

How?

What?

When?

We Can Serve As Guides

By K. Meagan Ledendecker

As adults, we often step into particular kinds of roles with children. We can be parents, aunts, uncles. We can be coaches, mentors. We can be teachers. Each role has a set of expectations, often with an unspoken rule that the adult knows best and that children will learn from us.

Yet the roles adults can play in children's lives can be much more nuanced. We can facilitate, suggest, model, and observe. The world can teach and the adults can serve as guides in a process of learning and discovery.

In the Positive Discipline approach, adults guide growth and learning by asking "curiosity questions." The key is not to rely on scripted questions but rather to be genuinely curious, perhaps asking questions like

- How do you feel about what happened?
- What were you trying to accomplish?
- What did you learn?
- How do you think you might use what you learned?
- What ideas do you have for solutions?

Avoiding the question, "Why?" is also important as it can sound accusatory and can lead to a child feeling defensive.

Recently a young person in my life was struggling – lashing out verbally, doing everything he could to emotionally hurt those around him. Once I realized that what I really wanted to know was how I could help him feel better, I could ask the question with all my heart, "What can I do to help you have a better day?" When we shift our roles and think about how to learn more about what our children are feeling, thinking, and exploring, we become meaningful guides. Rather than dispensing information, we can help children make discoveries.

Recently an elementary-aged child came up to me ecstatic with a discovery about the periodic table. "Look!" she exclaimed, "Gold has the symbol Au, because the Latin name for gold is aurum. Au for aurum!" Because she had discovered this on her own, the knowledge was so much more invigorating and inspiring than had I instructed her about etymology and periodic table symbols.

In *How Children Learn*, John Holt describes children's process of learning: "The child is curious. He wants to make sense out of things, find out how things work, gain competence and control over himself and his environment, and do what he can see other people doing. He is open, perceptive, and experimental. He does not merely observe the world around him. He does not shut himself off from the strange, complicated world around him, but tastes it, touches it, hefts it, bends it, breaks it. To find out how reality works, he works on it. He is bold. He is not afraid of making mistakes. And he is patient. He can tolerate an extraordinary amount of uncertainty, confusion, ignorance, and suspense."

Children naturally want to figure out the world and themselves. Thus, we can be thoughtful guides through this remarkable world of ours. We can entice. We can inspire. We can show possible paths. And we can observe, so as to most effectively support our children as they construct the adults they will become.

~ K. Meagan Ledendecker not only guides her own three children, but also six- to twelve-year-olds at The Montessori School of the Berkshires (MSB). Before co-founding MSB she taught in traditional school settings and worked for various nonprofits. www.berkshiresmontessori.org

