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Asking questions

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5-6 minutes

Small children are great at asking questions. Their questions are simple, direct, and utterly without ego. If you spend time with 2-5 year olds, you'll find yourself answering a near infinite series of progressively more challenging questions. This is one of the main paths by which children learn about the world.

> *ex. Child question: "Why is the sky blue?"*

Adults are generally bad at asking questions. Adult questions come with long preambles, caveats, and agendas. Adult questions don't seem to be designed to learn about the world, they seem to be designed to avoid looking dumb.

> *ex. Adult question: "I know the sky isn't actually blue, and that if I look up, I know there's nothing between me and outer space except air and maybe some clouds. Beyond that, there's outer space. Outer space is effectively black because there isn't light. Yet the sky often, though not always, appears to be various shades of blue. What triggers that blue? Is it something about how light interacts with air? Or gravity? Magnetic fields?"*

The contrast between child questions and adult questions is striking, but it isn't a function of age, it's a function of conditioning. At some point, children get social signals that asking questions makes them appear stupid. This can come from a frustrated parent, annoyed teacher, or mocking friend.

Kids internalize this feedback and start to ask fewer questions as they grow up. The scope of things about which adults ask questions get narrower and narrower, shying away from things that are new or hard to understand. At the same time, adult questions get longer and longer. Most of this length isn't important for the question, it is meant to prevent the audience from thinking the questioner is stupid.

These questions aren't terribly useful to either the questioner or the questionee. If you're not sure what this type of question looks like, watch a congressional hearing. The questions are meant to prove points, not produce knowledge.

Adult questions reinforce their own badness. When an adult spends most of a question proving his own intelligence, the question doesn't produce new knowledge. This reinforces the perception that questions aren't worth practicing. Without that practice, the questions continue to get worse.

I've been thinking about questions because I noticed that I've become increasingly self conscious about not knowing things, and cover for that by asking adult questions. Some of this is a function of the fact that I'm older and some of it is a function of the fact that my job involves giving a significant amount of advice. I noticed, as well, that conversations in which I ask simpler questions are more enjoyable and more interesting. These conversations lead to new ideas and better plans.

I'm particularly conscious of this dynamic in conversations with founders. Many founders believe that adult questions are the best questions because of their interactions with investors. On the one hand, investors tell founders that asking questions is a good thing. On the other hand, founders are judged for asking questions that are "too basic." Founders who do things without asking questions first are generally rewarded for being "fast" whereas those that ask some questions first are derided as being "slow."

However, successful startups are not defined by the questions that a founder asks. They are defined by what a founder does with the information at hand, and how quickly. Founders who acquire new information quickly and act are more successful. Founders who dither or get caught in infinite loops of ignorant execution generally fail.

Founders and investors would have better conversations if each side dropped the pretense of needing to "look" smart and asked child questions. This isn't a complex task, but it does require focus.

The way I'm working on this is to stop myself each time I'm about to ask a question and figure out what I actually want to know, and then see if I can just ask that specific question in no more than a single simple sentence. If the question does not produce a satisfying answer, I'll try to understand if it is because I worded the question poorly, or did not provide enough context. If I need more context, I'll add one or two sentences of context, and ask the question again.

This strategy does not always work: I don't always catch myself in time, I sometimes ask poorly worded questions, sometimes the question requires more context than is practical. However, I've found that the act of thinking about the question I want to ask and examining it in this child/adult dichotomy has helped me ask better questions, have better conversations, and learn more things. That's enough of a reason to continue doing it.