

How to help Early Years children become “Becausers”

Being an Early Years teacher in a school that does P4C can be tough. It’s easy to be envious of the in-depth discussions in classes higher up the school. What can you do when some of the children you teach can’t form questions yet? Or say random things that don’t link to the subject?

There’s one thing you can do that makes all the difference

At the heart of philosophical discussion is the skill of giving reasons for answers. But even the concept of a reason is difficult for very young children to grasp. So start by using the language you want them to use, and ask, “Who’s got a because?”

If you can turn your children into “Becausers”, they’ll be P4C-ready

They’ll be used to giving and hearing reasons, agreeing and disagreeing. They’ll be used to connecting what they say with the subject of the discussion.

And that’s a big success. One of the hardest things about discussions in Early Years is that the children say random things. You ask, “Would you rather be x or y?” and Billy tells you his gerbil has just had babies. So how can you combat randomness and focus their attention on the stimulus?

Make the stimulus unmissable

Huge pictures displayed on an interactive whiteboard are best. If you just ask a question, the words are quickly forgotten. A printed picture or a storybook are better because the children have something to focus on. But use a whiteboard, and the picture you are talking about is the biggest and most attention-grabbing thing in the room. Pictures of animals, places, meals, activities and toys work well. You can see some examples in the attached PPT.

Once you’ve got your pictures, there are three “Becausing Games” to play

Game #1 – Like, don’t like

Game #2 – Same, different

Game #3 – Better, worse

Let’s look in detail at each game.

Game #1 – Like, don’t like

Likes and dislikes are among the earliest values children express. They’re entirely personal, and they don’t involve much decision making. Simply show the picture and ask the children if they like it or don’t like it. Then ask “Why?” or “Who’s got a because?” and the children can take it in turns to give their “becausees”.

The game works even for children with very limited language or with English as an Additional Language. They can physically point to parts of the picture and give their reasons that way, which is ideal for teaching new words. That’s why good quality images with lots of detail are important.

How should you choose images?

You need a mix. Some that most children will like, some that most will not like, and some that Find the Fence and will divide opinion. See the fluffy dog with the dangerous looking teeth on slide 6. You may be able to use some of the images again in the next game.

Game #2 – Same, different

For this game, you need images in pairs. They need to be similar in some ways and different in others. For example, you might have a photo of a zebra and another of a horse. Or pictures of the same child at different ages. Or a house before and after painting.

The first time you play the game, ask the children what makes the pictures the same. Once again, ask for “because”. After you’ve got some because for “same”, get some because for “different”.

Once you’ve played the game a few times, invite reasons for both sides at once. The children then have to decide if they want to say, “same because” or “different because”. That choice is the beginning of the skill of “I agree”, “I disagree”.

What kinds of sameness and difference work?

Things can be the same or different in age, gender, size, colour, number of legs, emotion, what they are made of, where they are placed, type of thing (both dogs but different colours), real or pretend, nice or nasty, time of day. As well as getting them becauseing, you’re reinforcing a whole range of concepts that help them understand the world.

In the first game “Like or Don’t Like”, the children expressed an attitude about one thing. In “Same or different”, they compared two things. In the next game, they’ll put attitudes and comparison together.

Game #3 – Better, worse

For this game, you need pairs of images again. But this time, you need to show one image first, and then show the other and ask get because for “better?” or “worse?”.

So you might start with a picture of an old fashioned car with no roof, and then show a picture of a modern car. As with Like or Don’t Like, you need a mix. Some where most will say “better”, some where most will say “worse”, and some that Find the Fence.

Now that you’ve got children with different opinions about what’s worse or better, you’re getting close to the familiar “Would you rather...” questions made popular by John Burlingham’s book of that name.

What not just start with “Would you rather...” activities?

Questions like, “Would you rather be chased by a bear or kissed by a monkey?” are great fun and can get children very engaged. But while it seems very light and easy, there’s a lot going on in such a choice. You have to hold two possibilities in your head, think of reasons for each one and decide which way to go.

So by all means use Would You Rather games, but only as part of your toolkit for turning your children into P4C-ready Beausers.