

# *Children's science questions* section, Helsingin Sanomat newspaper

“**Can snails go** backwards? Even the scientist who answered this question said that although they had studied snails their whole life, they had never even thought about this”, says journalist and author Touko Kauppinen.

The Finnish Academy of Science and Letters awarded the Pro Scientia Honourable Mention for the first time in 2021. It was given to Lasten tiedekysymykset (“Children’s science questions”), a section in Helsingin Sanomat where children get to ask experts in science anything under the sun and beyond. The section editors are Kauppinen and HS science journalist Juha Merimaa.

“We humbly accept the Honourable Mention, and it feels nice that the section is appreciated. The honour naturally belongs above all to the experts – Touko and I pass on the questions and they answer them. The idea for the section came from Tuomas Kaseva who was the chief editor of the HS science section back in 2012. The section originally featured sci-

ence questions from adults, but when we tried children’s questions during the national newspaper week, they turned out to be so popular that we decided to continue with them”, says Merimaa.

The children’s questions delight not only readers and the experts answering them, but also the editors of the section.

“Was the world’s first day a Monday? The question is absurd, but also perfectly understandable in a way”, says Merimaa with a laugh.

The editorial staff do not make up any questions, but they are all sent in by children. Since the editors are spoiled for choice when choosing questions to publish, good ones are constantly left unanswered.

According to Merimaa, most work goes into finding a suitable expert and editing the answers. The person who knows the most about a topic may not necessarily be the one who can formulate the most understandable answer.

“The answers need to be concise, precise and easy to understand for a child, but

”Was the world’s  
first day a  
Monday?”

## Miksi aikuiset eivät yleensä hymyile?

Malla Suominen, 5

**EMME** itse asiassa tiedä varmasti, hymyilevätkö aikuiset vähemmän kuin lapset. On kuitenkin syytä uskoa, että näin on.

Why don't adults usually smile?

We don't actually know if adults smile less than children. There are nevertheless reasons to believe that this is the case.

this combination is not that simple to achieve. Once we were asked if an elephant can blow so hard that it would move a squirrel. Well, we know how much a squirrel weighs, but we have no measuring data about the pressure at which an elephant can blow air.”

The answers in the children’s science section need to be tightly condensed to about one thousand characters. Summing up the message is not a problem for Kauppinen, although he otherwise works with slow journalism and fiction and non-fiction.

“The key is to get to the heart of the matter and find out what is actually true. Although experts are busy, they’re more

than happy to take on these challenges from children – perhaps because they get to look at their research topics from a new perspective”, says Kauppinen.

He has found that the questions related to philosophy can be quite startling. Children can approach even basic issues from a new angle.

“Your mind jolts awake and you’re left thinking about what the person is actually asking here. For example, one such question was ‘when will we get there’. It had to be interpreted in a concrete and an abstract way at the same time. Children’s questions are often creative. Or they are basic questions that you may not come to think of when you have so many other things on

your mind. There's a small child in every adult who also gets to wonder at things in this section, and wondering is essential to humans", says Kauppinen.

There are questions that are both delightful and moving.

"I was moved when someone first asked 'why do you lose all your strength when you laugh a lot' and it was followed by the sentence 'you can never open tightly closed jar lids when you're laughing'. That second sentence put the question in context in an intriguing way", Kauppinen recalls.

He also enjoys the feedback that is actively sent by both children and adults. Finns have clearly welcomed the section with open arms.

"To me, the section is a combination of creativity and knowledge. We dive head-

long into things, ask a question and start to break it down. When you get to turn a question over with an expert, a vast field of knowledge opens up in front of you. One small question can end up being quite a big one", says Kauppinen.

Merimaa points out that scientific research is a fundamental task of universities and is done for the good of humanity. That is why it should also be possible to share it with people. Even in a fun way.

"Naturally, I'm a science journalist so it would perhaps be strange for me to say anything else, but I firmly believe that science popularization is extremely important. And when working as a journalist is fun, it's the best job in the world, and this, if anything, is fun journalism. There's no doubt about that", says Merimaa.

Photo: Helsingin Sanomat newspaper