night sky."

Later that day, Ryland and I found some sticks that had fallen from the cottonwood tree in our backyard. We broke the sticks right where the rings are and found tiny little stars inside the twigs. We knew that the legend about the stars in the cottonwood trees grew out of people's imagination, yet we looked at the stars with a deep sense of wonder and amazement.

Being Intentional in Responding to Children's Questions

We all know that young children ask lots of questions and that these questions can range from the simple to the sublime. Many of these questions focus on the why and how of the world around us, often taking the form of scientific 'wonderings' (Allen, 2014). Some of their questions, however, are more philosophical in nature, reflecting their ability to think and wonder about abstract ideas, including ideas about what is right and wrong and what is fair or unjust (Christie, 2000; McCarty, 2006). Children's questions usually emerge out of their need to find meaning in the world around them (Frasier, 2009).

The questions children ask have tremendous educational value. They often express and support scientific inquiry, invite social interaction, and encourage further investigation (Medina, 2008; Sherwood & Freshwater, 2006). Children's questions also give us insights into what they're interested in and what they care about. These insights, in turn, can help us plan activities and build curriculum, which are relevant and of interest to the children we work with.

How we respond to children's questions can make a huge difference — not only in what children learn — but in how they view themselves as learners. The way we respond can foster or squash their curiosity, support or diminish their enthusiasm for learning, encourage or discourage curiosity and their sense of wonder, and broaden or restrict their view of the world. This may be especially true for questions addressing the mysteries of life.

One way to foster children's learning — and their dispositions for learning — is becoming more intentional about *how* we respond to their questions. We often focus on the 'what' or content of our

response, as our intent is to give correct information. It's just as important — perhaps more important — to consider the underlying messages we give children as we answer their questions. The way we respond (the 'how') can tell children that we take them seriously, that questions can help us learn, that not all questions have just one right answer, and that we respect their family's beliefs and values. A child's ability to learn has deep roots in relationships (Medina, 2008), and the way we respond to a child's question can strengthen or diminish our relationship with that child.

One question a child might ask is "Why do we have wars?" There is, of course, no simple answer to this question, and a teacher's first impulse may be to think of the topic of war as not appropriate for young children. The teacher may thus be tempted to respond in a way that basically ends the conversation. Saying something like, "Because some people haven't learned to get along with each other" will not address the child's feelings and concerns. The child may then be less likely to look to the teacher as someone who understands and cares.

Even though the question of "Why do we have wars?" is complex, a teacher would do well to engage the child in a conversation that allows for the unfolding of what's behind the question. A teacher may start by acknowledging war as something very troublesome. A statement like, "It's really hard to think about war, isn't it?" invites the child to express further thoughts and feelings about war. This acknowledgement tells the child that his question has been taken seriously, and the invitation to continue the conversation strengthens the child's relationship with the teacher.

Before responding to a child's question about the mysteries of life, we would do well to consider to what extent our response invites further engagement

and gives the child the assurance that we're really interested in their questions. We might refer to such responses as 'invitational responses.' (See Sidebar for further examples of invitational responses to children's questions about the mysteries of life.)

Responses Reflecting Different Traditions or Approaches

Many early childhood education programs are based on a particular mission, philosophy, or approach and this can influence our intentions as we respond to children's questions. Programs supported by Jewish and Christian communities, for example, may want to use the Biblical story of creation presented in the first chapter of the Book of Genesis to respond to children's questions about how seeds and plants and stars came to be. This Biblical story need not be the only creation story children hear in a Christian or Jewish program. Other stories, too, might be shared and discussed as a way to introduce children to legends and myths from different cultures, but the primary creation story would probably be based on the Bible. This, however, would not prevent a teacher from introducing different interpretations of the Biblical account.

Teachers in a Waldorf program would probably respond to a child's question about the origin of life on Earth with a greater emphasis on creativity and wondering than on a set of beliefs. They would engage the children's power of imagination in sharing and discussing a variety of creation myths and legends from around the world. They may have the children reenact one or more of the stories through drama, dancing, or some other art form. The children might be encouraged to make up their own creation stories as well. This approach recognizes the role of creativity and the

Invitational Responses to Children's Questions		
Children's Questions	Invitational Response	Positive Attributes of the Response
Why are some people bad?	When people are bad, it usually hurts other people, doesn't it? Can you think of why someone might want to hurt other people?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> addresses feelings invites further discussion uses simple language
Why do I have to do things I don't want to do?	Maybe you can help me answer this question. Can you tell me one of the things you have to do, but don't want to?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> invites the child to come up with an answer to his or her own question
What's infinity?	I think infinity means something that never ends — it just goes on and on forever. What do you think?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> uses simple language to provide a basic definition invites further discussion about the child's ideas
What happens when someone dies?	Do you know someone who died?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> invites the child to talk about why he or she is asking the question expresses interest in the child's experience of death
Where does God live?	That's a really interesting question and people have been thinking about it for a very long time. Some people say that God lives in every living thing — even in you. But most people say we don't really know for sure. What do you think?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> expresses an openness to the child's ideas takes the child's question seriously acknowledges different belief systems

imagination in helping children find meaning in the world around them.

The Montessori approach in responding to children's questions would also deemphasize ideologies and beliefs and would focus, instead, on helping children construct their own knowledge based on observation, examination, analysis, and interpretation (Murray, 2011). Children in a Montessori program are expected to be active participants in the development of knowledge rather than receivers of knowledge handed to them from others. They would thus be encouraged to reflect on what their

senses are telling them and to extract meaning from what they experience as they interact with the physical and social world around them. Children in a Montessori program would be involved and supported in forming their own answers to questions, including questions of a philosophical nature (Christie, 2000).

Nature preschools represent another type of early childhood program operating from a specific mission or approach. Nature preschools are designed to foster a child's lifelong connection with the natural world by

fusing early childhood education and environmental education. All aspects of the curriculum in a nature preschool focus on helping children understand, respect, and love the world of nature while also promoting the holistic development of the young child.

In response to a question about the origin of seeds or how the stars got in the sky, a teacher at a nature preschool would probably first focus on where the question is coming from or why the child is asking the question. Is this a science inquiry? Is it religious or perhaps based on what a parent might have said after a loved one died, suggesting that the loved one is now up in the sky? If the teacher determines that the question is based on scientific inquiry, she or he would probably compliment the child for doing what scientists do — ask questions. For answers, the teacher would probably turn to resources like books or the Internet. From there, the teacher might build models or draw illustrations to help the child understand some basic facts about the origin of the stars.

If, on the other hand, the child's question isn't really focused on science inquiry, the teacher in the nature preschool may turn to cultural knowledge and legends relating to the topic. The teacher might invite the child to share his or her own ideas and to use some form of artistic expression to represent those ideas.

Concluding Thoughts

Schools often reward students for answering questions correctly: matching predetermined criteria. Questions children ask, however, can be an incredibly rich avenue of learning, not only in the cognitive domain, but in the social and spiritual areas of development as well. Children's questions can also be used to guide their moral development. This is especially relevant to the caring

and compassionate aspects of morality (Noddings, 2002).

Preschool children are usually good at asking questions, but by middle school most students stop asking questions. Interestingly, this is when creativity — and sometimes enthusiasm for learning — tends to drop as well. Recent research indicates that creative thinking is declining over time in Americans of all ages, but especially in kindergarten through third grade (Kim, 2011).

As early childhood educators, we would do well to encourage the asking of questions, including questions addressing some of the deeper mysteries of life. Children may ask questions about death, about God, about fairness, sex, and why we have wars. We may struggle to answer these questions in a way that we feel is honest and authentic, and yet appropriate for the intellectual, emotional, and spiritual development of the child. We also recognize the importance of respecting the beliefs of families while introducing children to new ideas and broader perspectives.

Responding to children's questions about the mysteries of life can be challenging, but considering what children expect from us when they ask a question can guide us in the right direction. Perhaps we should first consider some things that children don't want and behaviors that we should avoid. Children don't want dishonesty or evasion; nor do they want to be ignored or laughed at. Children want the following things from us: honesty, to be taken seriously, and an understanding of where they're coming from. Young children ask questions because they're seeking explanations of what they wonder about (Frasier, 2009). Sometimes, the best we can do is to wonder with the child. The child will accept that and be enriched as we contemplate the mysteries of life together.

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