

Abstract

Although there are multiple reports of children spontaneously asking “why” and “how” questions, the information seeking basis of their questions remains unclear. Two studies measured children’s curiosity for how things work by pitting mechanistic information (e.g., how things work) against “fun” information (e.g., surprising stories). The information was never supplied, just the potential opportunity to acquire it. Children from 5 to 10 years old showed a clear preference for mechanistic information (as opposed to fun facts) when the experimenter put the emphasis on learning (as opposed to “having fun”). Crucially, children also showed an interest in mechanistic information when given neutral guidelines. A drive to learn more about mechanism therefore emerges early in childhood and can override attractive alternatives.