

# Stop Asking Stupid Questions thechildcareconsultinggroup.com

Do you ever ask the children in your classroom stupid questions? You know, like, “How many times do I have to tell you to stop putting your hands on your friends?” or “Did you poop in your pants?” or “Do you want a time out?” The definition of *rhetoric* is: *language designed to have a persuasive or impressive effect on its audience, but often regarded as lacking in sincerity or meaningful content.* Ouch. Rhetorical questions do not improve children’s behavior and they set you and the children up for failure. And the brighter children (aka “difficult children”) will give you a sarcastic response! Asking these questions invites more misbehavior. Rhetorical questions can also sound hateful, sarcastic and condescending. No one deserves to be treated that way.



Ninety-nine percent of the time this type of rhetorical questioning, is coming from a place of frustration. The rest of the time it is coming from place of meanness and wanting to embarrass or humiliate a child. Children notice all of that. When we act and speak out of frustration (or meanness!), we make our classrooms feel less safe, less supportive, and ultimately, less conducive to learning. Many young kids find this type of questioning confusing and misleading - especially in stressful situations in which an adult is clearly unhappy. At its most innocent, it's confusing to kids and just plain doesn't work well. At its worst, it's demeaning and potentially damaging to students' sense of self-worth.

So, now you know what *not* to do. What should you do instead?

- 1) Say what you mean:** “That behavior is not ok.” Be calm, be specific about the behavior you are addressing, and be brief and direct in describing the change you expect to see.
- 2) Tell the child what to do instead of what not to do. And immediately thank him for it.** “Put your feet on the floor. Thank you.” “Pick up the toys and let’s start over with just a few out of the basket. Thank you.” “Walk, please. Thank you.” “Eyes on me. Thank you.” “Show me what a line looks like so we can go to the playground. Thank you.” Hint: Thanking children immediately after giving an instruction encourages them to comply before they have time to think about *not* minding you. Magical.
- 3) Redirect. Or 4) Redirect with a meaningful look that says, “We both know you shouldn’t be doing that. Do this instead.”** Most children will appreciate the second chance. Examples: (to a child who is running around the room or disturbing others) “Brian, come build a puzzle with me.” “Britney, come see the new baby blankets and bottles in Home Living.” “Andrew, come and join your group in the block center.” Hint: Notice the use of the word “come” in these examples? “Come” is much more effective than “Go...” when dealing with young children.
- 5) Give two real choices.** If you give one real choice and one choice that you do not really want the child to choose, what are you gonna do when he chooses it? Example: “You can sit in your chair or you can sit next to me,” instead of “You can sit in your chair or I can call your mom.” Really? “You can sit down and eat your lunch or you can choose a book and get on your nap mat.” “You can choose a center, or you can sit next to me and color.”
- 6) State the obvious.** “You’re playing instead of eating. Eat or be done” “You’re not in line. We need to go inside so we can \_\_\_\_.” “You’re having a fit. Talk to me.” “You’re hurting people. Kick this box until you’re ready to talk to me.” “You’re roughhousing. That’s not safe. Build a block tower and knock it down. How tall can you make it?”
- 7) Brainstorm a new strategy or seek help or advice from colleagues to get some fresh ideas. While** it’s true that the definition of insanity is “Doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results,” (Albert Einstein) repetition is essential to learning for preschool age children toddlers thru age five. This includes learning lessons about proper behavior. If what you are doing has a meaningful temporary effect, the child probably just needs several repetitions to learn the proper behavior. If what you are doing seems to have no effect, it’s time for a fresh idea.

Eliminating rhetorical questions from your teaching toolbox will make you a happier and more effective teacher.