

Inquiry-Based Learning: Benefits and Strategies for Young Learners

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Think about it: instead of a parent or teacher force-feeding information to children, kids can harness their own natural curiosity and use it as the driving force of their learning. By tapping into a child's curiosity, not only will kids feel more in control of their learning, but they will feel motivated to learn more, and find a sense of purpose in their studies. In a nutshell, this is what inquiry-based learning is all about.

Years of educational research has shown us that students learn far more when pedagogy shifts from teacher-centered to student-centered approaches. By handing the reins over to our children, kids learn to be in charge of their own academic growth. Let's take a deeper look at inquiry-based learning before discovering meaningful strategies and activities to use with students both at home and in the classroom.



What is Inquiry-Based Learning?

Simply put, inquiry-based learning focuses around a question that students want to answer. That means that the unit or lesson to be learned begins with a question, and the entire activity is meant to answer that question. This approach makes student questions and ideas a priority, forming the foundation for any assignment, project, or experiment to be completed.

From a student's point-of-view, kids get to investigate their curiosity. By forming an open question or posing a problem to be solved, kids set a motivating purpose for their learning. They then seek to answer the question by using creative problem-solving skills, analyzing evidence to form a reasonable conclusion. Kids must then be able to defend or prove the conclusion they reach to ensure accuracy of the information learned.

From a parent or educator's point-of-view, inquiry-based teaching is pushing kids to think beyond their initial curiosity to think critically about the problem at hand, and possible solutions or answers. Kids must be encouraged to ask additional questions, and adults should guide students through the investigation process to ensure learning and success.

It's important to remember that parents or teachers should carefully model the inquiry and investigation processes to guide kids through their learning. Inquiry-based learning in kindergarten doesn't mean simply letting children loose to find answers to any question they've ever asked themselves. Using age-appropriate grade level subjects and topics, students should form questions under the guidance of an adult and pushed in the right direction through structured activities. These activities can take many forms:

- Group or family projects
- Learning and using the research process
- Science experiments
- Exploring deeper-level questioning
- Hands-on learning and manipulatives

As you can see, versus traditional learning, inquiry-based activities directly involve active student engagement instead of passive listening and rote memorization of facts. Not only is it more effective, but it's just more fun and motivating for kids.

Inquiry-Based Strategies to Use in the Classroom

If you're an educator looking for more ideas to implement inquiry-based learning in your classroom, try the following strategies to get started:



Start class with a surprise!

Warm-ups are a must to get young brains fired up and ready for learning. Instead of handing out a worksheet or math problem to start, get ready for inquiry-based learning by surprising your students. Without pre-teaching or providing context, show a short video to students, introduce a new concept like a math formula or a list of problems.

In social studies, share a primary source document. Of course, the topic should be of high interest and geared towards the appropriate grade level. Pair students with partners to examine the material and pose a question for students to solve after analyzing the content.

Use guided inquiry in stations

Learning stations are a great way for students to collaborate, examine, and learn new concepts. Inquiry stations take this idea one step further by guiding students to solve multiple problems or examine several attributes that support the overall concept being learning. Perfect for subjects like ELA, social studies or science, decide upon the subject and the concept ahead of time and prepare the stations or centers for students to rotate throughout the class period.

For example, in ELA, set up literacy stations throughout the room that task students with examining several elements of a story that is being read in class. Be sure to pose an overall question that should be answered, like, “what is the theme of the book?” Students can ask questions about and investigate topics such as character motivations, setting, mood, and more depending on the grade and level of your class. Throughout the process, students investigate story details that will lead them to determining the book’s overall theme.

Allow students open inquiry time to explore their curiosity

Especially important for younger children, allow students time to explore the interesting topics and burning questions they have about their favorite subjects. Allow time and support and watch as students use their own methods to discover the information they care about the most! If you’re uncomfortable with this method, offer more structure by choosing the subject, or giving students a list of topics to choose from during their open inquiry time.

Model different investigation methods, like concept maps and more!

It’s important that students are guided in the right direction by being given the tools they need to solve problems and answer questions. Be sure to model multiple different investigation methods, based on the subject and topic. For instance, many different types of graphic organizers, concept maps, or charts can be used to organize learned information. Show students the different tools they can use to organize their learning, so they can progress from the investigation process to drawing conclusions.

Activities to Support Inquiry-Based Learning at Home

If you’re a parent, no matter if you homeschool or just want to advance your child’s learning in addition to your child’s school experience, it’s easy to incorporate inquiry-based methods into your routine! Try the following techniques and ideas to get started:



What do you notice about...

Inquiry-based learning activities at home should be simple and focused on your child's observations. Take a topic your child is interested in, let's say for instance, rainbows. Ask your child what he or she notices about rainbows and ask him or her to make one using play dough or colorful pipe cleaners. Ask your child what he or she wonders about rainbows and use the answer as the catalyst for a project, such as the one below.

Bring on the projects

Project-based learning is a great way to foster inquiry because the projects completed center around the concept that kids are trying to solve. Projects are often quick and simple to complete at home, and can take many different forms, from science experiments to STEM building projects. Be sure to allow for open inquiry by taking your child's lead, exploring the concept or topic your child really wants to learn. After pinning down a question to be answered, find a project that will seek to answer it. For example, if your child wants to know how rainbows are made, explore how light is refracted using a cup of water, a flashlight, and paper.

Plan a party

Believe it or not, planning parties takes a lot of problem solving, requiring the party planner to ask many questions and make several predictions. Allow your child to help

you plan a real or fictional party or family gathering and turn it into an inquiry-based math project as an authentic way to learn and practice math skills. Encourage your child to ask questions about the supplies needed and the quantity of food to prepare based on the guest list and making assumptions about who may or may not show up.

It's clear that inquiry-based learning is here to stay and serves as a meaningful new method of learning that fosters critical thinking and problem-solving skills. Whether you're a parent or a teacher, it's easy to make the switch by exploring strategies that center around the child's questions and unique curiosities.

