



What We Can Continue to Learn from Fred Rogers

Meta-Cognition: The Follow-Up Questions



I wonder if you've heard of "meta-cognition"? It's a relatively new concept in education, and it literally means "thinking beyond" or "thinking about what you're thinking." People are just now starting to talk about it in early childhood, but I'll bet you've been encouraging it without realizing it.

The focus in education used to be about asking questions to get children to give you the right answer. But now it's more about going beyond the answer and helping them think about their thinking. How did they think of that answer? That's why follow-up questions are so important, like "What did you notice that helped you figure it out?" or "What's another way to solve that?"

Fred always asked lots of questions, and he gave children time to think and look closely at things. On this video Fred started out with a question for his viewers and then for Mr. McFeely. You can hear what meta-cognition sounds like as Mr McFeely explains how he arrived at his answer.



Here are some things to keep in mind about supporting "meta-cognition":

All kinds of learning situations

Elementary school teachers often talk about "meta-cognition" in terms of

Timeless Wisdom from Fred Rogers



"As far as I am concerned, this is the essence of education: to facilitate a person's learning, to help that person become more in tune with his or her own resources so that he or she can use whatever is offered more fully."

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reading comprehension and math. You can apply it to those situations and others, too, in developmentally-appropriate ways. For example, when you're doing attendance and ask, "How many children are absent today?" and then ask a follow-up question, "How did you figure that out?" or ask if anyone has a different way to figure it out. When children are doing a sorting activity for math or science, you could ask, "How did you decide on the categories?" or "How else could you sort them?" When you show the cover of a book and ask what they think the book is about, you could then ask why they thought that. When they're making a block tower, you could ask how they figured out how to stack the blocks so they would not fall down.

Of course it's not easy to know how much questioning is helpful and how much is interruptive. You have to trust your own intuition, know each child well and be a thoughtful observer.

All kinds of answers

You know that children might answer your follow-up question with, "I don't know." So you could ask more specific questions like, "Was there something you noticed?" or "Did it remind you of something you saw before?" Or you could suggest that child may want some time to think about it. We also need to recognize that some children have an easier time verbalizing their thoughts than others.

Remember, too, to be accepting of all kinds of answers, even if they're silly or absurd. What you want to encourage is thinking, so you could say something like, "That's an interesting thought" or "What a creative idea!" Then ask a follow-up question to learn more about what the child was thinking. You might be surprised when you hear children talk about their thinking -- they might actually be on the right track, just a different track than you expected.

It's not easy to remember to ask follow-up questions, or even to figure out how to word them to encourage deeper thinking. But my sense is that when you ask any kind of open-ended question, you're letting children know you care about their thoughts and ideas - and that strengthens your relationship with them -- and strengthens their learning.

Thank you for being our neighbor,



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