

How to Encourage Critical Thinking in Young People

Educators at all levels of schooling have long recognized the centrality of critical thinking in a sound education. Increasingly, parents are interested in learning what role they might play in helping to foster this goal. This article explains what critical thinking involves, why is it important and how parents might help their children succeed in this area.

What is critical thinking?

The term ‘critical thinking’ is potentially confusing: it may appear that its purpose is to encourage students to be ‘critical’ or negative about everything. This is not what critical thinking is intended to produce. In supporting critical thinking, our goal is to help students approach problems or issues in an open-minded manner, to look carefully at the various options, and to reach reasonable conclusions based on careful assessment of relevant factors.

Critical thinking is not being negative, but being thoughtful about everything students do and study in school. It is encouraged by identifying a dilemma raised by a playground incident or by a story that students are reading, and then discussing the pros and cons of possible solutions before reaching a decision.

Critical thinking is nurtured by encouraging students to experiment with various methods before deciding the best approach to an estimation problem in mathematics or science, or a design challenge in art or business. It is promoted by helping students

recognize the criteria for a well-written paragraph or an effective speech, and then inviting students to critique—to look for both the strengths and the shortcomings—of their own work or that of fellow students before revising their written or oral presentation to make it even better. In short, critical thinking is an orientation or ‘way of life’ characterized by ongoing deliberation and careful assessment.

Why is it important?

Critical thinking is an important part of any educational program for two reasons: it is an essential ‘life skill’ and it offers an effective and motivating way for students to learn subject matter.

The overriding mission of schools is to prepare our students for success in later life—in higher education and also in their broader personal and professional lives. Critical thinking provides young people with the skills and attitudes they need to resolve in a disciplined manner the myriad of challenges they will face in school, at work and in their home. In other words, the ability to think critically is an essential life-skill, without which our graduates will be inadequately prepared for adulthood.

Critical thinking is also important because of the enhanced satisfaction and learning that results when students are challenged to use and apply the ideas in the curriculum. Presenting subject matter in

the context of a problem or an issue is more motivating to students and more likely to develop deeper understanding than asking students simply to record answers found in the textbook or in the teacher's presentation.

Compare the difference between, on the one hand, asking students to copy from the textbook the five distinguishing features of the major regions of Canada and, on the other hand, assigning students a specific region and challenging them to convince the rest of the class that their region would be the best place to move their entire family (in terms of climate, natural beauty, cultural attractions, occupations, life style). We believe that the latter activity teaches the topic in a more meaningful way. The increased motivation means that students are more likely to do additional research beyond the textbook, have a richer understanding of the actual differences across our vast nation and remember more of the features of India when tested on an examination.

In other words, critical thinking is a powerful approach to learning that results in greater student interest and achievement.

How can parents help?

Parents can play an important role in helping their child develop this important school and life skill by reinforcing the work of teachers. Below are a few ideas to help children develop as critical thinkers. It is crucial, however, to nurture critical reflection in very supportive ways—this means “challenging” children to think should be gentle, positive and, wherever possible, enjoyable.

- when helping with homework, encourage your child to suggest his/her own ideas and to explain why, and when correcting errors, rather than simply telling the right answer, guide your child by asking

open-ended questions (e.g., Have you thought about the effects of . . . ? What else might happen if you did this? That sounds interesting, can you tell me why you thought this?);

- praise imaginative or thoughtfully supported ideas, even if the comments are not entirely correct;
- look for casual opportunities, especially while reading books, to raise questions that require assessing various alternatives (e.g., Do you think it would have been better for the character to do or ?);
- encourage your child to explore positions from different points of view, especially from
- perspectives that he/she does not personally hold (e.g., How might your brother feel about . . . ? I know you don't like having to do it, but why might your teacher think that homework is important?);
- help your child identify the relevant factors or criteria to consider when making a particular decision (e.g., when selecting a bicycle children might consider the cost, how often they will use it, whether it suits their needs).
- invite and (when appropriate) accept your child's ideas and suggestions in planning events, establishing family rules and solving personal problems.

Perhaps, the most important point to remember is that encouraging children to be critically thoughtful is more time consuming and slower than simply telling them what to think. But the same is true of helping a young infant learn to walk—in

the early stages it is always quicker to carry the child. However, with patient and guiding parents, children learn to walk and, before too long, they learn to walk as fast (or ever faster) than their parents. The same is true for critical thinking: patience and gentle persistence in the early stages, soon leads to great results.

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