



Fostering development

Introduction

What's the thinking behind these cards?

These cards have been written by psychologists who are specialists in child development and have studied the ways in which children's development can be fostered. One of the things we hope to encourage is good conversations that help people in a family find out more about how everyone thinks about issues.

One of the principles we follow is that discussing things with children is important. This is not only so you can tell them what you think, or what you want them to do, but so they can be helped to work out and develop their own ideas and ways of thinking about issues. One of the things that research has told us is that children can also make a lot of progress by talking things over with their brothers and sisters, or their friends. You can help create the chances of such conversations happening by taking advantage of times when there's an opportunity for a few minutes talking about issues with your children. This could be when you're having a meal together, for example.

It's also important not to 'rush to judgement' about important issues, like clothes or school work. To have a proper discussion, and to make good decisions, you need to find a way of holding off making any firm statements so that a space is created where views can be aired and tried out.

If you do this, neither you nor your children should start by laying down the law about what you think. You could start a discussion, for example, by talking about the good aspects of having cool clothes and the down sides, and ask your child(ren) to do the same. That is, to give both positive and negative thoughts about the issue.

The explanation A lot of research has been done in recent years to find out more about the factors that help children develop their abilities to think about and solve problems. Some years ago it was generally believed that the development of children's thinking could happen perfectly well if children just had experience of working with problems that they solved by themselves. Teachers also used to believe that you could just tell children things for them to come to understand them. But research has shown conclusively that development is fostered if children get opportunities to talk through problems with other people who have different ideas from their own, especially other children who are similar in their levels of thinking.

This can create what has been called 'cognitive conflict'. Working with someone else to resolve conflicts of opinion or understanding seems to be a potent force for development. Being told something by an older and more experienced adult is usually less effective than moving forward in thinking by working things out with a peer or in a group of children.

The activities that have been included in these cards can all, in their own ways, help start productive discussions, so use whatever ways you find easiest to encourage your child(ren) to discuss issues amongst their friends and with you.

Lastly, it's important for children to 'have a voice' with their parents; this means respecting your child(ren)'s opinions, asking them what they think and generally giving them space to let you know about their views.

You can find much more about child development on the Child of Our Time website open2.net/childofourtime

John Oates
David Messer
Esther Burkitt

Centre for Childhood Development and Learning,
The Open University