



## why is the sky blue?

And why *aren't* you there yet? When kids graduate from asking “Why?” to posing **questions** that stump you, rely on these answers.

When your child is born, you ask a million questions: “Which stroller is best?” “Where the heck is that pacifier?” Then, seemingly in record time, your tot is walking and talking, and *she* is the one with the questions: “Why do I have freckles?” “Where do babies come from?” Answering her often requires quick thinking about complicated subjects and a little bit of creativity. But this rundown of common stumpers and answers should satisfy kids of all ages. It will help you give a better retort than “Because I said so.” Just hurry up—before your sleuthing kids find out that you don’t know everything.

written by  
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photographs by  
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## tip

Explaining where babies come from can be tricky when you've adopted.

Operated by the National Adoption Center, [www.adoptionclubhouse.org](http://www.adoptionclubhouse.org) is a site for adopted kids ages 8 to 12.

Adoptees can chat with other adopted kids and learn about famous fellow adoptees, such as Jesse Jackson and Alonzo Mourning.



### Why do I have freckles?

**short answer:** Mom or Dad—or both—have freckles. Just as a child inherits hair and eye color from his parents, he also gets their skin type.

**long answer:** Freckles are spots of pigment in the skin that darken when exposed to the sun. To prove it to your son, photograph his forearm or face in winter and again in summer to compare the dots. If he is self-conscious, which may happen around age 11 or 12, have him read Judy Blume's *Freckle Juice* (suitable for ages nine and up; Pan Macmillan, \$8), suggests Caltha Crowe, a freckled third-grade teacher in Westport, Connecticut, who has been teaching for more than 30 years. The novel, which is about a girl who sells a potion to other kids who want freckles, "is the ultimate freckle-pride story," says Crowe. Then search for a who-has-the-most-freckles contest at local fairs or Celtic festivals, point out freckled models in magazines, and remind your child of a favorite relative who has freckles.

### Why is the sky blue?

**short answer:** Sunlight is composed of all seven colors of the rainbow, which together look white or slightly yellow. But air blocks all the colors except for blue, which is what we see, says Howie Bluestein, a professor of meteorology at the University of Okla-

homa, in Norman, and a contributor to *DragonflyTV*, a science show for kids on PBS.

**long answer:** Molecules in the atmosphere deflect most colors of light away from the earth, allowing just blue to get through, because the wavelength of blue light is shorter than the wavelengths of the other colors. On a cloudy day, there are larger particles in the atmosphere, which creates a different effect: The particles diffuse all seven colors of the spectrum, including blue, so the sky appears white or gray. During sunrise or sunset, the sun is positioned at a different angle to us, so instead of a blue sky, we see the reds, oranges, and purples that get scattered when the sun is overhead. Got all that?

### Where do babies come from?

**short answer:** Babies grow in their mommies' bellies. (Sorry, the stork is not a good idea, not even for preschoolers.) Little kids generally don't need any details about how babies get in or out of there, says Michelle Macias, M.D., a professor of pediatrics at the Medical University of South Carolina, in Charleston, and a spokesperson for the American Academy of Pediatrics. But you can point to your child's belly button and explain that that's where an umbilical cord connected her to Mommy.

**long answer:** Deliver the whole story around 9 or 10, when many kids have heard about intercourse in a sex-education class and have seen plenty of kissing on television and the Internet. "You may be uncomfortable talking about sex, but this is a chance to lay the groundwork for an open and trusting relationship with your children that will continue as they start exploring their own sexuality, so it's important to be open and not to giggle or act awkward," says Macias. "Don't use cutesy words for body parts. Say 'penis' and 'vagina' just as matter-of-factly as 'arm' and 'leg,' but explain that they're not polite things to talk about with everyone." Still grasping for words? Offer a child (age 10 or older) a copy of Robie H. Harris's *It's Perfectly Normal* (Candlewick, \$10), which explains sex and puberty.

### Why do I have to eat that?

**short answer:** If your child wants to grow big and strong, he has to eat in a healthful way, says Ann Cooper, director of nutrition services for the Berkeley

Unified School District, in California, which serves nutritious meals (a sample lunch menu: chicken tamales, black beans, white and brown rice, and broccoli).

**long answer:** Because junk foods and processed foods are so appealing—and so highly marketed to kids—by middle school, you need to strengthen your sales pitch. “Put it in terms that will speak to your adolescent,” says Cooper, who’s known as the Renegade Lunch Lady and consults with schools nationwide about healthy menus. Explain to kids that colorful, leafy vegetables will help improve their eyesight, says Cooper.

### Will gum really stay in my stomach for seven years?

**short answer:** Nope. The body can’t digest gum, but small wads will pass through the digestive tract, says Jane Todaro, a pediatric gastroenterologist and an associate clinical professor of pediatrics at the University of Washington, in Seattle.

**long answer:** “Tell children that it’s not a good idea to swallow gum but that nothing bad will happen if they do accidentally swallow a piece,” Todaro says. “I’ve heard of children who have bizarre competitions to see who can swallow the most gum,” she says. “That is definitely not OK, so it’s important to explain to them that although a piece of gum won’t stay in their stomachs, swallowing large chunks could create a serious problem.”

### Are we there yet?

**short answer:** Not yet. “Obviously, the child knows you’re not there yet or you wouldn’t still be cruising down the highway,” says Tom Harris, a Laidlaw school-bus driver in Naperville, Illinois, who, in addition to daily routes, often drives children on far-off field trips and to sporting events. By asking (every 90 seconds), she is really expressing her restlessness and desire to have the journey end.

### tip

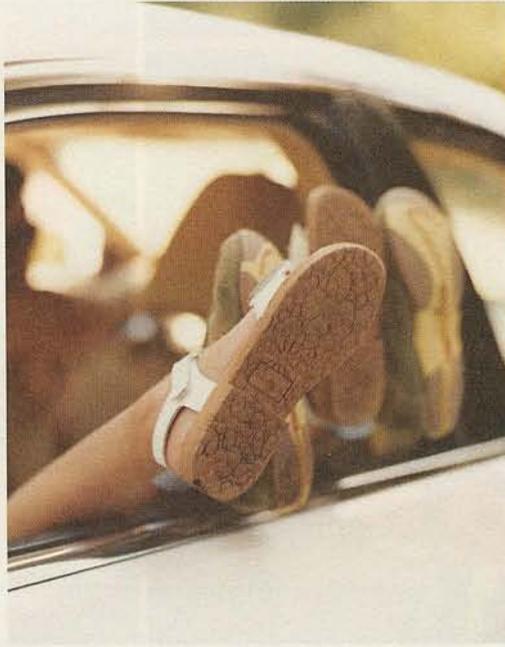
Turn the tables on your inquisitive kids. Have them log on to [www.20Q.net](http://www.20Q.net) and play 20 questions with a surprisingly omniscient online sleuth. If only all questions had yes or no answers.



tough questions **live + learn**

**long answer:** Explain the route—whether it's that you will take two more highways and a country road before you get to where you're going or that the remaining time is roughly the length of a trip to Grandma's house. Other tricks: "Ask her to help you watch out for landmarks or highway-junction signs," says Harris. Pass an older child a map, show him where you are and the location of your destination, and ask him to track your progress along the designated route. It will give him a graphic sense of how much farther you have to go and will help him develop map skills. And it will probably prevent him from asking, "Are we there yet?"—at least for a little while. (See "Bored? Play Bingo!" on page 26 for another clever way to pass time in a car.)

For answers to more questions—such as "Where do people go when they die?" and "Where do rainbows come from?"—and to share stumpers from your own kids, go to [www.realsimple.com/kidquestions](http://www.realsimple.com/kidquestions).



tip

Still stumped? To find explanations for all sorts of topics, spanning 11 comprehensive categories, log on to [www.howstuffworks.com](http://www.howstuffworks.com).



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## WEB EXCLUSIVES

### How to Answer 6 of Kids' Toughest Questions

When kids stump you with one of these six questions, you can rely on these answers



Emily Nathan

#### Why didn't I get invited to that party?

**Short Answer:** "Explain that the parents didn't have room or the money for everyone that the celebrating child wanted to invite, so some people couldn't go," says James Brush, Ph.D., a child psychologist in Cincinnati and a board member of the Ohio Psychological Association.

**Long Answer:** Around age nine, tell your daughter about the queen-bee syndrome, says Brush. "Say that girls look for ways to hurt each other socially and emotionally," he says. "By excluding someone, they're making themselves feel powerful." (Boys, Brush notes, are generally less emotional, and the short-answer explanation above is enough.) If you suspect this is an ongoing problem, look for social groups for your child, such as art clubs, sports teams, or music associations.

#### Where do people go when they die?

**Short Answer:** Until about age 9 or 10, the idea of the permanent nonexistence of someone who is important to the child is beyond his intellectual capacity, says Kyle Pruett, M.D., a clinical professor of psychiatry and nursing at the Yale University Child Study Center. "A religious person might use the opportunity to begin to teach a child about heaven and hell or reincarnation or whatever beliefs are held by the family," he says. An agnostic or a nontheist might say, "We just don't know what happens after someone dies. It's one of the great mysteries people have been thinking about ever since they've been writing down words."

**Long Answer:** As they get older, kids are more aware of death and dying. Even if they haven't lost a family member or a pet themselves, they surely have classmates who have. "These kids are trying to decide what they believe, so they need as much information about your belief system as possible to help them make their own decisions," says Pruett. Have an open discussion with your kids about your perspective on what happens after a person dies. But you don't necessarily need to present a united front. "It's OK if you say you don't know or if each parent presents a different perspective," Pruett says.

#### How do thunder and lightning work?

**Short Answer:** Lightning and thunder happen for the same reason that you sometimes get a shock after walking across a carpet. Clouds (like carpet) become charged with electricity, and then a current forms to balance out the charge. The jolt of electricity causes a bright flash, which we see as lightning, and a loud sound, thunder, which takes longer to reach us because light travels faster than sound.

**Long Answer:** "A cloud full of warmth and moisture is up there in the cold atmosphere, and it keeps rising and expanding," says Howie Bluestein, a professor of meteorology at the University of Oklahoma, in Norman, and a contributor to *DragonflyTV*, a science show for kids on PBS. All that activity charges the particles in the cloud, and when enough particles become negatively charged and enough become positively charged, a lightning flash occurs. Sometimes the lightning moves electricity within a cloud, and sometimes it moves electricity between the earth and the atmosphere — which is why trees and other tall objects can get struck by lightning. Fun trick: Estimate how far the lightning is from where you stand by timing the delay between the

lightning and the thunder. Five seconds of delay equals about one mile of distance from the lightning strike.

#### Where do rainbows come from?

**Short Answer:** “On those rare occasions when the sun is shining and it’s raining at the same time, the light shines through the raindrops, which separate it into all of its component colors,” says Bluestein. Pick up a glass prism at a science store to show your kids the same effect.

**Long Answer:** Basically, the raindrops bend the light of the sun. The seven colors in sunlight each get bent slightly differently because they’re different wavelengths. “It’s like at the beach — how longer waves travel faster than shorter ones,” says Bluestein. “Different light waves travel at different speeds, too, and get affected differently by a prism or by raindrops.” Still confused? Partially submerge a spoon in a glass of water and show your child how the water bends the light bouncing off the spoon. For more advanced experiments, pick up a copy of *Clouds in a Glass of Beer*, by Craig F. Bohren (Dover, \$13, [www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com)).

#### Why do we have to move?

**Short Answer:** Explain the advantages of the move in terms your child will understand: “It will mean a better job for Daddy” or “It’s closer to Aunt Sue.” “Be truthful and positive,” says Patty Barron, who has relocated her own family 16 times and is the director of the Youth Initiatives Department for the National Military Family Association, a nonprofit advocacy and education group for military families.

**Long Answer:** Have a heart-to-heart with your kids about the realities of the move — maybe that a new job will mean more money for the family. “Moving is much harder for middle schoolers because peers are such an important part of their lives,” says Barron. “Point out that moving is an opportunity to reinvent yourself — you don’t have any baggage and can start fresh.” Take the kids to see the new house early on so they have a sense of the surroundings. Or take them on an online virtual tour of the town and the house.

Which of your own kids' questions has stumped you? Share them by [posting a comment](#) in the [Your Words Community Area](#).

*Written by Josh Garskof  
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