

Interest Surveys: *What, Why, and How*

“I have learned from the interest inventories that every student is different. There are never two students who are the same. Each child is motivated by different things in life, different activities, and comes from different backgrounds and experiences. It is extremely important to take all of these facts in account and to look at the ‘whole’ child in order to relate to that child one on one. Once you know a little something personal about each student and show a little interest towards their personal desires and goals, they will trust you and feel special. As a result of that student feeling worthy, they will sincerely understand that as the teacher you are interested in their lives and you really do care about them as an individual, and it will reflect in their performance on their work in the classroom” (Grande).

Interest surveys are groups of questions about children’s interests, preferences, and opinions, usually given at the beginning of the year. The content of interest surveys depends on the grade doing the survey and the needs of the class and the teacher. Interest surveys generally cover questions related to children’s life at school and home, as well as their ideas about the world at large, with questions from the following six categories often appearing: books and media; school; home, family, and community; pastimes and hobbies; knowledge and imagination; and current events.

Why we use interest surveys ...

- “When given at the beginning of the year, the survey can help create a first impression of the student as created by the student” (Howard).
- At the beginning of the year, sharing interest surveys helps us build relationships, as we come to recognize what is important to individual students and find ways to connect children around new and shared interests.
- Later in the year, returning to interest surveys helps us plan engaging and motivating instruction based on children’s interests, possibly finding fresh entry points to curriculum that is difficult for children to connect to or access.
- Interest surveys help us find good independent reading books and writing topics for individual children or groups of children.

- Interest surveys provide us with an entry point for connections and conversations with individual children and families, as we can bring up a topic a child is particularly interested in learning about or a favorite book or movie as a way to get to know a child or family.

Suggestions for using interest surveys ...

Designing interest surveys: If possible, we can design our own interest surveys, which meet the needs of our particular class, often using sample questions from the six categories: books and media; school; home, family, and community; pastimes and hobbies; knowledge and imagination; and current events (see resource: Six Useful Categories For Designing Interest Surveys). Consider print and online surveys, using various survey-making tools depending on needs and available technology.

Giving interest surveys: Give interest surveys at the beginning of the year, and then periodically throughout the year as children’s interests shift and grow, encouraging children to see how their interests have changed or remained the same by comparing surveys from different points in the year.

- For the youngest children, when administering interest surveys, read aloud questions on the interest survey and give them time to draw and write the answers.

For the oldest children, encourage them to add and answer questions they wished we asked, but didn't on the survey.

- For all ages of children, model how to write survey answers that elaborate on their thinking, answers that explain the “why” behind the thought, and answers that take the form of sentences, not single words, in grades 2–5. This emphasis on elaboration in interest surveys then carries over to children's other work with reflective writing, throughout the year, as they have learned that opinions need to be explained, not just stated.

Using interest surveys to inform

instruction: Teach a sequence of lessons, in which children build relationships and begin learning how to work in partners and groups, through sharing their interest surveys with each other. Then, use what we learn from interest surveys to:

- Design instruction for the class as a whole, as well as individuals and groups, looking for ways to best connect children's interest to new learning.
- Plan conversations and conferences with individual children or families, looking for ways to best connect children's interests to getting to know them and their families.
- Foster relationships between children, particularly children who may be shy, bullied, distanced, or alienated from their classmates, and for whom common interests could provide an entry point (partner reading a book on a common interest, joining a book club on a common interest).

Using interest surveys with younger children: Interest surveys can help build relationships with younger children, as well as older children, with a few simple adaptations.

- Use fewer questions and read them aloud as well as presenting them in written form.
- Allow children to respond with drawings, or a combination of drawing and writing.
- Use some questions where children can circle a choice of images or symbols.
- Have children share their surveys with partners as soon as they write them, so they can interpret their drawings and writing for a real audience and get to know their partner.

How interest surveys support diversity, equity and inclusion: Interest surveys strengthen diversity, equity, and inclusion for three reasons:

- They allow children to represent themselves as they wish to be represented.
- They draw on and honor the funds of knowledge children bring with them from their families and communities.
- They let children recognize the diverse experiences and knowledge of their classmates.

Because interest surveys allow us to get to know children in ways that are grounded in their own lives and points of view, they have the potential to foster the growth of diversity, equity, and inclusion in our classrooms. Ultimately, it will be the thoughtfulness with which we use interest surveys that will determine how well they actually support diversity, equity, and inclusion.

Do's and Don'ts For Interest Surveys:

Paying attention to a few do's and don'ts when implementing interest surveys ensures that they are a worthwhile activity.

Do's:

- Use what we learn from interest surveys to help develop more engaging curriculum or approaches to curriculum for individual children or groups of children.
- Encourage children to appreciate and learn from each other's interests by sharing surveys and asking questions.
- Use interest surveys to help us get to know children and recognize topics they are interested in talking and learning about.

Don'ts

- Don't ask overly private or personal questions on interest surveys.
- Don't ask inequitable questions, the answer to which depend on experiences or opportunities some children may not have had.
- Don't insist that children answer all the questions on an interest survey if they do not wish to.

Citations and Further Reading

Alber, Rebecca. "Fire Up Your Class with Student Interest Surveys." *Edutopia*, www.edutopia.org/blog/fire-up-class-student-interest-surveys-rebecca-alber. Accessed 22 June 2020.

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Howard, Jaleel, et al. *No More Teaching without Positive Relationships*. Heinemann, 2020.

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