

Philosophical Conversation

In the early years

By Dr Sofia Nikolidaki, University of Crete, Department of Preschool Education

The Unwanted Gift

Ulysses has his birthday and the rest of the children make some nice drawings for him as a present. However, Ulysses doesn't want his gift. The children get angry with him and some of them are really sad. Children start complaining: "We spent so much time and effort to draw such nice things for you", said Emily. "We made it for you!", complained Michael. "You can't reject our presents. This makes us sad," said Helen. Ulysses listens to all these complaints and starts crying. He still doesn't want the gifts.

(Nikolidaki research log, 2018)

Teacher's food for thinking

Is it wrong to refuse a present? Most of the children think so. Here are some of their considerations:

- The effort they put in and their tiredness when making the presents
- The uniqueness of each present
- The reason for making this present ("It was for you!")
- The emotional impact on the children who felt that their presents have been rejected.

How should I deal with this problem? Surely a child has the right to refuse a present but it is a social norm to accept it for fear of hurting another's feelings or seeming inconsiderate. This is now a hard situation for Ulysses.

A gift is a form of bond between the giver and the receiver. The rejection of the gift can be interpreted as a rejection of the bond itself. Maybe this justifies the children's complaint.

There are more questions to consider. Do children make their presents because they truly want to or because this is what just what the children usually do when someone has a birthday? As a teacher, I usually encourage children to draw

something for their friend. We try to make the day special for people on their birthday – to make them feel unique. Therefore, is a present a product of care and love towards others, or is it a social haviour that children have learned?

What if children make a present only because they want to receive one from their classmate when it is their turn to get a present for their birthday? What are the motives for making a present? Are children aware of these motives? Is it a good “routine” that the I have established in the classroom? Should I let the children decide whether or not to participate in making presents? But what about unpopular children in the classroom who may not receive any presents? At the end of the day, shall we celebrate birthdays in the classroom or not? Do children need to feel special when they have their birthdays? Can they feel special any day and not have the need for a particular day? Is there a need for a special day or is it somehow socially manufactured?

What is the role of caring thinking? We usually make a present because we think that this act will give happiness to the receiver. We might think that we would also like to be treated specially when it is our birthday. We can enter to the other’s position and think walk in his/her shoes. But what if the other person doesn’t want the present? Can we still walk in his/her shoes? Can we still love the person without feeling rejected or angry because our gift was not appreciated?

We could argue that children would be more likely to show caring thinking towards the child who didn’t want the present if they knew the reason. If children knew, for instance, that Ulysses doesn’t like drawings, they might find it easier to empathize with him. They might even apologize. However, to what extent is (or should) caring thinking be expected? If we ask the receiver to give reasons for declining a present, it seems as if a present should always be accepted. Why should Ulysses have to account for something he didn’t choose to happen?

What if the child who rejected the present expressed his own truth? He said what came to his mind and what seemed true to him. He simply didn’t want a present and preferred to state that clearly instead of receiving his gift politely and then throwing it away later when no-one can see him do it. What is more worthy? What should the child do? Is being polite in this way a form of being hypocritical? Truth is still truth even if it seems rude or inconvenient.

What is the giver’s role? Why do we give presents? If a present is not accepted, is this because of the giver, the receiver or the gift itself? What are the giver’s rights when giving a present and what are his/her own responsibilities? Shall we develop a form of resilience in the givers, in case their presents are not accepted?

As a teacher watching this incident taking place, I didn't intervene. I was thinking all the above and I appreciated the power of this birthday routine. Accepting a present is a habit. Rejecting a present seems unfamiliar and strange to us. I gave the presents to the parent of the child but informed him that his son didn't want them so the parent shouldn't push the child to accept it. I wonder whether I gave this present to the parents to prove that our kindergarten cares for children's special days...!

Further questions and activities

Concept: Yes and No

- When *can* I say no? When *should* I say no? Think of situations. Are they the same for each question?
- Can something be a "yes" and "no" at the same time?
- Which of these sentences do you agree with?
 - All yesses and noes last forever.
 - Some yesses and noes last forever.
 - No yesses and noes last forever.
 - Most yesses and noes last forever.
 - Most yesses and noes do not last forever.

Yes, or no?

In this table, children are asked to answer the questions and give reasons. The "?" refers to cases that cannot be answered with a clear "yes" or "no". Ask children to explain "why?" There is no need for the teacher to use all the examples from the table. Each statement could be used separately and lead to a philosophical discussion or follow up activities according to children's interest.

	Yes	No	?
Eat a huge piece of cake			
Allow someone strange to touch me underneath my underwear			
Allow someone I know to touch me underneath my underwear			
Allow a stranger to give me a present			

Allow a friend to give me a present			
Allow someone to take me for a walk			
Buy the most expensive toy			
Play with kids I don't know in the school's playground			
Lie to someone I don't know			
Lie to someone I know			
Fix an electrical outlet at home without parental surveillance			

Think of cases that you can always answer with a “yes”.

.....

Think of cases that you respond with a “no”.

.....

Concept: Gift

- Do presents give you pleasure? Is there a present that doesn't make you happy?
- Can a present put pressure on us?
- Do I have the right to deny a present?
- What makes a present valuable to you?
- What makes something a present?
- What is a present?
- What is a good present? What makes something a good present?
- What is a bad present? What makes something a bad present?
- Why would someone not like a present?
- Are some presents better than others? What makes them better?
- Is it OK to give a gift you didn't want to someone else?

Good and bad presents

The children are encouraged to answer whether the following items could be given as presents. Encourage them to disagree and argue. The “?” stands for cases

where a “yes” or “no” answer cannot be clearly given. Each case could lead to a philosophical discussion if children show their interest. Finally, children are invited to think creatively and fill the table with their own examples. Then they can challenge classmates to answer.

	Yes	No	?
A human			
A cockroach			
A baby			
A half-eaten cake			
A sack of potatoes			
A statue taken from a museum			
Love in a box			
Two dreams			
A walk to the park			
Ten Commandments			
A punch			
Superman			
A magic force			
Someone’s presence			
Someone’s love			
Mother’s love			
A smile			

What is a present worth?

Something might cost a lot of money and be worth a lot to someone. Something might be worth a lot but not cost very much. For each item in the list, think of three situations or little story-starters in which the item will be worth “a lot”, “a little” or “nothing” to someone.

Example, using the item “A bottle of water”.

Situation one: Someone is walking across a desert with only one bottle of water.

Situation two: Someone has finished a meal and sips from a glass of water.

Situation three: I can’t think of a situation where a bottle of water would be worth nothing.

A second stage would be to ask children to give reasons for their choices.

	A lot	A little	Nothing
A kiss			
A golden necklace			
A journey in the universe with a rocket			
A painting			
A hug			
A book			
A wizard's wing			
A splash in the sea			
A bottle of water			
A palace			
My love			
My presence			

Make a list of unwanted presents that you have received for birthdays or during Christmas time. Then make a list of possible excuses for refusing each one.

Polite excuses	Funny excuses	Rude excuses	Creative excuses
1.			
2.			
3.			
4.			
5.			

Use your imagination

- Think of ways an unwanted gift can be transformed to a wanted one.
- Write the story of an unwanted present from the present's point of view!

The donation and re-gift corner

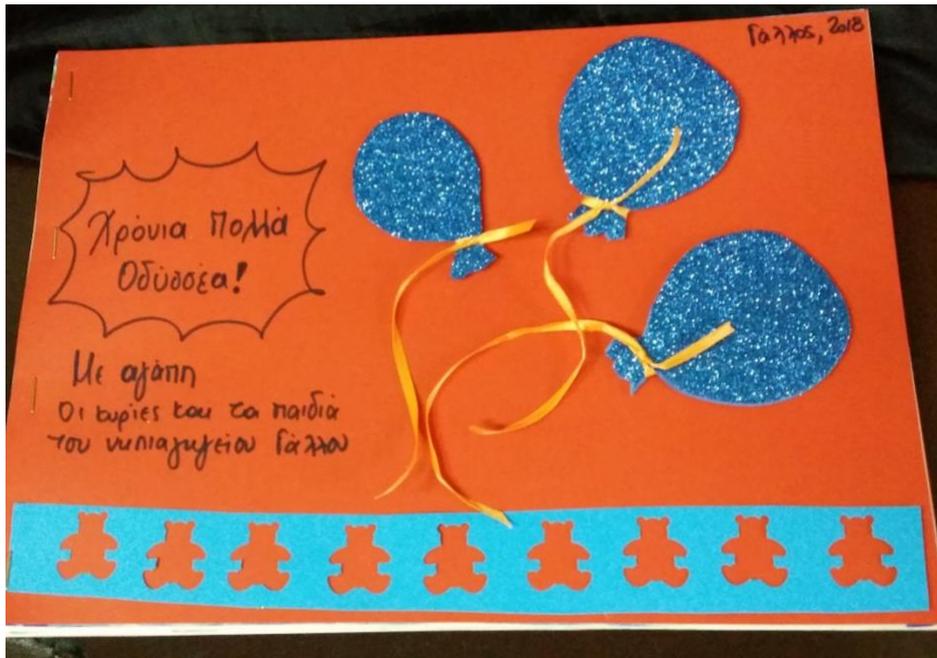
An unwanted gift might be a treasure for someone else. Create a corner in the kindergarten school and allow children to bring their unwanted gifts. Make children feel welcome to leave their stuff there and allow them to get anything that could be their treasure! Discuss how the same present can be unwanted for someone and a treasure for someone else. You could also search for people that would love to receive these presents.

Some of the children's picture gifts

Below, you will find some of the children's drawings that gave as presents to Ulysses along with the cover made by the teacher.

This is the methodology I often use:

- Children are encouraged to draw their pictures.
- When they have finished, each child comes to the teacher and makes a wish for the birthday child!
- Each child explains what their gift is and why it was chosen.
- The teacher writes down each child's answers.
- Before wrapping all the drawings together the children present to the plenary their gifts for the birthday child.
- Children's drawings (presents) often can be used for further philosophical discussion with children either in pairs (the teacher and each child) or in plenary (in case there is a picture made by a child that could be discussed by all the children). Below, there are some examples of potential questions the teacher could ask.

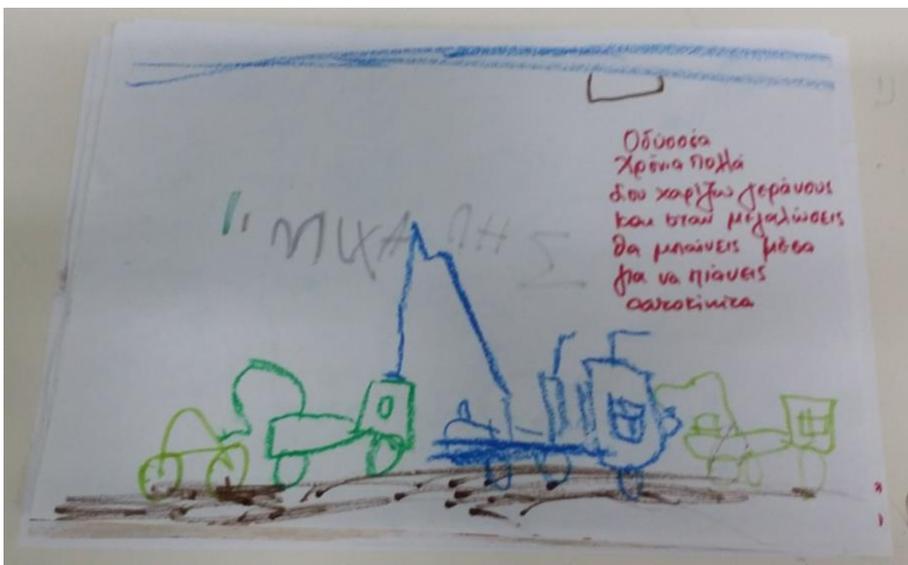


Picture 1: The cover for the Album of the children's drawings given as a birthday present.



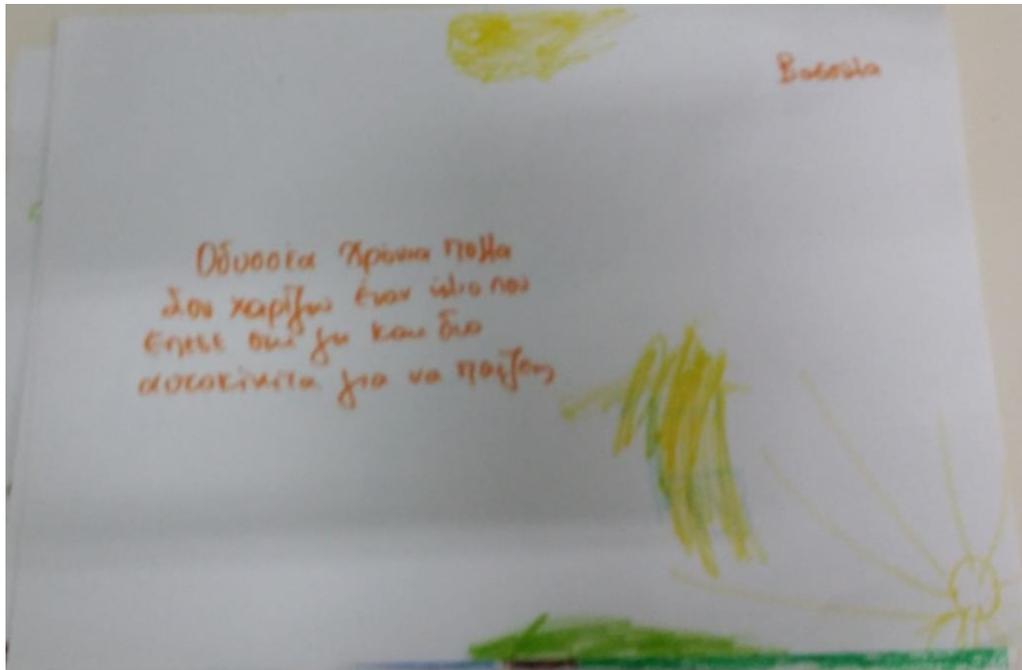
Picture 2: Message from Vasiliki: Happy birthday Ulysses. I give you as a present a toy shark to play with. Potential questions:

- What if the toy shark converted into a real shark? Would it be still a good present?



Picture 3: Happy Birthday Ulysses! I give you tow trucks to pick the cars when you get older.

(Ulysses likes the tow trucks but can we be sure he will still like them when he gets older?)



Picture 4: Happy birthday Ulysses. I give you a fallen sun and two yellow cars to play with. Potential questions:

- Can the sun fall?
- What if the sun falls? What could happen?
- Can you think of things that never fall? What are these things? Why do they not fall?



Picture 5: Happy birthday Ulysses. This is a heart and inside it there is a party! Potential questions:

- Can you find a party inside the heart?
- What does this party look like?