A Case for Curiosity

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Every year, five million children enter kindergarten armed with one word: "Why?" They continuously ask questions in what seems like an unending loop. On the other side, parents, caretakers, and teachers do their best to come up with answers to manage this kiddie-inquisition. Yet there's no allaying it. Behind that question hides another. And another. And another. And another. As painful as this activity may be for adults, the process is important for children. Their brains are busily creating pathways. They are trying to understand how things work. They are learning -- and learning how to learn.

Early-childhood research says that we have a curious scientific nature from the beginning of life. [A recent study](http://science.sciencemag.org/content/337/6102/1623.abstract) says that toddlers and preschool children behave like scientists. They are observant and curious as they soak in information about the world. Like little experimenters, they light up when unpredictable events happen and decipher causal relationships.

But something happens as children get older. That curious nature fades, and those "why" questions grow silent. Students no longer feel that it's OK to ask questions. Somehow, they fail to remember that they started off curious. They fail to remember their inner scientists.

Many great thinkers and artists lament the act of forgetting one's innate nature. In fact, Picasso once said, "All children are artists," to which he added that the trick was to remain that way as an adult. The same goes for curiosity. All children are scientists. The trick is to remain that way throughout our lives.

Today, the need for curious people has heightened. We are at a critical time in our world with many global issues needing to be solved. To make a better world, our society needs people to ask questions, seek answers, and create solutions. As such, it's time to reconnect with curiosity again and nurture it in our children. Children who ask questions will become adults who continue to ask questions.

Nurturing Curiosity

It's time to make a recommitment to curiosity, and all that takes is a few small acts. Children will stay curious if they feel that curiosity is valued. Curious children emerge from curious adults. As parents and caretakers, your life may not give you the freedom to pursue all the things that are intriguing to you. You may not have the time and energy to try new things yourself, but you can instill it in your kids. Instead of asking, "What did you learn today?", try asking, "What good questions did you ask today?" This small alteration indicates that finding out about things is important. You keep the inner scientist's flame aglow.

In fact, Isidor Rabi's mother asked him this every day, and he later won a Nobel Prize in physics. He said that this made all the difference for him. Now, there is no pressure to win the Nobel Prize, but this small modification shows the difference between process and content. The act of asking and of being curious is valued more than the specific information learned. We can always look things up on Google, but there's no app for curiosity. We must nurture it.

Stay Hungry. Stay Curious.

Some children already understand that they've inherited a curious mindset, and they do their best to remind adults. Take Clara Ma, for example. She is the sixth grade student who named the Mars Rover *Curiosity*. She gets it. We are innately explorers and come from a long lineage of people who asked, "What's that?" or "What's over there?" And, despite risks and failure, they pushed through, discovering and creating new things. The Mars Rover is a tangible reminder of our curious spirit.

For those adults who stay tuned to their curious nature, they show that curiosity provides openness and a space for creativity. A prime example is Steve Jobs, Apple's creative genius. He said the *Whole Earth Catalog*'s motto, which he read in the 1970s, resonated with him and became his personal mantra: "Stay Hungry. Stay Foolish." Being hungry for knowledge without regard for how you may look in your search is the spirit that we need in the 21st century. Solutions for global issues are going to come from those who ask questions (as unpopular as it may be) and search tirelessly for answers. This is the habit that must be kindled in our children.

In addition to making us more creative and willing to seek out answers, curiosity also stretches us internally; it expands our inner self. Bertrand Russell, the British philosopher, said, "Questions enlarge our conception of what is possible [and] enrich our intellectual imagination." Asking questions makes us better humans. It is part of our evolution. When we remain curious and open, we can mitigate fear. Fear makes us powerless. Curiosity (followed by action) returns our power to us. Fear casts a shadow. Curiosity pushes that darkness away.

So make space for asking questions. While asking questions is often seen as an annoyance, it's a skill that serves us for our entire lives. Asking questions isn't child's play. It's a pathway to growth and greatness.

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