

## Ask What, Not How

Written by Vince Gowmon, CPCC

Friday, 01 June 2018 00:00 - Last Updated Friday, 18 January 2019 09:52

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As a play coach, I conduct workshops to help adults reconnect with the skills and perspectives that encourage play, which are often dormant in grown-ups. In one of my Remembering to Play events, a father shared that his young son expressed interest in becoming an astronaut. I asked him how he responded, and the father replied, “By saying, ‘How are you going to do that?’” I was dismayed. It wasn’t just about the words the father chose, but the doubt and concern he reenacted in his tone—a tone his son would have felt.

*“The magic, the wonder, the mystery, and the innocence of a child’s heart are the seeds of creativity that will heal the world.” —Michael Jackson*



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It's very tempting to jump to the how. For the inhibited, rational adult, forgetful of the child within, the logistics of the dream are far more alluring than the dream itself. Isn't that what how focuses on? "How will you do it?" instead of "What would you enjoy about it?" Linear, practical details usurp the spiraling pathways of wonder.

How also removes children from here and now. How is about the future: How will you become an astronaut? Let's get this all planned out! Let's think ahead. Wonder and dreaming, by contrast, derive from imagination of the present moment, in which children dwell so beautifully.

Instead of asking how, what if the father had asked engaging questions that start with What?

What would it be like to be an astronaut?

What would be your favorite thing about that?

What would you wear?

What would you love to see up there?

What might you discover in outer space?

These questions (especially when asked with genuine interest and enthusiasm) orient the child to dreaming and feeling, both of which reside here and now; they invite him into a fluid, timeless state, into his body. In wonder, he loses himself in the joy of the conversation with his father and

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in wild imaginings. There are no linear timelines anchored by concrete specifics. There is no place to get to. Rather, joyful wanderings into the unknown are danced in, an endless sea of possibilities. What might we discover about each other? How deeply might we bond?

It's a rare gift. How much did we experience this with our caregivers as children?

*"What one loves in childhood stays in the heart forever." —Mary Jo Putney*

By engaging the dream, we validate the child. And by validating the child we make the present moment more important than the future, which encourages children to stay saturated in the now, where all humans are most happy.

This doesn't mean you should never ask how, or never point to the future. I'm not suggesting you stop offering thoughts from your logical, timeline mind. What I am saying is that you consider where you could ask what more often, where you could dance a little bit more in your child's wild world.

To do so requires letting go of control. The adult must suspend his need to be rational and practical. He must forgo his need to control the child. Certainty must give way to uncertainty. This is challenging for most adults. The future and certainty are far more compelling. They make us feel safe.

We've been conditioned to derive our sense of security by what we plan, rather than opening to the mystery of life, to the jewels embedded in our heart here and now. We've been taught to trust logic far more than intuition, planning more than spontaneity. We've been taught to think things out instead of feeling things out. We're told not to trust our feelings. Thinking leads us ahead and into our heads, whereas feeling—the body—lives forever in the now. It's here we find wisdom.

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*“There are children playing in the streets who could solve some of my top problems in physics, because they have modes of sensory perception that I lost long ago.” —J. Robert Oppenheimer*

A future-product-oriented adult misses so much of what a child is longing for: curiosity, listening, wonder, enthusiasm, process—connection. Connection is a core biological need; it’s essential for child development and learning. For children to develop and learn in healthy ways, they require a secure attachment with at least one primary caregiver. Regularly being told what to think and directed away from the dreaming, feeling present and toward a “realistic” future disintegrates the necessary bond children need with their parents.

More so, without a primary attachment figure to regularly play along in her world, a child learns that her voice, needs, and interests don’t matter. Stressing how more than what tells a child that her agenda must be tempered. That the adult’s agenda—the how—is what counts. When this happens enough times, a child is more likely to feel that her thoughts and feelings don’t matter and she may feel less inclined to share her heart with her caregivers. And we wonder why teenagers shut down.

Children need and long for someone to follow their leads, to dance in their wild worlds and sing their song with them—to connect before they correct/direct. With ongoing nourishment to the present-time relationship, children will spend less time chasing the future, like most adults do, and more time losing themselves in a butterfly, delightful conversation, wild fantasies, audacious laughter, or in the warmth of someone’s compassion. Presence is more likely to be a lifelong companion.

*“If a child has been able in his play to give up his whole loving being to the world around him, he will be able, in the serious tasks of later life, to devote himself with confidence and power to the service of the world.” —Rudolf Steiner*

The world needs children growing up present to what stirs within. It’s the present-time voice of intuition and visions of imagination that cultivate the bold dreamers, courageous leaders, and speakers of truth the world needs. More people blending into the dull, grey, pragmatic “realities” that most acquiesce to will not change things for the better. Colorful ideas from empowered leaders will. Therefore, we must let children lead today. We do so by following them in their

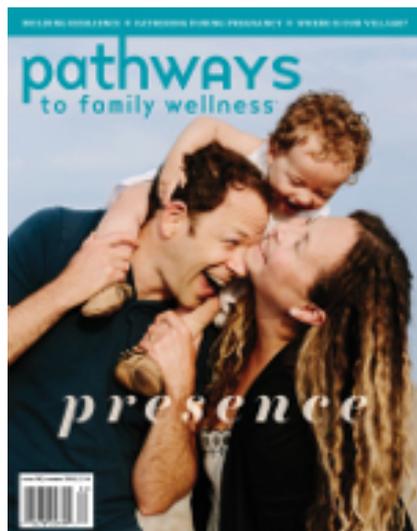
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endlessly bubbling, creative realities— by letting them dream us home.



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