

Why does it take so long to make friends, and so quickly to make enemies? What is pure happiness? Why am I here, and what is my purpose in life? Why do adults often pretend that nothing bad is happening in the world? What is my superpower? These are just some examples of real questions that children in BC have raised when given the space to formulate a question close to their heart. All of these questions, be it regarding identity, time, purpose or values, are existential questions that go to the core of what it means to be human and live in an increasingly complex world. These are fundamental questions that go far beyond acquiring competences, skills or knowledge. Yet, where and when do we give children the space to speak about these topics? How do we prepare children for a world that is yet to come? How can we support children to become ‘professional human beings’?

An inquiry-based pedagogy that facilitates dialogue among children gives the children the space and tools to develop their own questions. It allows them to become aware of how they feel about those questions. It encourages them to think further together with others, listen and understand different points of view, give reasons for what they say and collaborate in building arguments.

This is particularly important in a world where substance use is common – people use psychoactive substance to get going in the morning, to unwind at the end of a busy day, to celebrate a special occasion – children and youth need to learn how to function in this human environment. This involves much more than acquiring knowledge about drugs and their potential impacts. It involves exploring deeper questions about human relationships with these psychoactive substances as well as developing the capacity to survive and thrive in a world where people use drugs.

### Teaching Philosophical Thinking to Children

*“I cannot teach anybody anything. I can only make them think.” ~Socrates*

Four hundred years ago, the French writer, Michel de Montaigne, probed: “since philosophy is the art which teaches us how to live and since children need to learn it as much as we do at other ages, why do we not instruct them in it?”

However, the rapid expansion of discipline-specific information and skills has led to a heated debate on what children ought to learn (and what they ought to learn first). Forty years ago, Max Weber criticized education systems for pitting means against ends and for focusing on efficiency and economic outcomes. Weber suggested we need to ask the question “why” in a much broader sense before we decide about ‘what’ to teach.

It seems that teaching philosophy is more important than ever. Not only has the amount and complexity of knowledge expanded, but our society is becoming increasingly diverse. This is why children need to be equipped with the skills and communicative practices to think for themselves. By doing philosophical inquiry with children early in life, we can help them make better sense of the conflicting messages they are bombarded with every day. We can help them make better decisions when they are faced with new and challenging situations and more effectively communicate and learn when differences of opinion are being expressed.

Teaching philosophical inquiry to children is not teaching them what philosophers have said or believed. It need not involve ever mentioning Socrates, Plato or Aristotle by name. Lipman reminds us that the aim “is not to turn children into philosophers or decision-makers, but to help them become more thoughtful, more reflective, more considerate and more reasonable individuals”

## Using Philosophical Inquiry in Drug Education

*“Children must be taught how to think, not what to think.” ~Margaret Mead*

Most young people growing up in British Columbia use a variety of psychoactive substances. According to the Adolescent Health Survey, 72% of 18 year-olds have tried alcohol. Almost all will have used caffeine, many will have tried cannabis and some will have experimented with other drugs. Children and youth try drugs for different reasons. The most common reason (60% of males, 69% of females) is in order to have fun. A very small number (3% of males, 4% of females) report feeling pressured to use. Other more common reasons include experimentation or to deal with stress or negative emotions.

Children and youth are exposed to conflicting attitudes towards drug use. Advertisements extol the benefits, pop culture idols, peers, parents and other adults provide mixed examples. How are children expected to find a balance? They are asked to respect others. They are told to shun certain behaviours. But some of those they are to respect engage in those behaviours themselves. This is why it is important that children develop the skills and habits of thinking for themselves. Learning to seek understanding by critically and empathically engaging other points of views and clearly communicating one’s own perspective are important to this process.

Traditional drug education has tended to address a perceived deficit in knowledge. The assumption has been that if children learn the risks involved in drug use, they will tend to avoid use. Evidence in support of this is lacking. In fact, human beings often engage in dangerous activities, partly to prove something to themselves or others. What children need is not just information about the risks. They need the skills to understand and assess the quest – the ability to make meaning out of all the information and perspectives available to them.

Through philosophical inquiry, children have the opportunity to participate in honest, thoughtful discussions that encourage them to think critically about drugs, express their current drug-related beliefs and talk about how drug use impacts their lives. While we cannot and should not ‘control’ young people’s lives and decisions, we *can* provide spaces for open dialogue where they can explore and become aware of their underlying feelings, thought patterns and biases. We can help children make more intentional and thoughtful decisions by helping them take into account the various viewpoints, arguments and possible consequences for oneself and for others when navigating through complex and ambiguous life situations.

## Engaged Philosophical Inquiry in the Classroom

*“It is the mark of an educated mind to be able to entertain a thought without accepting it.” ~Aristotle*

Back in the 1970s, the founders of Engaged Philosophical Inquiry (EPI), Matthew Lipman and Ann Sharp, took a pragmatic approach towards doing philosophy—that is, they asked children questions and encouraged them to think together. For instance, children usually understand that bullying is wrong. EPI gives the children the intellectual skills to address and think through a problem like ‘bullying’. It helps them understand emotionally why people are tempted to bully as well as why bullying might be hurtful for both themselves and others. Likewise, EPI can equip children to go beyond the generalization, “drugs are bad,” to deeper and more authentic reflection on the reasons people use drugs. This is so because EPI helps them develop their higher-order thinking skills as well as their emotional and moral competences.

By engaging in philosophical questions, children can explore an idea from different perspectives and imagine alternative possibilities and answers. Children are encouraged to understand others and their different opinions. This does not necessarily mean that they all agree. In other words, differences in justified viewpoints can co-exist and add value in a pluralistic society. Ultimately, the goal of EPI, as stated by Lipman and Sharp, is to encourage children to think critically, creatively, and collaboratively so that they will be better democratic citizens.

In a typical EPI session, the role of the teacher is not to provide answers but to create a context of inquiry. The key steps to this are:

- creating a safe and warm dialogue atmosphere where children can speak without fear
- letting go of the “banking” reflex whereby teachers provide the “approved truth”
- re-evaluating their own biases, beliefs and convictions in order to facilitate a more authentic dialogue

In other words, the teacher is more a *facilitator* of the learning process. Often the teacher/facilitator and the children sit together in a circle. They read a storybook, watch a video clip, engage with a newspaper article or in some other way stimulate their interest in a subject. Then the teacher engages the children in an open discussion in which the children pose questions and explore ideas. If the class is large, they may split into small groups or pairs to discuss questions before they come back together for a whole-class discussion. The role of the teacher in an EPI discussion can be described as follows:

- to be comfortable with uncertainty or not knowing since they are not the source of all knowledge
- to allow the *community of inquiry* to direct the discussion
- to create a space where everyone has the opportunity to ask genuine questions
- to encourage children to engage in deeper thinking and further questioning
- to listen to the ideas shared by the group and help participants see how those ideas connect to each other
- to help children reflect upon what is shared and constantly re-evaluate and revise their own ideas
- to keep the group from getting too far off track by summarizing key ideas, identifying agreements and disagreements, and asking questions about relevance and reasons

### For further learning:

#### Videos:

*Philosophy for Children*, Liverpool Healthy Schools. [vimeo.com/55009112](https://vimeo.com/55009112)

*Philosophy for Children*, University of New South Wales. [www.youtube.com/watch?v=tk\\_B32HtnWg](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tk_B32HtnWg)

*Teaching Children Philosophy*, University of Oregon. [www.youtube.com/watch?v=elehy0COOT8](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=elehy0COOT8)

*Philosophy for Kids: Sparking a Love of Learning*, TEDxOverlake. [www.youtube.com/watch?v=7DLzXAjScXk](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7DLzXAjScXk)

#### Blogs and articles:

West, A. (2015). *Philosophy Saved Me from Poverty and Drugs: That's Why I Teach It to Kids*  
[www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/nov/19/philosophy-poverty-drugs-kids-young-people](http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/nov/19/philosophy-poverty-drugs-kids-young-people)

Leask, A. (2014). *My New Year's Resolution: Turn Our Children into Better Thinkers*  
[www.buffingtonpost.ca/amy-leask/children-thinkers\\_b\\_6396834.html](http://www.buffingtonpost.ca/amy-leask/children-thinkers_b_6396834.html)

Ellerton, P. (2015). *Teaching How to Think Is Just as Important as Teaching Anything Else*  
<http://theconversation.com/teaching-how-to-think-is-just-as-important-as-teaching-anything-else-46073>

Surette, R. (2015). *Focus at Four: A&M Professor Says We Should Be Teaching Philosophy to Kids in School* (includes video)  
[www.kbtv.com/home/headlines/Focus-At-Four-AM-Professor-Says-We-Should-Be-Teaching-Philosophy-To-Kids-In-School-319628291.html](http://www.kbtv.com/home/headlines/Focus-At-Four-AM-Professor-Says-We-Should-Be-Teaching-Philosophy-To-Kids-In-School-319628291.html)

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Esposito, G. (2015). *Why I Teach Philosophy in Primary Schools*  
[www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/jul/13/teach-philosophy-primary-schools](http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/jul/13/teach-philosophy-primary-schools)



## Philosophical Inquiry and Drug Education

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