

You Asked?

The Child Who Answers, “I Don’t Know”

This answer comes from Donna Senior and Beth Johnson

Q. Whenever we ask our nine-year-old a question, she most often says, "I don't know." She doesn't take the time to think of whether or not she knows the answer (she often does) or take the time to see if she could figure out the answer. How do we encourage her to stop and think? Also, why would she do this? I often wonder if she is afraid to make a mistake, but others suggest it is just laziness on her part. Any insight would be appreciated!

Puzzled Parent

A. Compliments to you, Puzzled Parent, for raising this issue. Obviously you believe that it is important to encourage your child to think for herself and share her ideas.

It is wise to be careful about thinking that a child is lazy or about using that label (as some of us have done in the past). We believe that “laziness” usually means “discouragement.”

Some possible explanations for a child declining to answer a question are:

- It may be that for some reason she does not want to discuss that subject or express her feelings about it. That would be particularly true if she suspects that it is going to lead to a chore which she does not want to do.
- Some people are just slower to respond. She may need some time to think about the subject before expressing herself.
- The child might perceive that she is being “put on the spot” or that she might be subjected to criticism or judgment, even if that is not the adult’s intention.
- She may want to give the answer that the adult wants to hear, but she’s not sure what that is.
- She may be afraid of making a mistake.

You seem to have some instinct that your daughter might be afraid of making a mistake. Perhaps you’ve seen some other signs of perfectionism in her behavior. It is likely wise to follow your instinct.

Another avenue you might pursue is to check with the child’s teacher to see whether she responds in similar fashion at school. If she does not, then you might consider the purpose of this behavior. Adlerians use the “Four Goals of Misbehavior,” which were developed by Rudolf Dreikurs, to understand children’s behavior and to guide us to responding effectively. The four goals are:

- Undue Attention
- Power
- Revenge
- Giving Up.

Declining to answer questions could fall into one of these categories. The clue is to ask yourself how you feel when your daughter says, “I don’t know.” If you are feeling annoyed, irritated, or worried her goal is most likely “undue attention.” The child believes, “I don’t count unless I keep you busy with me.” The adult’s typical reaction in this case would be fuss over the child and to try to coax her to answer.

If on the other hand, you feel angry or challenged, the child’s goal is “power.” The child believes that she only belongs when she is the boss and she is proving that you can’t make her respond.

“Revenge” doesn’t seem to be a likely goal in this case, but “Giving Up” (or “Assumed Inadequacy”) might be one to consider. In that case the child might be thinking, “It is impossible for me to give an acceptable answer, so I’ll just not try.” The clue here is if you are feeling discouraged and would like to give up on getting her to answer.

If you determine that the goal is “undue attention” the best approach might be to simply drop the subject when the child says, “I don’t know.” You can give her focused attention at a more positive time.

If it is power that you are dealing with, the important thing is to not get angry. When you are feeling calm, you could use reflective listening to explore her feelings about your questions. You might begin with a statement like, “It seems that you don’t want to answer my question.” Or “I know that I can’t make you answer me, but I really am interested in your ideas about”

If the goal is “giving up” then the important thing is for you not to give up on her but to look for ways to give her genuine encouragement.

In any case, you obviously wish to establish open, respectful communication with your child. Some suggestions for helping that to happen include:

- Listen carefully – that is where good communication begins. It involves letting your child know that you hear the feelings and meaning behind what she says. Reflect back to the child, in a tentative statement, what you guess she might be feeling. It is like holding up a mirror for the child to help her examine her thoughts more clearly.
- Accept all ideas and opinions as valid even when you don’t agree with them. When children feel that we respect their thoughts, they are more willing to hear and consider our ideas and values.
- Be aware of your tone of voice, your facial expression, and your body language. If there is criticism, judgment, or anger there, it comes through in spite of our words.
- Ask open-ended questions with phrases like: “What do you suppose would happen if” “Let’s think of some ideas about”
- If the child really thinks she doesn’t know the answer, you might respond with a statement like, “We don’t always know answers. Even so, I am interested in your thoughts, ideas, and /or feelings about” Then really use your reflective listening skills.
- Initiate fun and fanciful discussions with your child to encourage creative thinking and build a loving bond between you.

There is a great book, *How to Talk So Kids Will Listen and Listen So Kids Will Talk*, by Adele Faber and Elaine Mazlish. It is easy to read with simple, practical suggestions for opening up communication with kids, and it has expressive cartoons to illustrate the skills.

With respectful communication and acceptance we can build a “family team” where everyone’s contributions are welcomed and valued.

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