CHILDREN'S SERVICES Information Sheet

BLANK LEVELS OF QUESTIONING

What are the Blank Levels of Questioning?

The Blank Levels of Questioning, sometimes known as the Language of Learning model, was developed by Blank, Rose and Berlin in 1978. Its main aim is to develop children's verbal reasoning and abstract language capabilities.

The model was established when its creators studied the language used by teachers in classrooms. They found that questions could be categorised into four different levels which are explained below. These start with basic questions, that ask for simple and concrete responses, and lead up to more complex questions that require abstract answers.

It is important that questions are pitched to children at the correct level, in order to support their understanding of the task in hand. More difficult questions can be simplified and brought down a level, or cueing techniques and strategies can be used to help the child respond. By Year 1, typically developing children should understand questions at all four levels in order to appropriately access all activities and meet curriculum expectations.

Normal Development based on Blank, Rose and Berlin [1978]:		
Level 1	Naming things	60% of 3 year olds understand level 1 & 2.
Level 2	Describing things – Answering Who? What? Where?	
Level 3	Talking about stories and events	65% of 5 year olds understand level 3 & 4.
Level 4	Solving problems and answering Why? questions	

PSI-3718C-2028-01

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The original model breaks down the more complex areas of language into four achievable steps, or levels. The Elklan programme, (McLachlan and Elks, 2012) has further analysed the model to make it more accessible and highlighted key themes, summarising 'types' of questions and directions at each level.

Teaching materials

Teaching materials

Naming

Describing

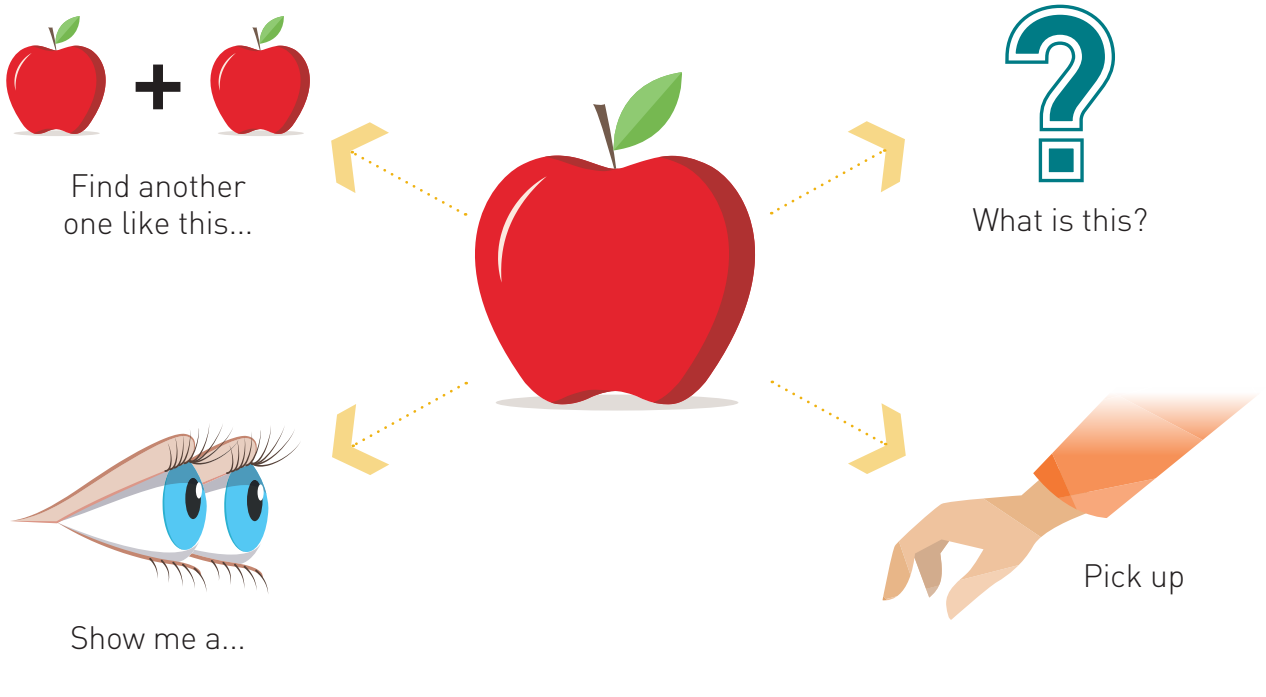
Re-Telling

Language demands

Justifying

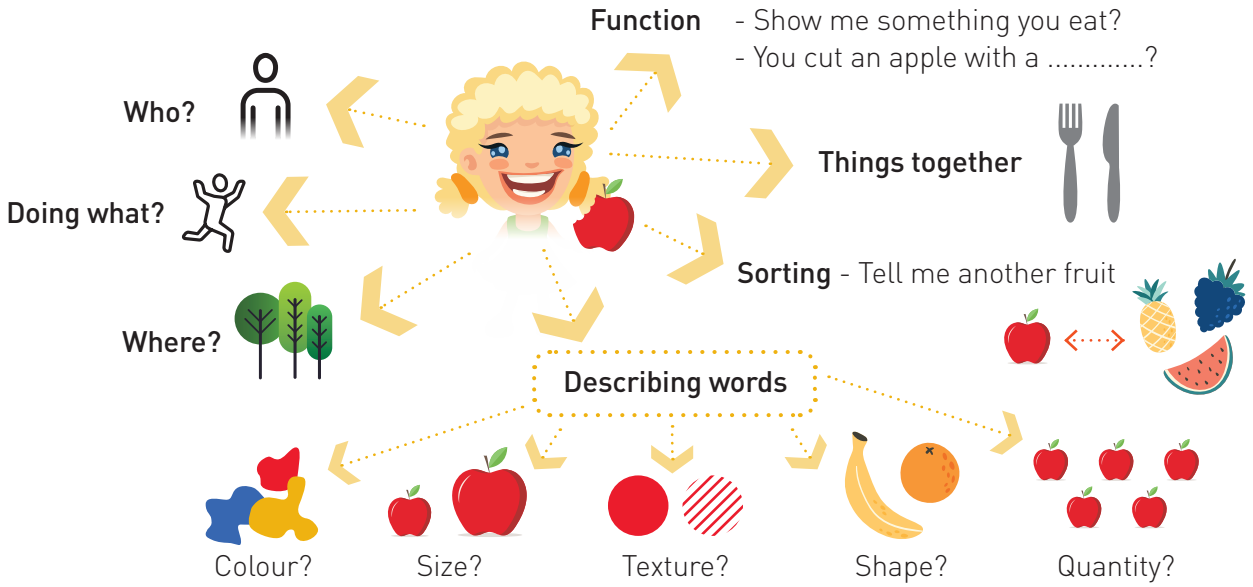
Language demands

Level 1

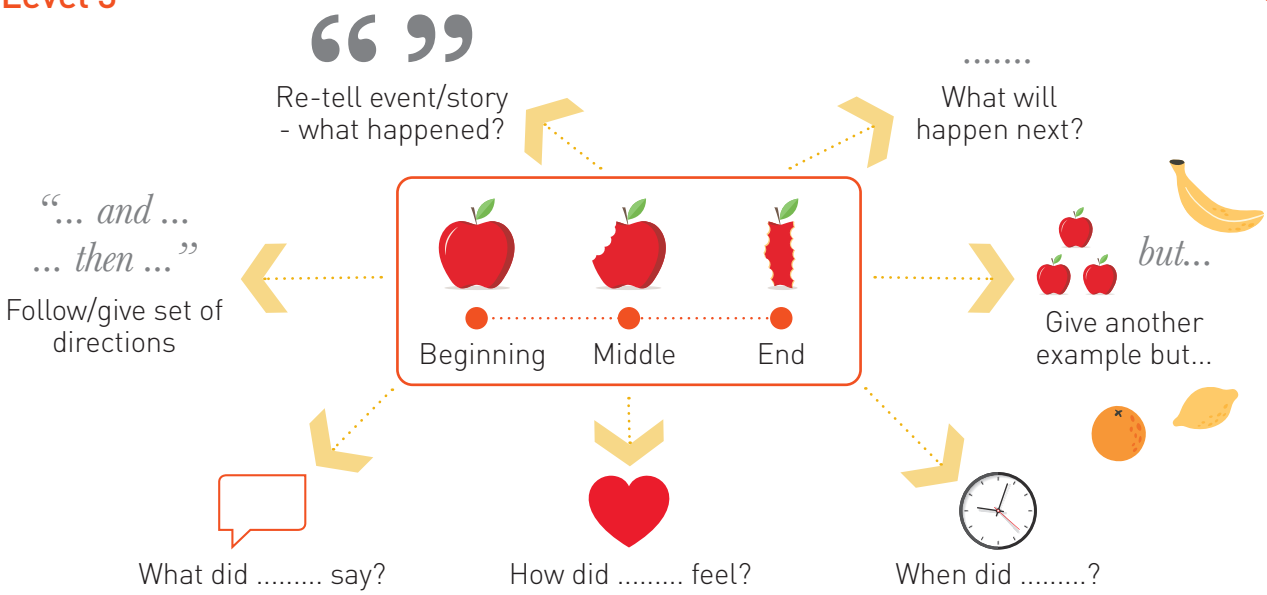


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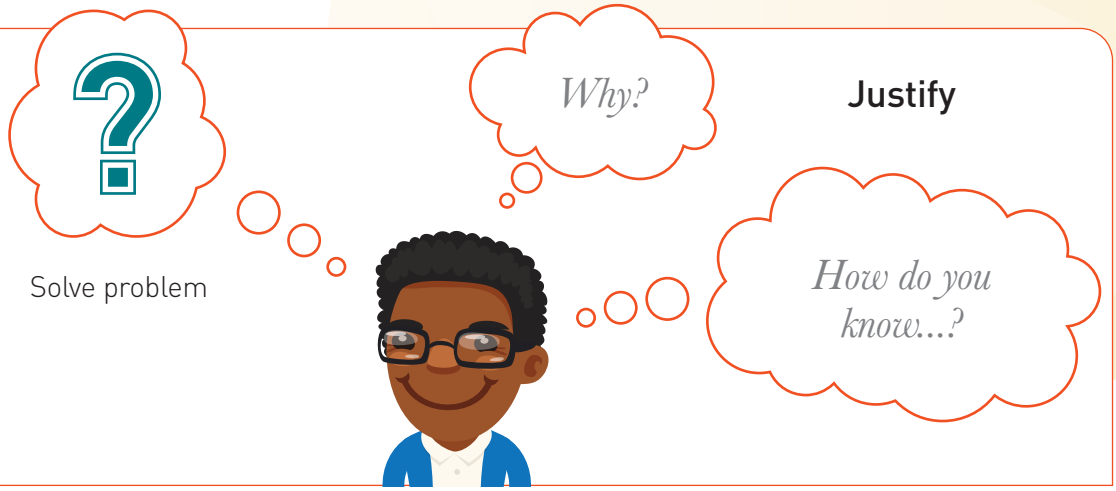
Level 2



Level 3



Level 4



The following explanation, about planting a bulb, gives examples of the different levels, as amended and highlighted in Language Builders, (McLachlan and Elks, 2012):

Level One – Matching Perception

"Right there – the answer is in front of you"
Children are required to match their immediate perception to language, and so respond to simple commands which involve matching what they are seeing to what they are hearing. The child focuses on **the whole object.**

Type of question	Example
Point to an object	Point to the bulb Pick up the watering can Give me the fork Show me the trowel
Find a matching object	Find me another bulb like this
Name an object	What is this?

Level Two – Selective Analysis of Perception

"Think and search – the answer is in front of you but you need to look for it"
Children are still required to match language on to their immediate perceptions, but they must focus more selectively on material. They are introduced to concepts, both concrete and abstract, which enable them to describe objects and determine how things are different, eg a ball can be round, hard or soft, red or blue, plain or spotty, big or small. This descriptive language helps children to understand simple stories or describe pictures. They focus on **part of the object**.

Type of question	Example
Function	Which do we dig with?
Sentence completion	You water the garden with a .....
Things that go together	What goes with fork?
Sorting and categorising Give an example (objects in sight)	What else can grow in the ground? Name another plant (object in sight)
Linguistic concepts	Find a black pot, find a big pot, find two pots
Describe a scene	What is happening?
Showing a picture or giving information and asking: Who? What? Where?	'Mum planted the bulbs in the garden' Who planted the bulbs? What did she plant? Where was Mum?

Level Three – Reordering Perception

"The author and you – the answer is not in front of you, use clues from the book and form your own answer"

At this level, children can use language to restructure and reorder their perceptions and experiences. They are expected to have an understanding of language itself and will be required to use language to talk about language. They are expected to make deductions or generalisations about a situation and to be able to make a common link in order to group information together. Children have to focus on the object **in its context.**

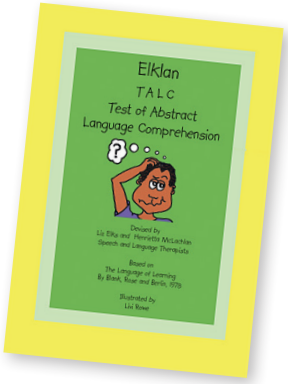
Type of question	Example
Follow a set of directions	Put the bulb in the top, add soil with the trowel and tap it down.
Give another example BUT listen to extra conditions	Find me something else you can put plants in that is not made of plastic.
Narrative/re-telling events	
Arrange pictures in a sequence	
Tell a story or describe an event	Tell me how to plant a bulb
Summarise the story in one sentence	What have you done?
Predict	What might happen next?
What does a character say?	(Looking at picture) What does Mum say?
How does a character feel?	(Looking at picture) How does Mum feel?
Define a word	What does 'sow' mean?

Level Four – Reasoning About Perception

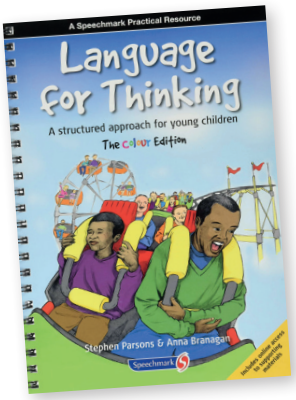
"In your head – the answer is not in front of you – it is your own opinion"
This level requires children to solve complex and abstract verbal problems. All 'why' questions are level 4. Children have to think about the relationships between objects, people and events and give reasons why things happen. They have to justify why events have occurred and why they are making a particular prediction.

Type of question	Example
Justify a prediction	Why will the bulb grow?
Identify the cause	What made the plant grow?
Solve a problem	What could you do if the plant doesn't grow?
Solve a problem from another person's point of view	What could Mum do if the plant doesn't grow?
Make an inference from an observation	How can we tell the trowel is old?
Explain why something cannot be done	Why can't we grow a plant without soil?
Select a means to a goal	What do we need to plant a bulb? (Objects not in sight)
Explain the logic of compound words	Why is this called a flower pot?

So what does the Blank Levels of Questioning look like in practice?



The framework can be used in both structured and unstructured activities; it can be used with specific children, or within a group of children with both similar and mixed capabilities. A speech and language therapist can complete an assessment to determine which level a child may be starting at eg Test of Abstract Language Comprehension (TALC).



Specific resources are available to work on, with pre-made questions and resources, eg the **Language for Thinking programme**. This programme categorises questions into Level A, B and C. However, they are linked to the types of questions outlined in the Blank Framework. This activity can be conducted in both individual and group situations.



Scenario & Question Sheet 1: Crossing the road

In the morning Lisa is going to school. Lisa walks with her little brother, Philip. They are carrying their school bags. When they get to the road they stop at the traffic lights. Lisa and Philip wait for the green man.

Level A	Level B	Level C
Where are Lisa and Philip?	Why have Lisa and Philip stopped at the crossing?	Why are Lisa and Philip crossing here and not further down the street?
Who is waiting to cross the road?	Tell me about this story using the word 'dangerous'.	Lisa's mum wants her to look after Philip on the way to school. Why?
What are Lisa and Philip waiting for?	What will Lisa and Philip do when the green man is showing?	Why must Philip and Lisa wait for the green man?
What might Philip see on the road?	What should Philip do before he crosses the road?	What should Lisa do if Philip runs out onto the road?
Who is the biggest, Philip or Lisa?	Which child is the oldest?	*Why do you think X is the oldest?
What are the children carrying?	What could be inside their bags?	What two things should Philip do if he has forgotten his lunch?

*Ask lower-level question first

Discussion starters Talk about how you get to school.
What can you do to be safe when you cross the road?

Practical task Act out crossing the road with cars, traffic lights and play figures.

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There is also a wealth of resources available on the internet. Websites such as Twinkl (www.twinkl.co.uk) have resources tailor-made to specific levels and also have activities and questions linked to specific stories. You have to pay a subscription fee to access all of the resources on Twinkl.



Birthday Party Scene

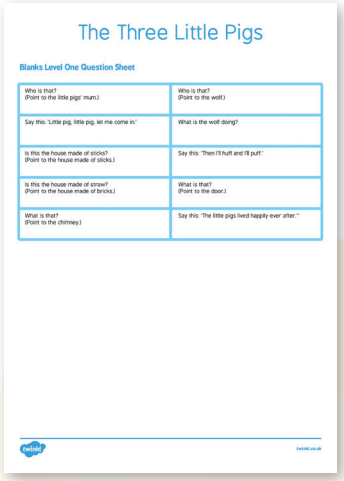
Blanks Level 3 Recording Sheet Student name: Date:

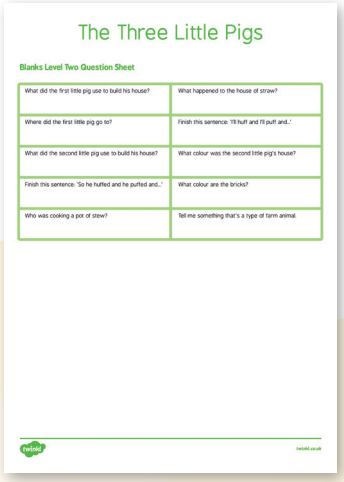
What will happen next?	How do you think he feels? (Point to the boy celebrating his birthday).
How are the jelly and the cake the same?	Find something to use with the (point to the knife).
Find the foods that are not fruit.	How do you make a sandwich?
What is a fruit salad?	How are the apple and banana the same?
What could the mum say?	What could the girl say? (Point to one to the girls).

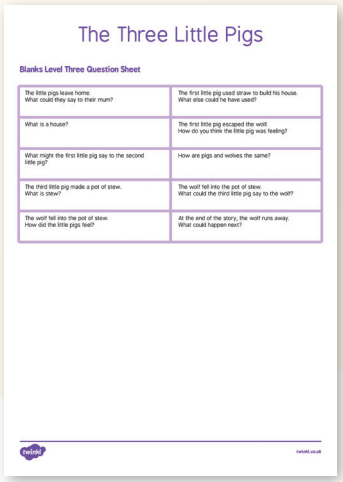
Score /10

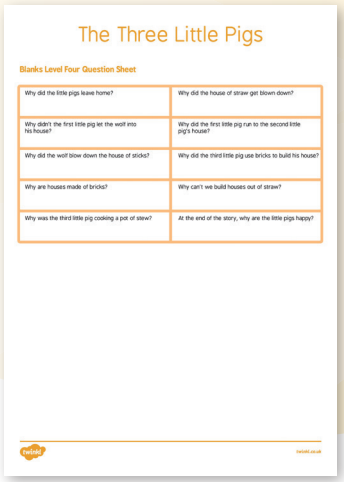
Additional Comments eg prompts used:











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In addition to structured activities, the blank levels of questioning can be applied to everyday and functional activities. The examples below apply to playing in a sandpit or having a tea party, but it is possible to use this framework and easily adapt the questions to any play situation or activity:

Sandpit Talk

Level 1

Find one like this. (hold up spade, bucket etc.)
What's this?
What colour is this?
What noise does the digger make?
Show me the bucket/truck/sifter.
What can you see?
What have you got there?
Is that a digger or a tractor?
What has David got?
What is David doing? (Pouring/digging etc.)
What am I doing with the cup?
Show me another bulldozer?
Dig a big hole for me.

Level 2

What does the sand feel like?
Who has the digger?
Find one that can help build the road.
Show me the spade that is big and red.
Wow! What is David doing?
What happened? (after sandcastle falls over)
Will you need a small bucket or a big bucket?
What else can we put the sand in?
What this is for? (Spade/bulldozer etc.)
What else can we cook with?
What will I do with this one?

Level 3

Find one I can use with the sifter.
Which one will we bake the cake in?
What do we need to do next?
What can David say if he wants your bucket?
Fill up the bucket then pour the water in the hole.
How did you make the mud pie?
Which one is the best bucket?
How are the digger and the tractor the same?
Where do all the trucks go? (during tidy-up time)
Find one you can't dig with?
Find something that can dig but is not a spade.
Tell me about the dump truck. (describing)
What will happen next?
What are all the things you've made?

Level 4

What will happen if we pour water in?
What will happen if we dig a really big hole?
If you were the truck driver what would you do?
Why did you pick that spade?
Why did that happen?
How will we know if the hole is deep enough?
How can the truck get to the other side of the hole?
Why can't David have all the spades?
Why do you like that one?
What could you do if the truck fell in the hole?
How will we know if the mud pie is cooked?
What will we do if the sand gets stuck in the bucket?
Why do we need to use that?
Why is this called a dump truck?

Tea Party Talk

Level 1

Find one like this. (cup, knife etc.)
What's this?
What colour/shape is that?
Is this a jug or a teapot?
What's in the saucepan?
What are you making/using/doing?
Show me the glass/saucer.
What can you see?
What has David got?
What is David doing? (Stirring/pouring/cooking etc.)
What am I doing with the teapot?
Show me another fork.
One part instructions eg pour the tea.

Level 2

Which one can you drink from?
Where are the plates?
Who has the teapot?
Where is the blue sugar bowl?
Find one that you can stir the spaghetti with.
Show me the saucepan that is small and blue.
What other things could we cook?
What happened? (eg if the milk jug tips over)
What else can we drink?
What this is for? (Sink/microwave etc.)
How is the fork different from the knife?
What will I do with this one?
Find one that can mash the potatoes.
How many forks are there?

Level 3

What goes in the cake first?
Find one that I can drink out of that is not a cup.
Which one tastes best?
What else goes into the cake?
What could we put in the oven?
How did you make that dinner?
Find me a knife that's not blue.
Stir the cake then put it in the oven.
What do we need to do next?
What can David say if he wants to wash up?
How are the cup and the glass the same?
Where do all the things go? (during pack up time)
What are all the things you've made?
Tell me about a teapot. (describe the parts and how it looks)

Level 4

Why can't we touch the hot oven?
What will happen if I drop the cup?
What will happen if the tea goes cold?
What will happen if we burn the biscuits?
Why can't we put the hot tea in the glass?
How did the tea get on the table?
Why did that happen?
How will we know when the dinner is cooked?
How did you make that pattern?
How would you feel if the dinner spilt on the floor?
If you were cooking the dinner what would you make?
Why is this called a teapot?
Why does the saucepan have a handle?
Why do we need to wash up?
Why do we need to use that?

Cueing Techniques

In addition to moving down a level if the questions are too tricky, there are different ways you can help. The following techniques will help to scaffold children's understanding and should be gradually reduced as a child's understanding improves:

- **Give processing time:** make sure the child has enough time to respond to the question.
- **Focus attention:** make sure the child is looking at you and listening to your request.
- **Repeat:** repeat the question again.
- **Simplify:** break your request down into parts or make the words simpler.
- **Focus on the feature:** help the child focus on specific objects by drawing their attention to relevant parts of an object/picture/story.
- **Forced alternatives/choices:** give the child two choices, eg is he running or jumping?
- **Sound cues:** give the first sound of the answer.
- **Gesture:** use gesture to help the child understand or cue them in to the correct answer, eg point to a certain part of a picture.
- **Rephrase:** repeat the request in a different way
- **Sentence completion:** give the answer sentence for the child to complete, eg 'what colour is it?' "It is ....."
- **Demonstration:** show the answer without talking and then ask again, eg 'what would happen if we put water in this broken cup?' and then demonstrate an answer through gesture.
- **Experience the concept:** help the child to experience the answer, eg 'how does it feel? Touch it.'
- **Relate to the unknown:** help child to relate the request to previous experiences, eg "The spaghetti is hard. How will it feel after it's cooked? Remember when we cooked potatoes the other day? How did they feel?".

The link between Blank and Behaviour Management and Emotional Regulation

The Blank model has important implications for the management of behaviour. It is not uncommon to find that children with low language capabilities (and who are, therefore, not at Blank Level 4) are asked complex questions, ie: 'Why did you do that?' 'What should you have done instead?' This could then lead to further behavioural difficulties, as the child may have difficulty understanding situations and regulating emotions and may, therefore, not answer appropriately.

Adults working with children with lower language levels should, when dealing with behaviour incidences:

At level two:

- Tell the child clearly what happened and how their behaviour affected other people.
- Don't ask questions about why they behaved the way they did.
- Describe appropriate behaviours/reactions in short and simple sentences.
- Avoid negative statements such as 'don't run' as the child may not understand this linguistic concept yet, try 'walk please' instead.

At level three:

- Ask the child to describe what happened, what people said and how others felt.
- Don't ask them to justify their behaviour.
- State the justification, eg why they should not have done something.

At level four:

- Ask more complex questions, including the 'whys' and 'hows' but, if the child doesn't understand, **repeat the question, simplify the language and model the answer if needed.**

So what can the Blank Levels of Questioning help to do?

- Assess the types of questions and directions a child understands.
- Support adults to know when to change the way in which they ask questions.
- Support adults to modify their language to make sure the question is at an appropriate level.
- Assess a child's verbal reasoning skills.
- Ensure realistic expectations of children's understanding and what they can respond to and access.
- Develop a child's reasoning skills by working on the next level up from where they are at the moment.
- Support learning across different curriculum areas and activities.
- Manage issues of discipline and understanding of social situations more effectively.

Ideas for activities at each level of the Blank Framework:



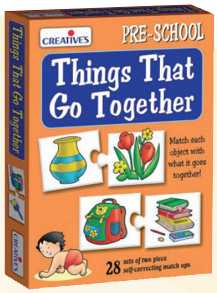
Level 1 - Naming:

1. **Feely bag of objects:** take turns to take one out of the bag and label it, (this could be linked to topics in class or different groups/categories, eg animals or food).
2. **Object identification:** have a row of toys, objects or photos – get the child to point to or pick up one of them.
3. **Four corners game:** you could also make this more fun and active, eg jump on the ....., or have the items in different areas of the room and ask the child or children to 'go to the .....'

Level 2 - Describing:



1. **Question words:** Who? What doing? Where? Use of structured programmes such as Colourful Semantics – describing verb pictures or photos (eg of curriculum vocabulary or general functional vocabulary depending on priorities for the specific child).
2. **Photos:** show the child photos of themselves, or people they know, doing things and ask them to describe what is happening eg "Mummy is sleeping!" or "Mrs Smith is reading. Again, this can be linked to visual support programmes such as Colourful Semantics if needed.
3. **Ask lots of questions when out and about:** focus on who?/what doing?/ where? questions for this level.
4. **Understanding function:** have lots of different toy objects out, eg spoon, bed, clothes, food, soap/flannel, car, and ask the child 'show me the one we drive/eat with/wash with etc.'.
5. **Things that go together:** there are lots of simple games available (see picture) but you could also use everyday objects, eg knife and fork, bed and blanket, soap and flannel, cup and juice etc. and ask the child to sort out which ones go together and put them in pairs, or have all objects out and ask 'which one goes with the .....?' and the child needs to find it.
6. **Categories:** you can use objects or pictures of items in the category you are working on, ask: 'can you put all the animals here and all the food here?' (you can have boxes for each group or just piles.) Start with simple and familiar categories, eg food/animals/transport and then work up to trickier categories or subcategories, eg farm/zoo animals, fruit/ vegetables, healthy/unhealthy food, things that fly/things on the ground/ things in the water etc.





7. **Linguistic concepts:** Barrier games: small group work whereby children have to follow a set of instructions and then see if their answers match at the end (this could be linked to colour, size or attribute). This programme could be provided by your SLT or school, and similar resources are also available online on websites such as Twinkl.
8. **Work on concepts within story books/activities:** when out and about, eg in PE: find me the blue ball, at lunchtime: use the big plate, in the supermarket: which fruit is yellow?

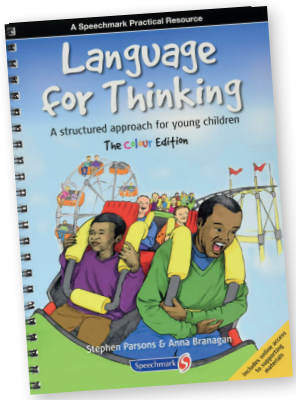
Level 3 - Re-telling:

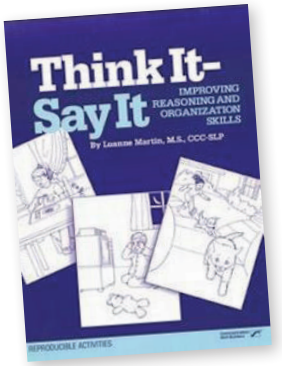
1. **Following longer instructions:** barrier games, sequence of commands in class, eg put your book away, get your PE bag then sit at the table.
2. **Understanding 'negatives':** eg 'find me something that is not .....'. You could do this with toys eg have a row of animals with one food item and ask 'find me the one that is not an animal'. Gradually reduce the visual support until the child can generate information independently eg 'can you tell me the name of an animal that is not a horse?'
3. **Sequencing**: start with 2-3 pictures and build up – you could use resources available on websites such as Twinkl, or that can be provided by SALT team.
4. You could take photos of your child doing a routine, such as making a sandwich, getting dressed etc. and ask them to put the pictures in the right order.
5. T**ell a story/summarise the story:** ask the child to look at a set of pictures and tell you what is happening (you may need to model initially and then reduce the level of support they need).
6. **Early prediction skills:** what might happen next? Using pictures/stories/real life situations. You might need to give choices initially, eg do you think the little girl will go to bed or have her dinner next?
7. **Super Duper board games**, eg 'Tell me how to...' and 'Emotions & feelings'
8. **How does a character feel?** Using story books/pictures etc. Resources from SLT team such as 'Why? Because...' and also introducing programmes such as Zones of Regulation can begin to support understanding of emotions both in others and in the children themselves.
9. **Define a word:** what does ..... mean? Show the child a range of objects or photos. These could be linked to current class topics and used as vocabulary support exercise/pre-teaching tools. Start with fewer choices to begin with and then build up as their confidence grows.



Level 4 - Justifying:

1. **Structured programmes:** Language for Thinking, Think it! Say it, Twinkl resources.

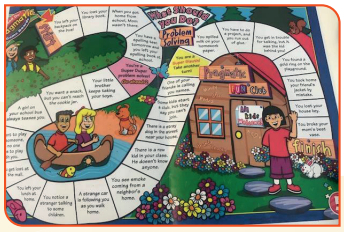




2. **Comic Strip Conversations:** these explore a child's understanding of a social interaction. It involves drawing stick people with speech bubbles (to show what they said) and thought bubbles (to show what they may have thought) and can assist with problem solving and seeing things from another person's point of view.



3. **Board games and activities for pragmatic skills:** eg Pragmatic board games from Super Duper publications.
4. **You could also make up your own:** for problem solving, think of lots of different situations for a certain topic. What would you do if .....? eg you broke a toy, you forgot your homework, you're late for school, your friend is mean to you etc. Have all of these written down on cards and ask the child to choose them from a bag.



5. **Justifying a decision:** Semantic links: why does ..... go with .....?
6. **Inference:** Mr Goodguess, emotions: why does ..... make you sad? (linked to Zones of Regulation).

