

# Your Preschooler's Toughest Questions Answered!

*If it seems like you're constantly dodging hardball inquiries from your "Gen Why" offspring, consider these "CliffsNotes."*

BY BRUCE KLUGER ILLUSTRATIONS BY LUCIE RICE

**So this is what it feels like to be seated across from Barbara Walters.** Your child just asked you a doozy of a question, and you have no idea how to answer... without scarring him for life. He's staring at you, waiting. This little guy is relentless! Where are my three lifelines?

Kids wouldn't be kids unless they routinely unleashed a real stumper. "At this age, a preschooler's natural curiosity about the world is skyrocketing," says Neil McNerney, a licensed child and family counselor in Reston, VA. "They're entering that 'Wow, there's a whole new world out there' phase, and as a result, their to-the-point questions about weighty issues can catch adults off-guard." When this happens, it's important to remember that they're still just preschoolers. "We hear a question and assume that we should answer it based on an adult's perspective," says McNerney. "But young kids aren't developed enough to handle that."

Clearly, it's a fine line to walk. So, Senator, what exactly should you say when your little one asks:



## "Are you going to die?"

**What he's really asking** When the father of my daughter's playmate died unexpectedly, her questions about death began. At this

age, kids are often most concerned about being separated from their family or left alone. "Usually they're asking because they're upset by a recent death and wondering if you will die soon, too," says McNerney.

**How to answer** "Be reassuring, but avoid being completely factual," says McNerney. Since your child is probably asking this question with only the immediate future in mind, quell his fears by saying "Most people live long, healthy lives, so this is something you don't have to worry about for a very long time." This isn't a dodge. If it turns out he's actually worried that he won't have anywhere to go if something happens to you, you can tell him that you'll always make sure he's taken care of.

If a person he knows or a pet has died, "be sure to acknowledge his pain and tell him it's OK to feel however he's feeling," says McNerney. "We have a tendency to want to shield kids from pain, but this doesn't help them cope."

**What not to say** Don't have the whole "circle of life" chat or say "Yes, I'll die

"A kid's curiosity about the world is skyrocketing at this age."

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*My son asked me what erectile dysfunction was after seeing so many Viagra commercials during the World Series. I just told him it's something older men struggle with, so he doesn't have to worry about it.*

—Katie Aguiar, on Facebook

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*“My son asked me what ‘gay’ was. I told him it’s when two men or two women are sweethearts, like his mommy and daddy are sweethearts. I said I’d be happy with him no matter what kind of sweetheart he wants when he grows up.”*

—Amber Brown, Sinking Spring, PA

because everyone eventually dies,” says McNERNEY. “Getting factual or philosophical in these instances can scare your child.” Focusing on reassuring your child is more important than stating the facts. At around age 6, kids start to understand that everyone dies, but they won’t truly be able to digest this complex idea until they’re about 10 years old.

may simply be an attempt to persuade you that she needs that new toy.

**How to answer** Start by saying “We’ve decided not to spend money on that.” Of course, your little one won’t be thrilled with that reply, so get ready for a barrage of “whys.” Try responding with something like “That’s something we don’t really need right now. There are other important things we have to buy today instead.” The trick is to keep any explanation to a minimum and then drop the subject. The reason: “When they ask ‘Why?’ they don’t actually care why you won’t buy something,” says McNERNEY. “They’re looking for an avenue to continue pleading their case for why they need that new toy.” If you don’t give them that opportunity, they’ll drop it.

**What not to say** If you’re in a toy store and your daughter wants something that’s expensive, don’t talk about money in ways that generalize. Phrases like “We don’t

have that kind of money” could unnecessarily confuse her or raise issues about whether your family is secure, says Myrna Shure, Ph.D., author of *Raising a Thinking Child*, a guide to teaching children how to resolve daily conflicts. Instead, you can say that this is the kind of big-ticket item that goes on holiday or birthday wish lists.

**“Why do you and Mommy fight?”**

**What she’s really asking** Children often take parental spats personally, and worry “Are you going to yell at me, too?” From a kid’s perspective, if people who love each other fight, how secure can love be? In fact, “Do you love me?” is often the next question.

**How to answer** “Explain that you and your partner are two different people with different opinions, and that this sometimes causes you to argue,” says McNERNEY. “But emphasize that people

**“Why can’t we buy this cool toy?”**

**What she’s really asking**

Why does this question always seem to pop up at Target? No coincidence, says Robert Brooks, Ph.D., a clinical psychologist at Harvard Medical School and coauthor of *Raising Resilient Children*. “Money-related questions often indicate that a child is thinking ‘Am I going to get everything I want?’” These questions are rarely linked to grown-up concerns, such as social status. Kids do get that money is what parents use to satisfy their needs, so her question

who argue can still love each other." Put your answer into context by saying something like "You fight with your brother, but you still love him, right? It's the same thing with Mom and Dad."

If your spats occur more frequently, try saying something like "Right now we're working on fixing some problems." This idea of grown-ups working together to resolve their differences is a good lesson.

**What not to say** Keep your responses general, and don't get into the nitty-gritty of why you're arguing. Kids won't know what to do with this information. It could cause them unnecessary worry, or they might spill your personal family drama to someone you'd rather keep out of the loop.

**"Why is their family different?"**

**What he's really asking**

Maybe your kid has a pal with two moms or dads, or a different ethnic or cultural background. Or perhaps that describes your family. Whatever the case, expect your kid to eventually ask why certain families look different than others. "Most books still portray a typical nuclear family with a mom, a dad, and kids," says Shara Sand, Psy.D., a psychologist in private practice in New York City. It's natural for kids to be confused when something veers from that. "They're trying to figure out what 'family' actually means, and if one version is 'right.'"

**How to answer** Explain that there are all sorts of families, and that one isn't

better than another. Sand recommends pointing out relatives or friends to use as examples—maybe you know a single mom who adopted, two gay moms, or a biracial couple. Let him know that these are all "families" because they are people bound by love. If he can't wrap his head around how two men or two women can make a baby, don't get too detailed, suggests Sand. "You can explain that when a couple can't have a child on their own, a doctor can sometimes help them make one."

**What not to say** Kids notice these differences early on, but keep in mind that stereotyping doesn't begin to happen until about age 6. So there's plenty of time to teach valuable lessons about how differences can be good, rather than taking a "color-blind" strategy. Don't forget that kids are like sponges: Any comments you make (even if meant as a joke) will help shape their future opinions. Sand says to especially avoid words like "strange" and "weird" when describing other families.

**"Where did I come from?"**

**What he's really asking**

"There's an old joke about a child who asks 'Where did I come from?'" says Shure. "The mom goes into the whole birds-and-bees thing, and after five minutes the kid says, 'Oh, I thought I came from Philadelphia.'"


Tempting as it is to believe that preschoolers' inquiries are actually veiled questions about sex, it's not just about that. When my wife was carrying our second child, our

older daughter wanted to know if she was once inside Mommy, too.

**How to answer** Because "Where did I come from?" is such a loaded inquiry, you may want to respond by lobbing the ball back into the child's court. "Say 'What do you know about where you came from?'" says Shure. This way, you can gauge your response. Stick to simple facts, such as "You grew inside my tummy." Wait for him to ask additional questions. If he wants to know more, you can add "And then you came out through my vagina." As he gets closer to age 5, you can explain that Dad plays a part, too—that he puts something called sperm inside Mom to help make the baby grow.

**What not to say**

Don't go into the details of sex (kids aren't ready for this until the fourth or fifth grade), but don't lie, either. The old stork story will just lead to more questions later on.

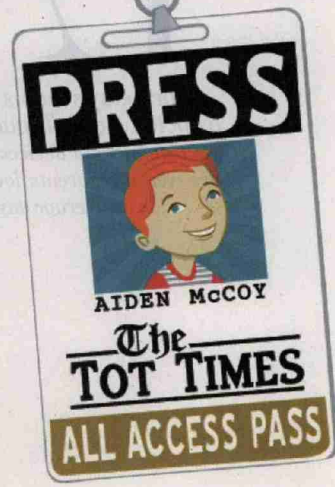
Whatever tongue-tying whopper is posed by your kid, don't be silent. That will only signal that he's asked a bad question. Think of these puzzlers as opportunities to chat with your child and learn what's going on in that little head. After all, it won't be too long before he's reminding you that he actually knows everything. 

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**Our son asked Daddy why his cousin didn't have a dad. He replied that some kids don't have both parents, but that his cousin is the luckiest kid in the world for having his mom and everybody who loves him.**

—Marcela Marchesini Kapfer, on Facebook

**Really stumped?**  
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**“My daughter asked me why grown-ups don't know anything. I told her to ask her father!”**

—Leslie Ann Flores, on Facebook