



Asking Powerful Questions

How to Help Kids Become Independent and Productive

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OVER THE YEARS, my tutors and I have homed in on many strategies to help kids with ADHD in school, no matter the area. In math, we've taught tricks to learn the multiplication tables and games to master the Pythagorean theorem. For our reluctant writers, we've developed color-coded graphic organizers and used cool software like Rev. But, I can tell you from my many years of experience, there is no better strategy to help kids develop self-awareness, responsibility, and independence than "powerful questions."

Powerful questions is a strategy long advocated for facilitating a collaborative relationship and building independence. When applied to homework, it can change the conversation and, over time, the course of development.

Here's an example of a typical conversation you might have with your child:

MOM: "Jimmy, do you have homework today?"

JIMMY: "Yeah."

MOM: "Well, you better start it now because you have soccer at 6:00 and I don't want you staying up late again

tonight because you started your work too late!"

JIMMY: "Ugghhhh..."

The problem here may seem like it's as simple as: Jimmy just doesn't feel like doing his homework. But it actually starts off on the wrong foot because the question Mom asked is a non-starter: it doesn't get Jimmy thinking about the things he needs to do to get started on his homework.

This is what we refer to as a Yes/No/Why Question, and **Powerful Questions are the opposite.** They are instead:

- Open-ended and non-judgmental
- Not intended to give advice or to solve the problem for the student
- Intended to get them thinking in the right direction that will provide a much higher chance of a solution they come to *themselves*.

Below is a side-by-side comparison of some common questions you might naturally ask, and some powerful alternatives you could replace them with to encourage independent thinking.

Yes/No/Why Questions:	Powerful Questions:
Do you have homework?	What are your priorities today?
Did you study for that science test?	What's the one thing you might do to study for your science test?
Are you ready for your big English exam?	On a scale of 1-10, how prepared do you feel for the English exam?
Why didn't you study?	Going forward, what's the one thing you might do differently?
Why didn't you turn that in?	Did something get in your way of getting that assignment done?

And here's the process to go through when you do go to reframe that conversation:

1. Ask an initial powerful question to spark thinking.
2. Listen to responses without passing judgment.
3. Restate or paraphrase what the student is saying.
4. Give positive acknowledgments along the way.

Okay, so now with that in mind, let's reframe our conversation with Jimmy, using Powerful Questions instead:

MOM: "Jimmy, what are your priorities today for homework?"

JIMMY: "I have a science test tomorrow and some math homework."

MOM: "Oh, okay, a science test and math homework. What might you do first?"

JIMMY: "Probably study for science."

MOM: "Okay, that sounds like a good plan! I can tell you want to get that out of the way. Great idea. How will you know you're ready for the test?"

JIMMY: "I'm going to work through the study guide again and practice the vocab words on Quizlet."

MOM: "Sounds like you have a good plan. You're going to work through the study guide and Quizlet before soccer. Let's leave by 5:30. Sound okay?"

Now, let's not pretend that this is how your conversation will go the first time you try this. More likely you may encounter:

MOM: "Jimmy, what are your priorities today for homework?"

JIMMY: "Huh??"

Or...

MOM: "Jimmy, what are your priorities today for homework?"

JIMMY: "I don't think I have any..."

as you stand there with his math assignment in your hand.

So, if this happens don't get discouraged, this process takes some getting used to on both sides. The important thing is to keep trying, and to gently lead them in the right direction, trying your best not to outright tell them what they need to do. Because students with ADHD often have a much harder time in school, the negativity built up over many years is hard to undo, so go at it patiently.

Stop asking "why" and start asking "what"

Another strategy in communicating better with kids is to limit the use of "why" questions. "Why" questions are inherently difficult for kids to answer. They tend to create conflict instead of collaboration, putting kids on the defensive. Instead, try removing "why" from the question and replace it with "what."

In working with kids for over thirty years, I've found that "what" questions result in productive dialogue and problem solving. Below are some examples.

"Why" vs. "What" Questions

Instead of....	Try asking....
Why didn't you finish your test corrections?	What got in your way of finishing the test corrections?
Why do you feel that way about your teacher?	What happened recently that concerns you?
Why didn't you study when we put together that amazing study plan together?	I can tell it was a challenge to study. What threw you off track this week?
Why didn't you ask your teacher about your test grade? I thought you said you were going to meet with her.	What strategy (or tool) could you use to help? OR my favorite... How do you anticipate the conversation going?
Why did you turn this in late?	What got in the way of completing this? OR What was hard about getting this done?



Regardless of your child's response, make sure to nod, listen, and empathize. You want to be a good listener and earn trust.

Another strategy for communication is using a Success Rating Scale taught by Jerome Schultz, PhD. I love his book, *Nowhere to Hide: Why Kids with ADHD and LD Hate School and What to Do About It* (Wiley, 2011). Here's how it works. You will ask your child two questions:

1. "On a scale of 1-5, how difficult do you rate this assignment?" (*1 is very easy, 5 is much too hard, won't be able to do it*)
2. "On a scale of 1-5, what's your motivation to do it?" (*1 is very easy to finish independently, 5 is overwhelming and incapable of accomplishing*)

Regardless of your child's response, make sure to nod, listen, and empathize. You want to be a good listener and earn trust. The goal of this exercise is to understand your child's perceived level of difficulty and motivation.

The "sweet spot" answer to each question is a three (challenging, but not overly so) or even a combination of ones and twos. Anything between a one and three means that your child has confidence to complete the task, which is great news.

If your child answers with a four or a five, they have a mentality of avoidance. They will likely procrastinate and have a hard time completing the work independently.

Don't panic! This is a great opportunity ask the right questions and open the conversation with your child. It's very likely they feel stressed about the assignment. They

may need your help or a professional's assistance (perhaps an academic or executive function coach). Regardless, by understanding their motivations and feelings, you can begin to provide the help they need. Don't be afraid to contact your child's teacher and ask for additional support as well. They want your child to succeed.

ASKING THE RIGHT QUESTIONS can change an entire conversation. We know this as adults and the principle applies to conversations with children as well. By working to understand their challenges, you can help them overcome obstacles. Along the way you'll learn more about your child, and your child will grow to trust and feel comfortable speaking with you when they're struggling at school. 🗣️



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