



# Santa Barbara County Education Office

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## **The power of “Why?”**

*By Susan Salcido, Santa Barbara County Superintendent of Schools*

When children ask questions, they often display their innocence, curiosity, inspiration, and wonder. But the act of asking questions might also be a key catalyst to children’s emotional and intellectual development, according to award-winning authors and researchers Kathy Hirsch-Passek and Roberta Golinkoff, in their recent book *Becoming Brilliant: What Science Tells us about Raising Successful Children*.

Children ask questions all the time. But few parents or caregivers are able to respond patiently with the perfect answer every time. In *Becoming Brilliant*, the authors urge parents to consider the opportunities presented when children pose questions on topics that interest them. Seizing on those opportunities can help parents cultivate the skills children need to succeed.

The authors focus on six essential concepts that begin with “C”: collaboration, communication, content, critical thinking, creative innovation, and confidence, in that order. Each of these skills relates to the others. The first “C,” collaboration, is the most basic and primary to all the others. It involves getting along with people and controlling impulses — critical to success at home and at school. Communication, which comes next, involves reading, writing, speaking and listening.

After learning how to collaborate and communicate, you then need something to share. That’s where content comes in. Critical thinking draws on that content and provides a way to use it. Creative innovation enables an individual to use that critical thinking and apply the content in a new way. The final “C” is confidence, which enables young people to use all those previous skills to take the safe risks that are so central to success.

Importantly, opportunities exist for parents, teachers, and grandparents to cultivate those skills. When children ask a question, it helps to encourage them to ask even more, and further helps them understand how other people think about the answers.

It also helps to turn the tables and ask children questions about things they see. The authors suggest asking a child, “What do you think that person is thinking? Where do you think that person is going? What makes you think so?” These questions can help children see that their environment can be approached from differing points of view, understand that things are not always what they seem at first glance, foster critical thinking skills, gain breadth of knowledge, and develop empathy.

The key is to see learning as a social process that involves relationships with others. How we relate to children has an impact on how they view the world. For parents, trying to be “in the moment” is helpful because those opportunities are not always frequent, and they don’t always arise at convenient times. Focusing on moments of connection, particularly when children ask questions, can become a valuable way to impart skills, and it doesn’t involve buying devices or having children take extra classes.

There is no secret formula for raising bright, inquisitive kids. No one approach will work for all children, even in the same family. Most parents are at least slightly overwhelmed, with little time or energy to add another item to the to-do list. Still, some might find it helpful to know that cultivating interpersonal skills and relationships has proven to be a strong foundation for success in the future.

With limited time or energy to “do it all,” it can be helpful to focus on what has proven to be most productive over time.

The next time your child asks, “Why do birds fly?” know that your answer might also give wings to her intellectual dreams.

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