

All About Open-Ended Questions

Improve your classroom interactions
with these tips on the CLASS[®] tool

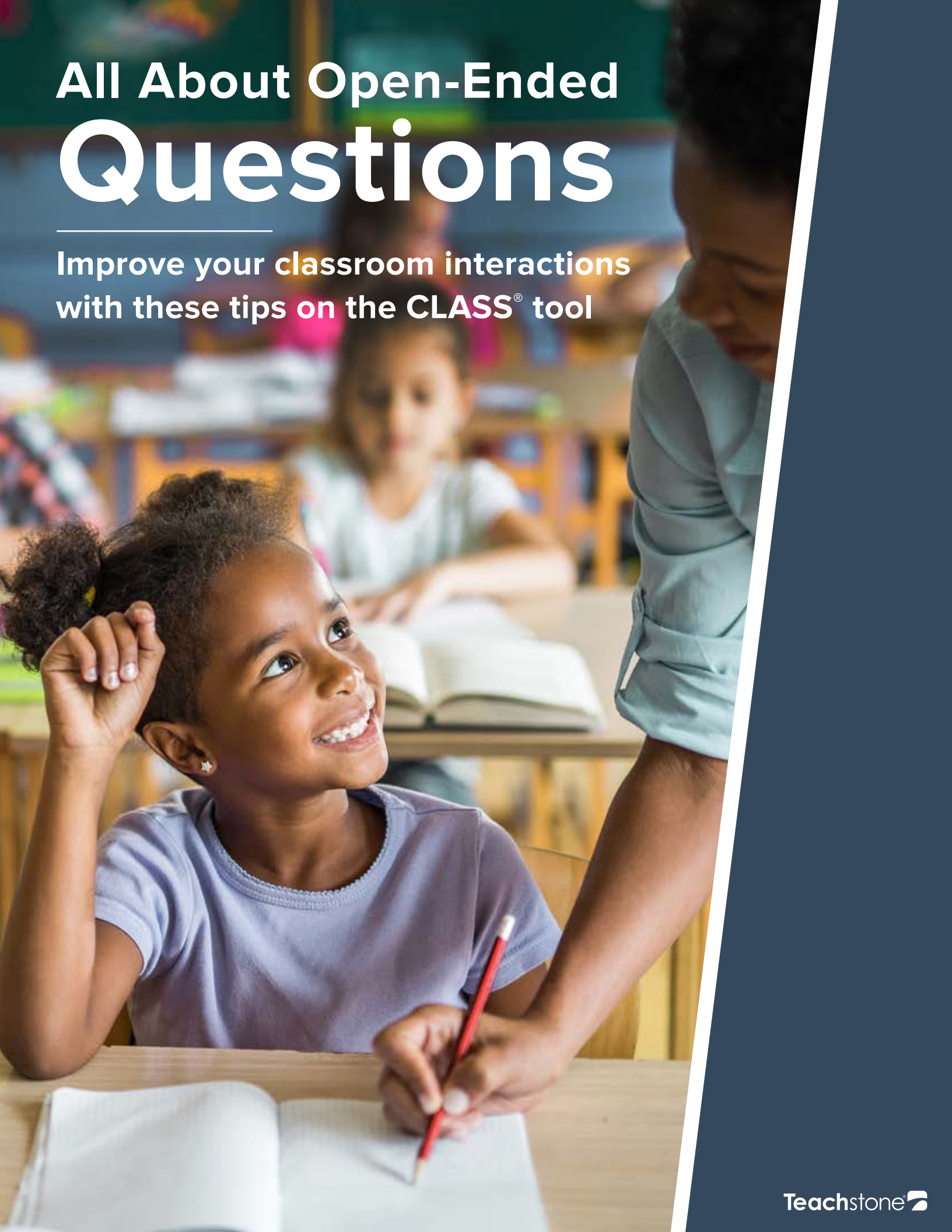


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Keep Learning

Find out what to expect when your classroom is going to be observed by a CLASS observer in our short video.

Introduction

A special note to our readers ...

Dear Reader,

Thank you for downloading our e-book!

In this e-book, we'll lay out some tips on using open-ended questions to improve your classroom interactions. We'll give advice on how to ask questions that generate meaningful conversation, and offer strategies for encouraging children to reflect and respond. We'll also show you how open-ended questions fit within the broader framework of the CLASS tool.

After reading the book, we challenge you to:

- Reflect on your current practices in the classroom
- Jot down areas for improvement
- Use the suggestions in this book to apply specific techniques to those areas for growth
- Share this resource with a colleague who might find it beneficial

Thank you for your dedication in creating life changing experiences through meaningful interactions.

Tip 1: How to Ask Open-Ended Questions

What you need to know about open-ended questions and why they matter for children's learning.

If you're familiar with the CLASS, you probably already know how important open-ended questions are in fostering high-quality classroom interactions. Openended questions create meaningful opportunities for learning, prompting children to reason and reflect while encouraging their use of language.

An ideal conversation might look something like this:

Teacher: Why did you decide to put the triangle-shaped block on top?

Child: So it can be the roof.

Teacher: What might happen if you didn't have a block on top?

Child: Then the rain might come in.

Teacher: How else could you keep the rain out?

Child: With an umbrella.

Teacher: How would that work?



As it turns out, it can be challenging to achieve this ideal. While asking questions comes naturally for many teachers, asking open-ended questions may not. It takes effort to build a repertoire of questions that encourage children to reflect on and articulate their own ideas. Teachers often find that they have to be intentional about incorporating open-ended questions into their classroom practice.

So, how can we remember to ask these kinds of broad, thought-provoking questions? Here's a list of strategies you can implement in your own classroom:

- Generate a list of generic open-ended questions, print them out in a large font, and create banners to post around the tops of the classroom walls. They make a pretty border—and they're right there to see and use as you're in the moment, interacting with children. Alternatively, post these same questions in centers on large notecards as a reminder, or print out and laminate this list to carry with you.
- Before reading a book with children, write questions and statements on sticky notes and flag selected pages:
 - "Look at the cover. What do you think this book will be about?"
 - "Why is the monkey throwing coconuts?"
 - "Tell me what you think will happen next."

- Ask “How did you decide ... ?” to encourage children to talk about something they are doing. Help them articulate their decision-making process by following up with “What if you ... ?” or “How else could you ... ?” and presenting an alternative to the action they took.
- Provide lots of opportunities for children to practice responding to these types of questions—and make sure you wait for them to answer. While you're waiting, you can discreetly tap each of your fingers to be sure children have at least ¹⁰ seconds to reply. Not all children are used to open-ended conversations, and it might take time for some children to get comfortable with responding in more complex ways.
- Consider creating a "question of the week" to ask each child in your class in a one-on-one setting. Make time for these individualized back-and-forth conversations on the playground, at meal times, while waiting in line, or during centers. Ask the question, then demonstrate your interest in the child's unique response by asking follow-up questions, like "Can you tell me more?" and "Why do you think that?"
- Practice, practice, practice! With time, you can make open-ended questions a regular part of your teaching routine.

Tip 2: How to Help Children Answer Open-Ended Questions

Asking open-ended questions is a skill that takes practice—so does *answering* them.



Now that you're armed with plenty of strategies for asking open-ended questions, it should be easy, right? Well ... sometimes. But sometimes the conversation might go like this:

Teacher: How do you think the dragonfly can fly?

Child: Because

Teacher: Because why?

Child: Silence

Most educators would agree that it takes time and practice to become skilled at asking open-ended questions. But it's easy to forget that there's also a learning curve for answering these questions. When a teacher asks an open-ended question, the focus of the conversation shifts from the teacher to the child. And while some children are used to this type of inquiry, others need practice to become comfortable verbalizing their thoughts and opinions.

So, how can we help children develop the skills they need to answer open-ended questions? We came up with some tactics:

- Encourage children to ask questions throughout the day and model thoughtful answers. Additionally, model asking and answering questions with other adults in the classroom. For example, you might ask a fellow teacher, “Mrs. Debbie, why are you putting on your coat?” prompting her to answer, “Oh, I need my coat because I know it will be cold outside. It snowed this morning.”
- Introduce children to open-ended questions by first approaching them when they are relaxed—playing or eating, for example. You might say, “I see you really like to build with the blue blocks. Tell me, what makes the blue blocks special?” Or, “You just poured the milk all by yourself. How did you learn to do that?”
- Encourage back-and-forth exchanges by using open-ended follow-up questions. Back-and-forth exchanges model natural conversations and are more likely to elicit responses. For example, you might follow up on a child's comment by asking “why,” “how,” and “what if” questions. Don’t forget to provide wait time.
- In group settings, try asking the whole class an open-ended question. Let the children talk with an elbow buddy for a minute before you ask them to share with the group.
- Engage in one-on-one self- and parallel talk as a way to bond with shy and quiet children. Describe your actions and what you see them doing in a conversational way. For example, “I see you are putting a dress on the doll and giving her a nice big hug. I am dressing my doll in shorts and a t-shirt because she wants to go play at the park.” This kind of interaction can build children's skill and confidence, opening the door for meaningful conversations in the future.

Tip 3: CLASS is More than Open-Ended Questions

Yes, there IS more to CLASS than open-ended questions.



After all this talk about open-ended questions, it's easy to see why so many people associate these questions with the CLASS tool. But while asking "how" and "why" questions is a vital part of supporting language and concept development, it's important to remember that we can't have effective interactions with these questions alone. There's more to the CLASS tool than just open-ended questions!

The Recipe

Let's think of the classroom as a beautiful birthday cake. Whether we're baking the cake or fostering effective teacher-child interactions, we need to start with a recipe that will guide us toward the desired outcome. Our recipe for effective teacher-child interactions is the [CLASS Dimension Guide](#). Following the guide will help us make the most of our everyday exchanges with children in the classroom.

The Ingredients

Now, let's think about the specific parts of the CLASS tool. Making a cake requires combining the right ingredients in the right proportions. Sugar may make a cake taste great, but simply throwing sugar into a mixing bowl will not produce a cake. Likewise, open-ended questions alone will not transform children's academic and social outcomes. We need to address all of the CLASS dimensions, just like we need to mix all of the right ingredients into the batter.

Understanding the specifics of each dimension is as fundamental as knowing the difference between flour and baking soda. A good teacher reviews and researches these "ingredients" and follows the recipe to create a classroom environment that will nourish children emotionally and academically.

So let's see what's going into the mixing bowl:

- We'll start with Positive Climate, Teacher Sensitivity, and Regard for Student
- Perspectives—these CLASS ingredients help children build trusting relationships with teachers, support their independence, and encourage excitement about learning.
- Next, we'll add equal amounts of Behavior Management, Productivity, and Instructional Learning Formats, to help children get the most learning out of each day. These dimensions also help children learn how to self-regulate.
- Lastly, we'll mix in Concept Development, Quality of Feedback, and Language Modeling, to support children's cognitive and language skills.

Tweaking the Recipe

Just as cooking times and temperatures vary based on oven type, so might the specifics of implementing the CLASS be affected by classroom dynamics. It's important to remember that what works for one group of children might need to be altered slightly for another group of children, to account for different needs, personalities, and backgrounds. A skilled teacher, like a baker, understands how to tweak the recipe to make sure that the CLASS tool has the maximum benefit for her individual students.

So there you have it: for high-quality classroom interactions, you have to know how to use all of the ingredients of the CLASS tool. Remember, it takes time to figure out how to incorporate each of the dimensions. But before you know it, your CLASS-cake will be complete.

Time to celebrate!

KEEP LEARNING

Find out what to expect when your classroom is going to be observed by a CLASS observer in our short video.

[WATCH THE VIDEO](#)