

What's in the mind?

Explore your child's ideas about other people's minds. As children get older, they find it easier to think about what is in other people's minds. Young children find it hard to do this. They cannot easily imagine that someone else can have a 'false belief'. This activity uses a simple test to explore your child's ideas about other people's minds.

You will need

Tube of Smarties; pencils; child

Activity

Before you start the activity, you'll need to empty the Smarties tube and replace the Smarties with some pencils. When you have got your 'trick' Smarties tube ready:

- Show the Smarties tube to your child and ask them 'What do you think is inside?'
- Then open the tube and tip out the pencils.
- Ask 'What are these?'
- Put the pencils back in the tube and close it again.
- Ask, 'When I first showed you the tube, all closed up like this, what did you think was inside?'
- Then ask, 'If I showed this tube to someone else, what would they think is inside?'

Under the age of about four, children tend to give the wrong answers to the last two questions. Slightly older children may get one of the answers right but not the other, while older children are quite clear about what the right answers are.



What's in the Mind?

The explanation

Younger children can't hold in mind what they first thought the tube had in it. Once they know the tube has pencils in, that knowledge dominates their thinking. It affects what they think other people will believe as well. So they can't separate their own beliefs from those of other people.

It's important for children to develop the ability to understand that other people have minds too, and that other people don't always think the same as they do. It's also important for children to find out that other people can be wrong – even grown-ups! Some children find this harder to learn than others do.

This ability, which psychologists call 'theory of mind', helps us to get along with other people. It helps us to anticipate how other people will behave, and is part of being able to empathise, to put ourselves in others' shoes. It also helps us to realise that people can sometimes do things because they have 'false beliefs' – they can misunderstand something or can get the wrong end of the stick.

One benefit of doing this activity with your child is that you'll probably also get an insight into how differently they see the world from you. When life is busy, it's easy to assume that your child's mind is just like yours – that they'll understand what you say to them, and that they share your beliefs.

But they probably don't! A child's mind is different from an adult's – they see things in different ways. And keeping in touch with what your child thinks, feels and believes can help you get on well with them.

Talking about these ideas with your child may even help them to develop their own 'theory of mind'.