



ERIN
HARREL

of Cape Coral has a Ph.D. in education and is the mother of three children.

Stimulating critical thinking skills

The **mind** is a wonderful place to play

I sat and listened as my dad, “World’s Greatest Grandpa,” chatted with my kids recently. The kids couldn’t wait to answer his questions. They anxiously chatted over one another describing the wonderful experiences we had had over the summer. They described our whitewater rafting trip and beautiful cabin in North Carolina with great detail.

My father sat grandly with his wide smile, intently listening to every word. It was as if they were reliving the moment and they were bringing Gramps (as 6-year-old Maggie calls him) along for the ride. It was magnificent!

I wondered: Why could they sit and chat with my dad for hours on end? My father has always been a very important part of my children’s lives. Although he lives in Fort Lauderdale, he comes our way whenever we ask him. He is the one they call when something exciting happens and the one they look for to cheer them on while playing sports or performing. However, it was more than just a special relationship that kept the kids so intrigued by their grandpa.

I sat on the back porch



Gramps with Jude, Maggie and Riley.

listening to the kids chatter away with Gramps. Each time there was a pause, Gramps prodded with a question. The questions seemed to stimulate several minutes of creative discourse among the four of them. With each answer, I could almost see the intent thought and creativity dancing in the kids’ heads. It was wonderful!

After close to an hour, I again wondered how he could keep the banter and friendly conversation going among the 6-, 10- and 11-year-old. Then, it hit me: Gramps wasn’t just asking simple ques-

tions — he was triggering critical thinking skills. The kids had to actually think about the questions my dad was asking. For example, as they talked about fishing in the creek behind the cabin, he would ask, “What time was the best time to catch fish?” He would follow with “Why do you think that was the best time to catch them?” These questions would stimulate an entire conversation about the flow of the creek, run-off from the cow pastures (kids love to talk about “poop”) and fishing.

I suppose we have lost a

bit of this type of banter as we move through the fast-paced world of electronics: iPods, iPhones, Wii, PlayStation, Xbox, VTech electronic learning systems for toddlers. As an educator, I see the changes in the classroom, but I never put two and two together with my own children. Teaching children critical thinking skills can be as simple as having a good conversation. All too often, we get caught up running from after school activities to sports fields, and we forget the value of good conversation and healthy questioning techniques.

If you are wondering what "healthy questioning techniques" are, there are typically two categories of questions:


1. LOWER ORDER:

These types of questions typically evoke simple answers like "yes," "no," "maybe" or a memorized number or word. Lower order questions are those that involve memorizing information and then recalling it at a later date, such as testing a child's ability to multiply. Using words or phrases such as "when," "how many," "what," "list" or "describe" typically does not stimulate critical thinking skills.

2. HIGHER ORDER:

These types of questions use powerful thinking skills and require one to analyze, evaluate or comprehend. Higher order questions require a person to think critically about a concept or term and apply that to what they already know. The following are a few examples of terms that stimulate critical thinking through higher order questioning: "summarize," "explain," "compare," "what if," "illustrate," "design," "arrange," "examine," "classify," "create" and "separate."

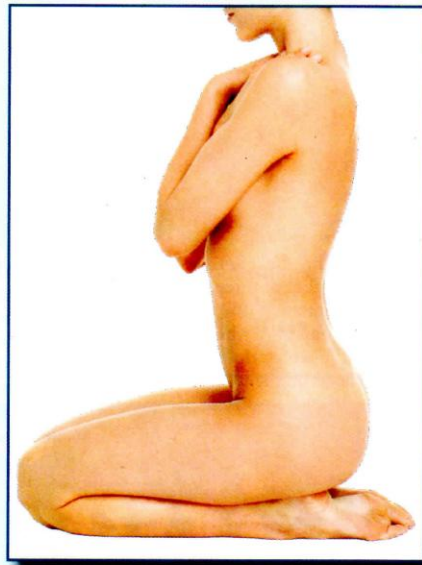
Expanding the types of questions we ask our children will not only stimulate better conversation but will force children to think. The Council of Exceptional Children recently stated, "The use of critical thinking is one of the most valuable skills we can pass on to our children."

You can find more information about critical thinking and types of questions in Benjamin Bloom's "Taxonomy of Educational Objectives," commonly called Bloom's Taxonomy. Also, Edison State College will soon hold a Kids and Critical Thinking Workshop. (For more information about the workshop, call Sue Wilson at 489-9369.) 

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Anthony Brignoni, MD, FACOG
Established 1991
(941) 743-6866
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**2300 Loveland Blvd. Suite I
Port Charlotte, FL 33980**