

Philosophical Conversation

In the early years

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Poor snail! It's disappointed!

Ulysses finds a snail. He brings it to me as a little treasure he found in the school's playground. Then I see him stepping on the snail and smashing it all over. George who saw Ulysses goes near and sees the smashed snail. "Poor snail", he sighs. "You must be very disappointed". As a teacher, I got involved and I asked Ulysses how he would feel if a giant stepped on Ulysses' house. Then George realizes that the snail is dead. More children come around and the following discussion takes place:

Emily: Poor snail. It didn't deserve this.

Vasiliki: You killed it without any reason.

George: Ulysses did it.

Michael: We can kill only mosquitos when they bite us. And the flies because they are disgusting.

George: So ... is the snail now dead?

Eleni: Completely...

George N: And what is this liquid? Is it snail's blood?

Vasiliki: But it is not red.

Emily: It's the snail's blood. It is different from humans' blood.

Teacher's food for thinking

Ulysses, who stepped on the snail, possibly didn't kill it on purpose. He might have thought it was a game and that the snail would not die or be injured. He might not have had a bad motive. Should the teacher draw children's attention to the consequences of an act? Would it be better if the teacher pretended that she hadn't seen? What if Ulysses felt guilty and was denounced by his classmates? Is guilt good when it is appropriate? The teacher thought it is good for children to realize that, even at a young age, each act has its own consequences. The teacher thought that children should learn to be responsible of their acts and the consequences for themselves others. For this reason, she used a hypothetical

analogy which possibly would make the child get in the snail's shoes. In this case, the snail is the victim and the child the perpetrator. In the analogy the roles are reversed. The child becomes the victim and the giant the perpetrator.

When more children were involved in the discussion, the teacher had opportunities to shed light on children's presuppositions about right and wrong. For instance, Michael seems to think it is acceptable to kill an animal for certain kinds of reasons (it bites us or it is disgusting).

Further questions and activities

Concept: Disgust

- What makes something disgusting? What are the criteria to judge whether something or someone is disgusting?
- Do I have the right to kill something disgusting?
- What is disgusting? How do we know?
- What if we humans are disgusting for someone else? Has this someone else the right to kill us?
- Can something disgusting be somebody's favorite? Can you give me examples?
- Can I be disgusting for someone else?

Further activities

Allow children to bring with them something disgusting (it can be on a picture too if the real thing is not available). Let them explain why their choice is disgusting.

List down as many disgusting things as you can. Then rate them from the most despicable to the least. Allow children to discuss their ratings and say if they agree or disagree giving arguments.

What is the most disgusting thing ever? Why?

Concepts: Consequences, motives, reason, awareness, violence

Emily and Vasiliki pointed out that the snail was dead for no reason. They felt sorry for the snail and pointed out that "it didn't hurt us". These statements that highlight concepts that could be discussed further through questions such as:

- If the snail did something to us would we have a reason to kill it?
- Could there be a good reason to kill a snail?
- Whose fault is the snail's death?

- Are we responsible for the snail's death? For which things we can be responsible?
- Can we predict the consequences of our acts? Can you think of examples of consequences we can't predict and some we can?
- Is killing and letting die the same?
- Is it my fault if I let a person die when I could have helped them?
- Is it my fault if I kill someone who asks me to do so?

Linked to Michael's idea that we are allowed to kill a mosquito if it bites there are few questions to come linked to the concepts of motives and consequences.

- If something bites me, am I right to kill it?
- If I bite someone, does he have the right to kill me?
- Is it right to think of animals in the same way as we think of people?
When is it right, when isn't it?
- Would the mosquito bite me if it knew that I am going to kill it?
Does the mosquito know that it's bite hurts me?