

Young Children's Difficult Questions and Adults' Answers

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ABSTRACT It is valuable to examine children's questions that are particularly difficult for adults to answer, and the latter's responses, to better prepare and inform parents and other caregivers of their roles. Despite the crucial nature of these questions and answers for the children's development, research on them remains rare. The aim of this study was to examine pre-school children's difficult questions and the parents' answers to them. In this basic qualitative research, data was gathered via interviews with 46 parents whose children were attending pre-school. Word lists and word-repetition techniques were used for data analysis. Five main themes of the children's difficult questions were identified: religion, science and nature, sex and fertility, daily life, and miscellaneous concepts. Among the parents' answers, seven main themes were discerned: giving realistic answers (with examples), giving realistic answers (without examples), providing wrong explanations, providing purely religious explanations, leaving the question unanswered, answering insufficiently, and threatening or exhorting.

INTRODUCTION

The constructivist view emphasizes the importance of children's questions (Birbili and Karagiorgou 2009). According to constructivist theory, which has positive effects on children as a contemporary theoretical approach (Cetin and Gunay 2006; Yildirim 2014), children construct knowledge by interacting with their environment (Piaget 1954; Vygotsky 1978; Arslan and Yanpar 2006; Bhowmik 2015; Xu 2015). They actively try to obtain information from the people around them in order to gain knowledge about the world they live in (Callanan 2006; Yildirim 2014). Children encountering day-to-day problems can sometimes overcome them using their existing knowledge, but sometimes need support from outside, and the best way to obtain this external support is to ask questions (Mills et al. 2010). Young children form their questions to obtain knowledge, and become increasingly dissatisfied with casual or simplistic answers as they grow older particularly, after the age of 3 (Callanan and Oakes 1992; Chouinard 2007; Frazier et al. 2009). When children are unsatisfied with the

answers to the questions they ask to increase their knowledge, they continue asking the same questions or construct their own explanations (Kemler Nelson et al. 2004; Frazier et al. 2009). Children's questions have also been seen as an opportunity for adults to honestly share their experiences, values and beliefs with children (Stephens 2007) and children's interests can be truly followed by adults, thanks to these conversations (Bateman 2013).

Children gain new knowledge or find solutions to their problems as a result of adults' answers (Mills et al. 2010). However, some questions asked by children surprise adults, and adults cannot be sure how they should respond. When adults encounter questions they find difficult, their responses, including their facial expressions and body language, change. Since children notice these differences in adults, their interest may increase or they may classify them as *questions that should not be asked*. Also, adults' inappropriate answers may cause children to develop fears, obsessions, or misconceptions, even to the point that these result in some undesired effects on the children's personality development. On the other hand, appropriate answers from adults support children's development and provide them with new knowledge, thus increasing their enthusiasm for learning (Bayhan and Artan 2011).

Adults should know how best to answer children's questions in a manner that avoids inducing feelings of confusion or emotional trauma.

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Therefore, books, brochures, and websites about how children's questions should be answered are common all over the world (Bokhutlo 2012; Meyerhoff 2014; National Institutes of Health 2014; Spiker 2014). Many sources contain examples of children's questions and suggested answers about particular topics. Goldman (2009) and Bartell (2014) exemplify the genre for questions regarding death and sexuality, respectively, though public bodies have also become involved. The Ohio Department of Rehabilitation and Correction (ODRC) prepared a manual about how children's difficult questions should be answered when one of their family members has been arrested (Ohio Department of Rehabilitation and Correction 2014), and Alberta Health Services (2014) published a parents' guide to talking about sexuality with children aged 6 and younger. In Turkey, pages related to this topic appear in some development books (Tuzcuoglu and Tuzcuoglu 2004; Bayhan and Artan 2011). Although it has been generally accepted that all sorts of questions from children should be answered appropriately, doing so can be difficult for parents, teachers, and caregivers. Therefore, it is valuable to examine children's questions that are particularly difficult for adults to answer, and the latter's responses, to better prepare and inform parents and other caregivers.

In one of the oldest studies, Smith (1933) examined the influence of demographic factors on the frequency, form, and function of questions from pre-school children. Pre-school children's questions were examined in light of their social class differences by Gullo (1981). Mills et al. (2010) also examined the form and function of pre-school children's questions that were asked. Each of these studies identified the format and type of questions based on several variables. However, to the best of the researchers' knowledge, no research to date has focused on questions from pre-school children that parents find especially difficult to answer, or on the answers to such questions. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to redress this gap in the literature.

METHODOLOGY

A basic qualitative research method comprising interpretation of interviews, observations, and document analysis is used frequently in education studies (Merriam 2009). This method was deemed appropriate for the current study, in light of its topic and aims.

Participants

Convenience sampling was used to select participants for this study. In this sampling method, a group of individuals is chosen based on their availability (Fraenkel and Wallen 2006). In the current study, participants were chosen based on their availability and their willingness to participate. They consisted of 46 parents (41 mothers and 5 fathers) whose children attended pre-school in a public kindergarten. The ages of the participants varied between 25 and 40, with most of them (n=43) being in the 25-36 age range.

With regard to their highest level of educational attainment, the participants included university graduates (n=9), college graduates (n=3), high school graduates (n=15), and those who had only attended elementary school (n=3) or primary school (n=11). Additionally, three parents had never been to school and were illiterate, and two others did not attend a school but were literate. The number of children of each participant ranged from one (n=11) to seven (n=7), with most parents (n=33) having between one and three children.

Data Collection Tool

Data for this study was collected through a demographic information form and a structured interview. The form included questions about the parents' age, gender, number of children and education level, while the structured interview protocol consisted of two questions:

1. Could you please share the questions, which were asked by your child and which were difficult for you to answer?
2. How did you answer these questions?

Data Collection Procedure

Data for this study was collected from a public kindergarten in a large city in eastern Turkey. The school's administration was informed of the aims of the study. After approval was obtained, a document was sent to 88 parents with children in kindergarten, explaining the aims and requesting participation. Those parents who volunteered to participate were interviewed on a one-to-one basis in an appropriate room of the kindergarten facility when they came to pick up or drop off their children. Interviews were audio recorded with the participants' permission.

Data Analysis

For purposes of data analysis, all audio recordings were transcribed as computer files. All transcriptions were read several times by the researcher and a second coder, both of whom were experienced in qualitative research, and coded separately. Word lists and word-repetition techniques were used for data analysis. According to these techniques, questions and answers were listed and frequencies of their uses were noted (Bernard and Ryan 2010). After determining all the codes, the coders compared them. They disagreed regarding certain codes and referred to the literature to resolve these disagreements. At the end of data analysis, five main themes relating to children's difficult questions were identified: (1) religion, (2) science and nature, (3) sex and fertility, (4) daily life, and (5) miscellaneous concepts. Also, among parents' answers, seven main themes were discerned: giving realistic answers (with examples), giving realistic answers (without examples), making wrong explanations, providing purely religious explanations, leaving the question unanswered/"glossing over", answering insufficiently, and threatening or exhorting. While analyzing the data, the researcher interpreted the participants' religious responses based on Islamic principles because all participants were Muslim.

FINDINGS

The findings of the study are reported in two main sections, with children's difficult questions explained in the first section and parents' answers to these difficult questions in the second.

Children's Difficult Questions

Religion

In relation to God, children asked what the gender of God was (n=4), where God was (n=3), who God was (n=3), why God protected people (n=1), God's height (n=1), what God looked like (n=1), and how God was born (n=1). Also, one of the children asked, since God did not like the Devil, why God did not destroy him. Another child asked:

"Mom! You say that God sees us. When I am playing in my room, you are in the kitchen and my grandfather is in the garden, how does God see all of us at the same time?"

The question of another child is below:

"Mom! Why do lions hunt rabbits? Lions are larger than rabbits so why doesn't God help rabbits?"

After the characteristics of God, the second most important sub-theme of children's religious questions was death. Children asked where the dead went (n=4), what death was and why people died (n=2), why he did not have a father (n=1), and why people were entombed (n=1). Lastly, some children focused on other religious concepts not specifically related to God or death, for instance, what the devil was (n=1), whose house the mosque was (n=1), and when she would go to heaven (n=1).

Science and Nature

In relation to this theme, children wanted to learn why rain fell (n=2), why the sea was salty (n=2), why fish did not drown (n=1), why babies could not talk (n=1), why cows and horses had tails (n=1), how people's nails grew (n=1), how people were able to fly in space (n=1), why hedgehogs had spines (n=1), why people did not fall on a round world (n=1), why her hair was not blonde like her friend's (n=1), why bulls get angry when people show them red colored items (n=1), why the cows' milk was white even though they ate grass (n=1), why adults have body hair (n=1), why stars did not fall (n=1), why milk teeth (baby teeth) fall out (n=1), why she had dark hair (n=1), and why animals did not wear clothes and if they did not get cold (n=1).

Sex and Fertility

In relation to sex and fertility, children were curious about how they came into the world (n=5), why she did not have a "pippi" (Penis) (n=2), where she was while her parents were getting married (n=2), how they could breathe while in their mother's wombs (n=2), why her mother's breast was bigger than her father's (n=2), if he emerged from an egg like a chick (n=1), if there was still a baby in her mother's womb (n=1), how he entered his mother's womb (n=1), why he was circumcised (n=1), why women could give birth but men could not (n=1), why her mother did not marry her teacher (n=1), if her mother had a "pippi" (n=1), if and how he could become a father (n=1), why milk came from her mother's breast and if she was a cow (n=1), if she would marry

her father when she grew up (n=1), and why her mother did not give birth to her and her sister together, that is, why her older sister was born before her (n=1).

Daily Life

Children asked some difficult questions related to daily life. For instance, one child said that she was attending a pre-school (known as “mother school” in Turkey) and asked if she would go to “father school” the following year. Others were curious about why everybody had a mobile phone (n=1), why her mother had become a nurse (n=1), and why his father went to work (n=1).

Miscellaneous Concepts

Lastly, children asked questions about a number of other concepts, for example, the meanings of whore (n=1), love (n=1), and shame (n=1).

Parents’ Answers to These Difficult Questions

Following the data analysis, seven main themes were identified among the parents’ answers to children’s difficult questions, as mentioned above. Since each parental answer was unique and meaningful, tables have been used to clarify and organize these responses.

Giving Realistic Answers (with examples)

When children asked difficult questions, parents sometimes tried to explain their answers using examples. Such responses are shown in Table 1.

Giving Realistic Answers (without examples)

Sometimes parents gave realistic answers to children’s difficult questions. These answers are shown in Table 2.

Table 1: Giving realistic answers (with examples)

<i>Children’s questions</i>	<i>Parents’ answers</i>
God sees us, but why can’t we see him?	Because people can’t see everything. For example, the lamp works with electricity. Surroundings are lighted by electricity. Although we can’t see electricity in the cable we know it is there (P ₇).
Mom! You say that God sees us. While I am playing in my room, you are in the kitchen and my grandfather is in the garden, how does God see all of us at the same time?	Look dear! Fill the basin with water, then put a few of your toys into the water. Then, stand up and look down on them. You can see all of them, can’t you? God can see all of us in this way (P ₂₅).
How do airplanes fly?	How do birds fly? They fly in same way (P ₁₆).

Making Wrong Explanations

While answering children’s difficult questions, parents sometimes made wrong explanations (Table 3).

Providing Purely Religious Explanations

While answering children’s difficult questions, parents sometimes gave answers that ascribed the questioned situation to God, heaven, or God’s will (Table 4).

Leaving Questions Unanswered or “Glossing over”

When children asked difficult questions, parents who were unable to properly answer them sometimes provided evasive answers. These responses are shown in Table 5.

Answering Insufficiently

Some parental answers to children’s difficult questions, while perhaps not actually wrong, can be described as simplistic, incomplete, or otherwise insufficient. These answers are represented in Table 6.

Threatening and Exhorting

When children asked difficult questions, parents sometimes threatened or exhorted them instead of giving proper answers. Such responses are shown in Table 7.

DISCUSSION

The five main themes related to children’s difficult questions in the current study were religion, science and nature, sex and fertility, daily

Table 2: Giving realistic answers (without examples)

<i>Children's questions</i>	<i>Parents' answers</i>
Mom! Will I marry with my father when I grow up?	No! It is not possible. He is your father and you are his daughter (P ₁₂).
Why don't I have a pippi?	Because you are a girl. Boys have a pippi but girls don't (P ₄₂).
Mom! Why does milk come from your breast? Are you a cow?	No, I am not a cow. Your brother hasn't started eating our foods yet. In order to prevent him from starving, milk comes from my breast. This milk is your brother's food (P ₄₄).
How did we come into the world?	You were in my womb. You grew up and doctors pulled you out from my womb (P ₃).
Where did I come from?	I gave birth to you. You were pulled out from my womb (P ₂).
Is there a baby in your womb?	Yes, there is. You will have a sibling (P ₁).
Mom! Can I be a father? How will I be able to be a father?	You will grow up and you will get married. Then, if you have a child, you will be a father (P ₂₂).
I'm going to mother school (pre-school) this year. Will I go to father school next year?	There is not a school called father school. You will start the first grade (P ₁₉).
Mom, why am I dark-haired?	Since your father and I are dark-haired, you are brunette (P ₃₈).
Why do animals not wear clothes? Don't they get cold?	No, they are not like people. Their fat layers protect them from cold (P ₃₇).
Why are people entombed?	Because they died (P ₁₆).
Is God male or female?	God does not have a gender. God is not like us (P ₃).
Where does God live? Does He live in the sky or on the ground?	God does not have a home like ours. God is with us in everywhere (P ₁₄).

Table 3: Making wrong explanations

<i>Children's questions</i>	<i>Parents' answers</i>
Where is God?	God is in sky (P ₄).
Where will we go after dying?	Our bodies will be buried and our souls will go to heaven (P ₄₁).
Where do the dead go? Why don't they come back?	God takes people whom God loves very much. We can see them when we die (P ₂₈).
Why do people die?	God takes people whom God loves (P ₄₅).
Why is the snow white?	In order to make environment more beautiful (P ₄₃).
Mom! How did I come into the world?	We brought you from the hospital (P ₂₁).
How did you make me?	We put sugar between us. When we got up in the morning you emerged (P ₃₃).
Where was I while you were getting married [asked by the child while watching CD of parents' wedding ceremony]?	You were in the factory at that time (P ₂₅).
Why does it rain?	Clouds are sweating (P ₂₇). When clouds are crying, it is raining (P ₃).
Mom! Do you have a pippi?	Yes, I have. All people have a pippi (P ₁₄).
Why was I circumcised?	Because you are a boy and when the time comes, all men are circumcised. It is necessary for your health (P ₄₆).

life, and miscellaneous concepts. Although Turkish children's questions can be said to be broadly parallel to other nations' children's questions in this age group (Cockcroft 2010), some of their questions included cultural elements, for example, regarding circumcision. Some questions that the researchers regarded as easy or commonplace were described as difficult by parents. This

disjuncture may result from the parents' lack of knowledge related to some questions or fields, such as child development and ecology.

One interesting point about children's questions is that children used the word "pippi" instead of penis. It can be said that parents and other people in their environment used such names instead of sexual organs' scientific names.

Table 4: Providing purely religious explanations

<i>Children's questions</i>	<i>Parents' answers</i>
How did the sea become salty?	God put salt in it (P ₁₀).
Why does a hedgehog have spines?	God has created it like this (P ₁₇).
Why don't we fall if the world is round?	God has set up an order like this (P ₂₆).
Mom! Why are your breasts bigger than my father's?	Because God has created us like this (P ₃₁).
Why are clouds in the air?	God has created them like this (P ₁₃).
Why do the stars not fall?	God keeps them there (P ₃₂).
How did I enter your womb?	After I married your father, God put you in my womb (P ₄₁).
Mom! Why didn't you give birth to me and my sister together? Why was my sister born before me?	God wanted to create your sister firstly; so your sister was born before you. If your sister was not older than you, she would not be able to protect you. God thought of you and created your sister before you (P ₂₂).
Where was I while you were getting married [asked by the child while watching CD of parents' wedding ceremony]?	You were with God at that time (P ₈).
Mom! Why don't I have a father?	God's will (P ₉).
While the God does not like the devil, why doesn't the God destroy the devil?	The God knows everything. We can't know anything (P ₄₃).

Table 5: Leaving questions unanswered/"glossing over"

<i>Children's questions</i>	<i>Parents' answers</i>
Why does God protect us?	I couldn't answer this question (P ₁₃).
Is God male or female?	I was surprised and I couldn't answer (P ₃₄).
Why is the sea salty?	I didn't know how children could understand. Therefore, I said that I would explain later (P ₂₉).
Why do adults have hair on their bodies?	I said that I did not know and that she would understand when she got older (P ₂₉).
Why do milk teeth fall out?	I said that I would explain later (P ₃₅).
Why do cows and horses have tails?	I couldn't answer (P ₉).

Table 6: Answering insufficiently

<i>Children's questions</i>	<i>Parents' answers</i>
Why does the pink soap make white foam?	All foam is white (P ₇).
Why don't fish drown in water?	Because they live there (P ₈).
Why can't babies talk?	Because they do not have any teeth (P ₈).
Why do trees face upwards?	Because they grow upwards (P ₃₁).
Why do stars disappear in the daytime?	Because there is too much sunlight (P ₉).

Table 7: Threatening/exhorting

<i>Children's questions</i>	<i>Parents' answers</i>
Who is God?	Did not I tell you that don't talk about it? God will hit you! (P ₄₀)
What is the Devil?	Never ask again. It is a bad thing (P ₃₇).
Mom! Why don't you marry my teacher?	Shut up! And don't talk about it with your father (P ₂₁).
Bilge! Why are your breasts bigger than Uncle Ahmet's? (While my daughter, her sitter Bilge and my cousin Ahmet were sitting in the living room, my daughter asked)	Shut up, shut up! It is a shame! (P ₃₂)

This finding matches that of Martin et al. (2010), who found that twenty-eight percent of participant mothers in their research used the word "pippi" instead of "penis". Children should be educated with the real names of sexual organs as part of a healthy sexual education. Therefore, parents should be more careful in this regard.

When parents' answers were examined, five out of the seven identified themes can broadly be described as inappropriate ways of responding to children's questions, with only "giving realistic answers (with examples)" and "giving realistic answers (without examples)" being appropriate for children's understanding and development. This finding regarding parents' answers parallels the findings of Martin and Torres (2013), who focused on children's sexual questions and parents' answers. Also, studies conducted by Larsson and Svedin (2002), and Stone et al. (2013) indicated that parents worry about how and when children should be informed about sex and sexual topics. When accounting for the profiles of participants in the present study, it may be said that lower educational levels, lack of knowledge, and personal misconceptions tend to increase parental anxiety regarding difficult questions. Therefore, it is suggested that parents should be informed about the key developmental importance of children's questions and appropriate answers to them. Also, it should be emphasized that the quality of parent-child interaction has a very important role on development of children (Akgun and Mellier 2015).

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the majority of questions asked by the Turkish pre-school children in the study were about religion, science and nature, sex and fertility, and daily life. Parents answered these questions in a variety of ways, most of which were not developmentally appropriate. It is crucial to encourage children's curiosity in general and their questioning behavior in particular. Also, ensuring that the explanations given are clear and correct is necessary for children's healthy development and maintaining their enthusiasm for learning. Therefore, parents should be ready to answer all kinds of questions from their children and should be informed about child development, children's questions, and appropriate parental answers through books, television pro-

grams, seminars and conferences. Pre-school institutions and their teachers should take special care to guide parents about how to answer difficult questions from children.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The current study examined pre-school children's difficult questions and parents' answers to them in only one public pre-school institution. In further research, difficult questions of young children and parents' answers should be compared based on a range of public and private schools. Also, parents' answers should be examined in light of variables such as gender, age, occupation, educational level, religion and socio-economic status. Furthermore, answers of parents can be compared in developed countries, underdeveloped countries, and developing countries. Finally, children's levels of satisfaction with their parents' answers should be examined via observations and interviews. Variations in the content of children's questions with age and other factors can also be investigated.

NOTE

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