
P4C: what, why and how?

What is philosophy for children?

Philosophy for Children describes the practice of adults and young people coming together to philosophise. It is 'for' children in the sense that they will eventually appropriate the sorts of thinking they encounter in P4C sessions to use independently in their own lives. In P4C sessions you will find:

1. Teachers encouraging children to express concerns, create questions, identify inconsistencies and to reason.
2. A concern with concepts likely to be important for everyone – but sometimes elusive and contestable – that are embedded in discussions about what should be believed, done or valued. (For example: Knowledge, truth, fairness, reality, cause)
3. The use of a language of reasoning to achieve greater clarity and precision in spoken and written discourse. (For example: Assumption, reason, example, criterion, theory)

Why philosophise with children?

Through philosophising, people seek general principles to help them work out what should be believed, done and valued. In this search, many plausible but conflicting opinions can arise from individual interpretations of experience, customary opinions and differing values. When adults and children philosophise, they evaluate opinions, clarify meanings, examine justifications, identify assumptions and tackle inconsistencies that arise in dialogue. They want to come to the best answers they can but they also create new questions when they notice problems. Reflecting in this way is important in learning and throughout life. Many important questions people ask themselves are best addressed through philosophising.

- People sometimes say 'mind your own business'. But when should I think something is my business?
- Fairness suggests equal treatment but it also seems fair that rewards should be merited and so unequal?
- I want to find the truth but how will I recognise it?
- Some people say they have rights but what is a right and how do people think they got them?

We think that all adults, even if they are not philosophy specialists, should help children reflect philosophically. The P4C.COM website is dedicated to providing support for this venture.

Teachers may worry that philosophising will distract children from developing other important skills or getting good exam results. But they can be assured by relevant research that when young people philosophise, they become more self-reliant and systematic thinkers and they also achieve better results in exams. Some may also believe that pupils need a certain level of knowledge and experience or a set of stable values before they can philosophise with sufficient insight for the practice to be worthwhile. However, it is our experience that questioning supports greater understanding no matter what the base level of knowledge and experience. And children who philosophise, are more likely to want to increase their knowledge of the world around them.

How to philosophise with children

How can you help children to philosophise and do it well? Here are some fundamental principles:

- Develop a culture of philosophical encouragement
- Engage in regular dialogue about what should be believed, done and valued
- Foster better reasoning through focused activities and exercises
- Draw from the web of concepts, themes, questions and answers which have inspired people to philosophise through the ages

Here are some concepts – relevant to the various subject areas – that could be understood more fully through philosophical questioning and dialogue.

- **Literature:** love, democracy, fairness, justice, goodness, power, anger
- **Humanities/social studies:** justice, globalisation, nation, history, truth, cause, evidence, interpretation
- **Arts:** beauty, art, imagination, reproduction, real, copy, meaning
- **Religious education:** belief, faith, truth, morality, tolerance
- **Design technology:** purpose, economy, value, elegance, simplicity, effectiveness, originality
- **ICT:** knowledge, entertainment, game, reality, legality, morality
- **Citizenship:** rights, duties, justice, fairness, freedom, welfare, community, enterprise
- **Science:** science, experiment, evidence, knowledge, theory
- **PSHE:** Wellbeing, identity, choice, freedom, values

Why the 'should'? We've stressed the importance of 'regular dialogue about what should be believed, done and valued'. The word 'should' doesn't mean we recommend that children be obliged to come to a particular consensus. Rather, it means working towards answers that, on reflection, they find most cogent as individuals. A 'should question' is implied by an act of reflection: 'Yes, I have believed, done or valued such as such, but *should* I have done so? To answer that question, I will have to review my reasons, be clear about the question I am answering, allow for possible alternatives and consider criteria for evaluating the route I took.'

In addition, when people think their questions and answers are interesting, important or generally applicable, they are likely to recommend them to others even in the face of disagreement. They say not just: 'This is what I think', but 'This is what should be thought, so far as I can see, and for the following reasons'. When those with differing ideas respond in the same way there is an impetus towards dialogue, questioning and review which, in turn, help to develop the faculties of reason and judgement in children and young people..

In the rest of the document, we give advice about how to philosophise with children and direct you to helpful resources on the P4C.COM website.

How to philosophise with children: a practical guide

Develop a culture of philosophical encouragement

Developing a classroom culture of philosophical encouragement means taking a certain stance towards your pupils. These are some of the impressions you will need to create through your actions:

- I am interested in your ideas
- I will show my interest by listening and responding to you
- I am confident that you are the sort of person who can come up with relevant questions, opinions, reasons, examples, applications and comparisons.
- I will work as much as I can with your questions, understandings, interests and values
- I am working for us to create a classroom community in which we are a group of thinkers who can work through questions and answers together

Developing a culture is a bit like creating a story about your group. You will be helping the pupils see themselves as being capable of philosophising.

On the website: Every activity on the website will help you to be an encouraging teacher but there is some particularly helpful general advice on *Routines to encourage philosophising* in the *How to ...* section of the p4c.com website.

Negotiate some guidelines and aim for a community of enquiry

It's a good idea to negotiate some guidelines before you start the first session. Ask the pupils what they think should happen in a discussion that matters. They are likely to say people should listen, take turns and not insult or make fun of others. These are good starting points for your guidelines. It's also good to add something like 'give reasons, imagine examples and ask questions'. Draw attention to the guidelines regularly and, as time goes on, you can ask the pupils if they want to suggest any changes (with reasons, of course).

Community of Enquiry: You want to aim for a *community of enquiry* in which there is a feeling of mutual respect and attention giving but also a search for understanding, meaning, truth and values supported by reasons.

Starting points for philosophical dialogue

The starting point for a philosophical dialogue is an experience shared by the participants. The nature of the experience can vary. It could be:

- Reading a story, dialogue or documentary
- Looking at an image or watching a short film
- Listening to speech or music
- Pondering a question
- Taking part in an activity
- Contemplating an object

On the website: Our *P4C library* provides resources you can share with pupils. Most come with advice on how to get the most out of them. However, there is a common **set of steps** that, if followed, will

provide you and the children a with a workable framework for your philosophising. We explain them below but they are also available as a separate document in the *How to ...* section of the p4c.com website.

Steps for open dialogue

We call this an open dialogue because the use of the resource could elicit a range of possible responses and questions. In our suggestions below (steps 2 and 3), we recommend a way of getting to a question that combines pupil involvement with teacher input leading to some predictability of outcome. Alternative suggestions are available in the *How to ...* section of the p4c.com website.

It is important for the group to sit in a circle or horseshoe, not only as an aid to good listening but also to indicate that everybody's participation is equally valued.

- 1. Share the resource:** Create an experience for the group by reading, watching, listening or enacting the chosen resource material.
- 2. Establish significance:** Having shared the resource, ask pupils what they find interesting or important in it. Invite them to talk in pairs first and then tell you. Write their statements, keywords and questions on a whiteboard or flip chart. Continue until you have filled up the space or come to a point when you think there is enough to provide some choice but not so much that confusion sets in. Have a little bit of encouraging conversation about the responses but don't get too bogged down with detail at this stage.
- 3. Negotiate a question:** In each resource you will find some suggestions about key issues and possible questions. Use this, and your own judgement, to negotiate a few questions that bring together some of the pupils' responses and your own preparation. Depending on the age of the pupils, your next moves will be one or more of the following:
 - So, there is interest in X and Y. How about this as a question?
 - We could take this question as it is. How about that?
 - Let's try to write a question together. Any ideas for wording?
 - Can anyone suggest a question that takes some of these responses into account? Take a minute and see what you can come up with.

You could negotiate two or three suitable questions, then ask pupils to vote for their preference or just stick to one. There are opportunities here to articulate why the chosen question has philosophical potential. This may help pupils develop an understanding of the nature of philosophising.

- 4. Generate first thoughts:** Have pupils share their first thoughts about the question in pairs. Then ask for volunteers to address the whole class. Each speaker will choose the next one. Ask pupils to indicate they have something to say by resting a 'thumbs up' on their knee. This is less distracting for everyone than putting a hand in the air. If people feel they aren't getting noticed, suggest they raise the thumb off their knee. Don't interrupt at this stage but have a notebook on your lap so you can jot down some keywords and expressions. Use simple expressions to encourage pupils to get involved and say more: 'Go on' or 'Reason?' or 'Example?'. More tips for this step are given in the *How to ...* section of the p4c.com website. After a number of first thoughts have been expressed there will probably be a need to re-focus the discussion. You can do this in various ways. For example:

- Use the notes you made to clarify the points made and assign them to the people who raise them. ‘John’s theory was X. (Is that right John?); Ajmal’s point was Y (Is that right Ajmal?). I’d like to hear some responses.’
- Remind pupils of the main question and ask what they think now.

5. Attempt philosophical dialogue: Carry on the dialogue from your requests at the end of the last step. Continue to allow pupils to choose the next speaker or tell them you will choose the next speaker from now on. Over time try both strategies and note the advantages and disadvantages of each. We have many suggestions in the *How to ...* section of the p4c.com website for conducting a philosophical dialogue. Each session will have its own particular features but the general guidance we offer will make the involvement of pupils more likely.

6. Generate last thoughts: We are talking about last thoughts *in this session*. We don’t suggest that they are final thoughts forever. There may be other opportunities to continue with some strands of the dialogue, create new questions or focus more on key concepts. One simple strategy for generating last thoughts is to have pupils write down a few sentences or draw a picture and explain it to a partner. You could ask a few people at random to report back and then close the session. Read through some of the comments later. They will give you food for thought. More suggestions for generating last thoughts are available in the *How to ...* section of the p4c.com website.

Points out of five: You can also use this session to get an impression of children’s attitudes to the practice of P4C by using a scale of responses from 1 to 5. This is convenient as it corresponds to the number of fingers on a hand. Create a list of items you want to monitor. Take a tally of numbers of each score for each item. How many fives were shown, how many fours and so on? A suggested list follows. Some items focus on the group and some on the individual. They point to the types of thinking and acting that are particularly valued in P4C: critical, creative, caring and collaborative.

- We help each other to think well
- We give reasons and examples
- I am happy to be questioned about what I think
- We ask others what they think and why
- I notice some of the ‘big ideas’ in our discussions
- We disagree without quarrelling
- I feel I can speak if I want to
- I feel safe in this community
- I think people in this community care about me
- I am getting to know people better through listening to what they say

In this way, you gain some feedback about what the children think about the sessions and their part in them. The feedback gives you things to talk about to individuals and groups. If they are not happy to be questioned, why not? Is it possible for others to help? Could some things be changed?

Focused dialogues and activities

Sometimes it’s good to have a dialogue that is focused by the structure of an activity, a role-play, or a provocation (when the teacher pretends to hold an implausible belief that children are likely to challenge). There are plenty of resources on the p4c.com website that you can use to initiate focused dialogue. The steps to follow will be explained in each resource. Many of the activities are best done in small groups. By using focused activities you and your pupils will:

- **Gain variety:** Children like a change sometimes. A role-play or provocation can be set up to require dialogue and reason giving whilst also providing a change of atmosphere. They are often enjoyable for teachers and pupils alike. You will find role-plays and provocations in the *P4C Library* section of the p4c.com website.
- **Improve reasoning:** You might want to spend some time showing children how to use a term like *assumption*, how to imagine opposing arguments, or how to use conditional reasoning with *if...then* sentences. You will find suitable resources in the *Reasoning Activities* section of the website. Your choice of activities will depend on your assessment of the capabilities of the pupils. They will be able to reason better with support and examples from you and other pupils in the class.
- **Explore concepts:** Open dialogues often have multiple themes that pull pupils' interests and questions in different directions. Interesting ideas are expressed but you feel some concepts require further investigation or clarification. In this case, it would be appropriate - in the next session - to present pupils with an activity that helps you focus their attention on a single concept or cluster of related concepts. You will have many activities to choose from in the *Concept Activities* section of the p4c.com website. They serve the additional function of providing you with a model you can copy to construct your own.

Individual thinking and writing

Keep philosophising alive by continuing to talk to individual pupils about past and present dialogues. Ask them in passing what they think, ask if they would mind you calling on them next time in a whole-class dialogue. Ask them if they have talked to friends and family about any of the questions you have discussed together and whether they have any new questions.

Writing can be an aid to thinking. Give pupils notebooks and encourage them to write and draw their thoughts following open and focussed dialogues. You could provide pupils with prompts such as:

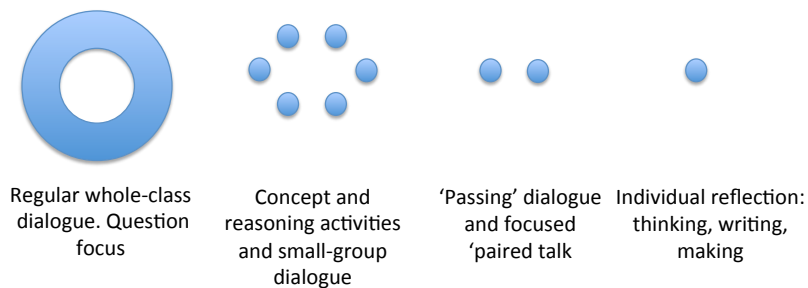
- What were the most important (or interesting or surprising) points from your reading/discussion about _____. Fill six lines or more.
- What distinct reasons would you give for agreeing or disagreeing with the claim that _____? Write five lines to explain.
- Think about and write down two questions about _____ because you would like to hear what other people think.
- Write at least four examples of _____.
- What are some of the criteria for _____? Fill in five lines or more.
- In five lines, predict what would happen if _____.
- How do you think _____ and _____ are related? Fill five lines or more.

Reading pupils' writing can give you a valuable insight into the thinking of the pupils who speak least during class discussions.

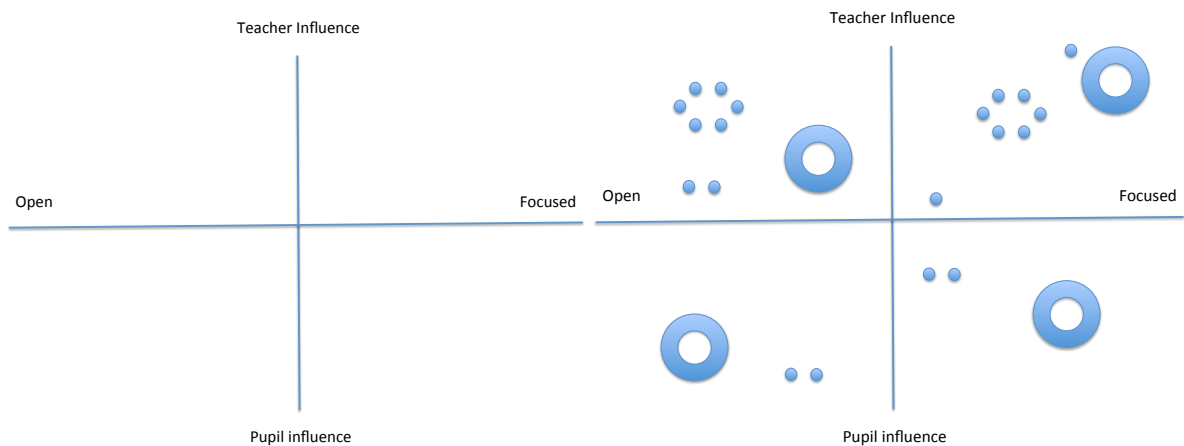
Sometimes a good strategy is to take a 'writing break' during an open dialogue. This can work to get everyone thinking, to give you the chance you collect your thoughts, or get some input from pupils who have not contributed orally.

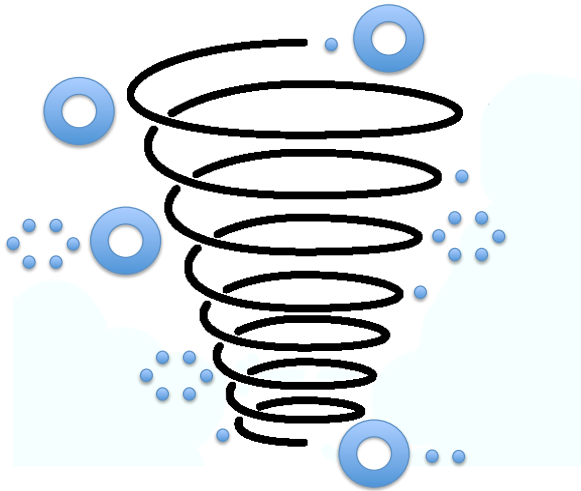
Combining open and focused activities in a series of p4c sessions

We've seen that philosophical dialogue can be done with whole classes and with smaller groups. There is also scope for individual reflection.



We can place these activities along an axis as relatively more open or more focused in the senses explained above. We can also place them along another axis as being more influenced by the teacher or more influenced by the pupils (*eg*, in terms of suggesting issues, creating questions, and directing discussion). We've combined the axes in the diagrams below. The quadrant on the right has been populated by a number of imaginary sessions. It may be useful for you to use such a quadrant as a record for your own sessions and to help you plan new ones.





A spiral curriculum: Over a sequence of sessions, you can mix up the types of activities – sometimes more open, sometimes more focused. In the first session (at the bottom of the spiral) you might have some paired talk followed by a whole-class dialogue. In between sessions you have a few short conversations with individual pupils. Then you present pupils with an activity to focus on a concept you felt was not sufficiently explored in the previous session. Pupils might follow that up with a piece of writing. You might then choose a new resource and use it to start an open dialogue. At some point, a pupil's contribution to a dialogue might remind you of an argument from an earlier session. You take the opportunity to see what others think. Do pupils still think the same way as before? Are there any new questions? Over time the scope and depth of pupils' thinking is developed.

At the p4c.com website we are working on a spiral curriculum for primary schools.