



## Curious about Connections

*Three Deceptively Simple Questions to Encourage Lifelong Systems Thinking, Critical Thinking and Empathy -*

*by Dr. Linda Booth Sweeney*

Designed for easy use by parents, teachers, and librarians, *Curious About Connections* facilitation

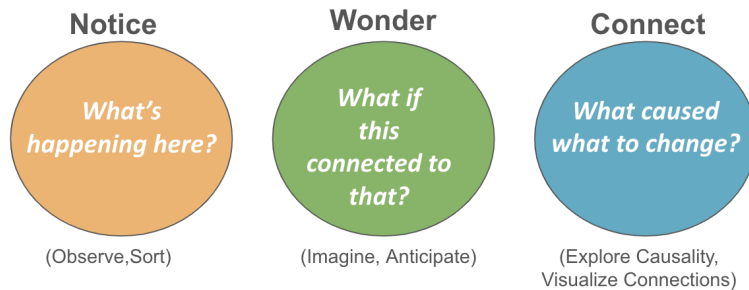
approach supports what family/work advocate and author Ellen Galinsky calls a child's early "causal sense". Using simple and easy-to-remember questions that guide children to NOTICE, WONDER and CONNECT, adults can support children to become "adept at disentangling cause-and-effect, especially when the evidence is ambiguous." (Ellen Galinsky, *Mind in the Making: Seven Essential Life Skills Every Child Needs*).

These conversations help children build the muscle to see not only objects— a bee, soil, a soccer player—but to imagine how the interconnections and interactions among those objects can create something entirely new. Whether you're 5 or 55, imagining interconnections is the first step in systems thinking. Beyond systems thinking, these conversations can also:

- Help children feel more confident when dealing with complex problems as they grow older.
- Improve communication skills as children learn to make their thinking visible.
- Supports a growth mindset by encouraging "What if?" questions.
- Practice empathy, as they learn to listen without judgment.
- Enrich environmental and sustainability education

## THREE SIMPLE QUESTIONS

# CURIOUS ABOUT CONNECTIONS



## A CLASSROOM EXAMPLE

Here's an example of how you can use the CURIOUS ABOUT CONNECTIONS question to foster kindness in a classroom:

### Making Thinking Visible

# CURIOUS ABOUT CONNECTIONS

### Kindness in a Classroom

1. First, what do we **NOTICE?** What are the parts of kindness? (Children will likely say, other children, the teacher, the room itself).



2. **WONDER:** What if the parts interconnect? How could they interconnect to produce kindness?



The first set of ideas will likely involve linear, cause and effect. Nice words, create nice feelings for instance.

3. Now, **CONNECT.** With encouragement, children can look for ways that one element influences another, and another to feedback back on itself, ultimately creating its own dynamic, in this case "kindness".



Encourage children to use drawings, string, objects to "make their thinking visible" about the interconnections that create change.

Loop Adapted from Waters Centers for Systems Thinking

## HOW TO HAVE *CURIOUS ABOUT CONNECTIONS* CONVERSATIONS

As Parents, Teachers, and Caring Adults, your role in Curious About Connections conversations is to:

- Encourage children with a variety of materials and methods to visualize connections through words, drawings, objects, or movement.
- Create an environment of curiosity and wonder.
- Ask open-ended questions that spark exploration and imagination.
- Avoid providing immediate answers or solutions.
- Foster inclusion and respect – encourage children to listen to each other's ideas and perspectives without judgment.
- Try the questions yourself when you're faced with a complex situation. You might be surprised!

### BACKGROUND

These questions originated from “Thinking about Everyday Systems”, Dr. Linda Booth Sweeney’s doctoral research conducted at Harvard’s Graduate School of Education. *CURIOUS ABOUT CONNECTIONS* conversations are being applied and tested by early childhood educators, librarians, nature centers, parents and systems thinking practitioners using a variety of materials including picture books, postcards, experiential games, role plays, music, and hands-on activities like building and science experiments.



Whether you're five or fifty-five, **systems thinking** begins with imagining – and making visible – how different parts of a system work together to produce the results we see. By doing this, children learn to think critically about the world around them.

Early exposure to systems thinking can help children **visualize and communicate** their thinking and ultimately, feel more confident when dealing with complex problems as they grow older.

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