Flexible Interview Guidelines

Flexible interviewing is not easy to do. It requires skill and practice. Don't worry if it feels awkward in the beginning, or if you make mistakes. You will get better with practice, and you will feel more comfortable, too. And even if your efforts aren't perfect, you will discover that even novice attempts to interview can yield wonderful results!

Before beginning an interview, think of a set of tasks and problems that you might use with the child, so that you do not have to think of appropriate problems on the spur of the moment. For example, before conducting interviews to assess addition, write down a list of problems in order from simpler to more difficult, drawing on your current curriculum as well as specific areas of investigation for the child you're working with.

Focus on what the child CAN do. Use this as an opportunity to find the child's strengths and abilities. To accomplish this, briefly suspend the tendency to correct and teach, and focus your attention on the child's thinking. Do not talk too much, instead let the child do most of the talking. Focus on observing carefully what the child is doing as he or she solves a problem and try to think of possible explanations. Be flexible and responsive to the child to allow the child the opportunity to share his or her knowledge.

Initial Task or Question

- Start with a task on which the child is likely to succeed.
- Make the task as concrete as possible. Use manipulatives if possible.
- Use the child's language in asking the questions or presenting the tasks. For example, use "take away" instead of "subtract" if that will foster communication with the child.
- Present the tasks/questions in such a way that the child doesn't feel he will disappoint you if he can't do it. Maintain neutral expression and watch your body language. Encourage and praise effort rather than answers.
- Try to avoid prompts that allow the child to say "no" as a valid response. Instead, gently direct the child to do the task. Use prompts such as the following.
    - Do *[problem]*.
    - Figure out *[problem]*.
    - What is *[problem]*?
    - How do you do *[problem]*?
    - Show me how to do *[problem]*.
    - What do you think *[problem]* is?
- If the child says he can't do it, or that he doesn't know, but you think he may be able to solve it if he tries, gently encourage him to try.
    - Please try to figure it out.
    - Please tell me what the answer is.

- If you feel a task may be particularly challenging, or that the child may need some support to be able to solve the problem, provide him with the option of using some manipulatives with which you know he is familiar and comfortable. Those manipulatives may not provide the child with the most effective strategy, but would permit the problem to be solved. For example, in challenging a child to solve subtraction with regrouping, you could provide counters for the child to use, in addition to Base-ten blocks.
- Wait. Allow the child ample time to respond.
- Don't discourage the child's way of solving problems.
- Be careful that the way in which you present tasks doesn't provide clues as to the answers. For example, if you want to find out if the child can identify which of two numbers is more or which is less, vary the order in which you present the numbers so that the larger number isn't always given first.
- If the child gives you an answer, and then asks if he is right, instead of answering and thus allowing the child to turn the focus towards what you think about his response, try to turn the focus back to what the child thinks. Ask the child:
    - What do you think?
    - Do you think you're right?
- Reassure the child that you are interested in how he solves problems, not whether or not the answer is right or wrong.

Clarify or Change Task/ Question

- If the child does not seem to understand the question:
    - Try repeating the question.
    - Try rewording the question.
    - Try asking the child to tell you what the task is.
    - Try changing the task to make it simpler.

Investigate or Probe

- When you get a response that needs investigation in order to better understand what the child has actually done or what the child is thinking, ask questions to try to help the child reveal more about his strategies or his thinking. Be careful not to use leading questions. Use questions such as:
    - How did you know that?
    - How did you do that?
    - Can you tell me what you did out loud?
    - How did you figure it out?
    - Can you tell me how you figured it out?
    - Can you show me how you did it?
    - What were you thinking?
    - (If the child did not use manipulatives, provide one, if appropriate.) Can you show me how you did it with these?

- If the child does something specific that you do not understand, or that you want to investigate, ask more targeted questions such as:
    - Where did ____ come from?
    - What did you do with ____?
    - Why did you do ____?
- If these kinds of questions fail to help the child describe his thinking or reveal his strategies, as a last resort, you can use questions such as:
    - How would you help a friend do it?
    - How would you explain it to a friend?
    - If a friend was having troubles with that problem, could you give him some help? How would you help him?
- If you want specifically to investigate a child's understanding of a concept and the child's responses do not provide the information you are seeking, you could try to present scenarios around those concepts, such as
    - Some kids do…
    - I know a kid who…

  Then follow up by asking:
    - What do you think of that?
    - Is that a good way to do it? Why or why not?
- In trying to decide whether a response needs investigating, keep in mind that a wrong answer doesn't necessarily imply lack of knowledge. Nor does a right answer always imply understanding. If you have any doubts as to whether the child understands the response given, take time to investigate. Always try to think about why the child did what he did.
- You can investigate children's behaviors, in addition to their responses. For example, if you see a child counting on his fingers, or tapping his fingers on the table, you could ask the child what he was doing with his fingers.