

## WHY TEACH PEOPLE TO ASK THEIR OWN QUESTIONS?

Almost thirty years ago, we were working on a dropout prevention program to encourage parents to get more involved in their children's education in the low-income community of Lawrence, Massachusetts. The parents told us over and over again that they were too reluctant to get involved or even to show up at the school because they "didn't even know what to ask."

These parents and thousands of other people we've worked with all around the country and beyond have shown us just how important it is to have the seemingly simple skill of asking questions. It turns out that being able to ask your own questions opens all sorts of closed doors, by making it easier for people to advocate for themselves, get essential information, partner well with service providers, and, perhaps most important of all, participate effectively in key decisions that affect them.

Little children seem to ask questions quite naturally. Why, then, should we bother to actually teach this skill of question formulation to adults? Somehow, children's readiness to ask questions weakens over time and often disappears completely. We have to change that. The skill, so critical to learning, advocacy, and effective participation in decisions, actually needs to be deliberately taught and, perhaps, 're-learned.' When you learn how to formulate a good question, it becomes a skill you can use anywhere--you can ask questions at your children's school, the welfare office, the health clinic, and anywhere you might need information or need to advocate for yourself and your family. Imagine trying to advocate *without* the ability to ask your own questions!

The parents in Lawrence named a problem that had long been overlooked. Thanks to their insight, we began a journey of many years trying to figure out how to teach what is actually a very sophisticated thinking skill to anyone, no matter their level of income or education. After much trial and error, we created the Question Formulation Technique, a simple, step-by-step process for teaching the skill of asking questions.

## WHY TEACH THE QUESTION FORMULATION TECHNIQUE?

The Question Formulation Technique (QFT) is designed so that the person going through the process is the one actually producing and working with their own questions. That sounds kind of simple, but it's often quite different from what most people have experienced when interacting with any service or agency. They may be accustomed to you, the service provider, asking them questions

to get information from them. But what information do THEY need? What do they want to know? We can't know that unless they are asking their own questions.

The QFT asks people to first come up with a lot more questions than they usually ask (that could mean three questions instead of one, or fifteen questions instead of just a few). This is a form of what is called "divergent" thinking. Through the next few steps of the process, they continue to work with and focus more sharply on the questions they just produced. This is a form of "convergent thinking." They also have the chance to do "metacognitive thinking," which means they get to think about the challenges and value of learning to ask their own questions and become more aware of themselves as quite capable thinkers. This can be a transformative experience for people as they realize they now have the ability to think for themselves, to ask their own questions, and to make their voices heard.

People who go through the QFT process begin to think, feel, and do things differently. We call these cognitive, affective, and behavioral changes.

- **Cognitive:** People now know how to come up with their own questions, the uses of different types of questions, and how to prioritize and strategize about their questions.
- **Affective:** People feel more confident asking questions and are motivated to find answers.
- **Behavioral:** People can now use a process for asking their own questions. They have a skill that they use in all areas of their lives to advocate for themselves, seek information, and participate in decisions.

To teach the QFT, access our free materials at our website, [rightquestion.org](http://rightquestion.org). We've found that people working in many fields can quickly learn the process and easily integrate it into their daily work. We look forward to supporting you and hearing from you about how you've used the Right Question Strategy--write to us anytime at [contact@rightquestion.org](mailto:contact@rightquestion.org).

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