

Goldilocks and the Three Bears

Traditional fairy tales can be a great way to develop the skills needed for P4C with young children aged four to seven. Vivian Paley (2004), a kindergarten teacher of 38 years in the US, endorses traditional fairy tales because young children can engage with the abstract concepts embedded in these stories:

By the time the children are four they can identify and debate many of the issues hidden in these age-old plots.

Children are powerful thinkers. To build on this, they need immersion in high quality stories. They need to listen to them, re-tell them, act them out and create their own. If their teachers ask higher-order questions, they will be able to explore stories in depth and, in so doing, develop greater understanding of character, plot and scenario. The language of story combined with the language modeled by the teacher and classmates will shape children's thinking and extend their vocabulary. Teachers of young children know they have to plan for this to happen. I have taken *Goldilocks and the Three Bears* as an example of a traditional story that is ideal for P4C with 4–7 year olds.

Binary opposites

Most often, fairy tales present abstract concepts in binary opposites. Children are able to engage with such concepts because they are presented in a story that makes sense to them. In P4C, teachers can start to plan by identifying concepts in stories.

I began my own preparation by thinking about what binary opposites were embedded in the Goldilocks tale. Some of them linked to children's understanding of the physical world, for example:

big/small; hot/cold; up/down; inside/outside; animal/human; sturdy/fragile.

However, the binary opposites I was really interested in were those important ones linked to everyone's experience and always open to a variety of interpretations (in other words, they are *common, central* and *contestable*). I came up with the following:

Obedience/disobedience; respect/disrespect; starvation/gluttony; belonging/not belonging; confrontation/compromise; risk-taking/safety; giving/taking; pride/shame; friends/enemies; right/wrong; powerful/weak; fair/unfair; friend/foe; peace/war; forgiveness/blame; carefulness/carelessness; trust/suspicion; timidity/boldness; being naughty/being good.

Any of these concepts could be explored after reading the story and they may well come up in enquiries with the children.

Having thought about the concepts I planned a set of activities to help children explore the story, develop the skills they need to do P4C well and explore one set of binary opposites: naughty/good.

Activity 1: Sharing the story

Either tell the children the chosen story orally, or read a version of it to them. Tell them to take some individual time to reflect on the story, then ask them:

- *What were you thinking about when you were listening to that story?*

Ask them to share their ideas in pairs and report back to the class.

Activity 2: Thinking about the characters in the story

Ask the children to reflect on the characters in the story, then ask:

- *Were there things you liked about how the characters behaved in the story? What things were they?*
- *Were there things that you didn't like about how the characters behaved in the story? What were they?*

Children share their thoughts in pairs or small groups before feeding back to the class.

Activity 3: Binary opposite concepts: Being naughty/being good

To help children explore these concepts I devised a 'naughtimeter'. To carry out this activity you need five pictures from the story printed out for the children to see. The skipping rope is laid in a straight line and now becomes the 'naughtimeter'.

Children are asked to rank the pictures according to the degree of naughtiness they think Goldilocks displayed in the story:

Picture 1: Goldilocks going into the forest without her mother's permission.

Picture 2: Goldilocks eating the porridge.

Picture 3: Goldilocks breaking baby bear's chair.

Picture 4: Goldilocks sleeping in baby bear's bed.

Picture 5: Goldilocks running away when the bears find her in the bed.

Lay the pictures around the skipping rope and invite children to place a picture on the line. Encourage them to say, 'I'm putting this picture here because...'

Children can disagree with each other and move a picture to a different part of the line. Encourage them to say, 'I disagree with ... because...' As children decide in what order to place the pictures, they may well end up exploring the concepts of disobedience, stealing, criminal damage, invading someone's personal space and failing to face up to the consequences of our actions.

I observed a teacher trying this out with Year 1 children. The children offered all sorts of opinions and justified them with reasons. One six-year-old, moving the picture of breaking the chair below that of eating the porridge, justified the move because 'breaking the chair was an accident'. The teacher asked the children if they agreed that

accidental damage was not so bad as deliberate damage and asked them to respond by saying 'I agree with Ewan because...' or 'I disagree with Ewan because...'. Most agreed it was not so bad, and then one child raised an important issue: 'Yes, but the chair was still broken'.

Her comment led to some discussion about the outcomes of actions and their relationship to intentions. A third child said 'breaking the chair isn't as bad, as it can be mended', thus distinguishing between permanent and reparable damage. Another child suggested 'Goldilock's daddy could mend the chair'. Moving on, another child, demonstrating his understanding of cause and effect, argued that disobeying her mother was the 'most naughty' because all the other things happened as a consequence of that.

That led to some discussion about obedience and disobedience. The teacher asked: 'should we always do what we are told?' Most children seemed to think they should, but this could have been an opportunity to consider examples of occasions when it is better not to do what we are told.

Another child asked: 'was the cottage door locked or open?' The clear implication was that breaking in to the cottage was worse than just walking in through an open door. The teacher replied: 'would that make a difference to what we think about her going into the house?' Children thought it would. One child said the bears would be to blame if they left the door open.

One child argued that eating the porridge was the second most naughty thing Goldilocks did, 'because it was like stealing'. The teacher asked her: 'What if she was really hungry?' The children decided she wasn't really hungry, as she had tasted two other bowls before eating the one that was 'just right'. She had chosen to do it and that was worse than breaking the chair. Discussion continued for 20 minutes and clearly indicated how important Goldilocks' motivations and intentions were to the children when judging her behaviour.

This account of children responding to the 'naughtiometer' makes use of the important skill of ranking, which has a lot of potential for promoting the exploration of concepts. Exercises such as this are great for developing the skills the children need for philosophical enquiry. Hope you enjoy using them!