



Questions ANSWERS

With a bit of imagination, it's easy to develop enquiring minds in the early years, says **Sara Stanley**...

Last issue, I highlighted how we as facilitators of enquiry can use young children's storytelling and role-play as a starting point for philosophical discussion and understanding. The next step in their philosophical development is to provide opportunities for practising the specific skills needed for philosophical reasoning, questioning and dialogue.

I use a daily 'question board' to encourage my pupils to start each nursery session with thoughtfulness. The process of talking together about the ideas or questions presented on the question board sends a very strong message to both

children and their parents that the nursery is both a place to play and to think. The nature of the question board cards are intended to be playful in nature, based on fairy tales and ideas that appeal to young children. The expectation, however, is that thinking is something that requires communication, and its status in my setting is paramount.

Using the question board

When the children come into the session with their parents/carers they find their names and register their attendance by placing their name on the board under the

heading that indicates their answer or idea about the question. For example:

"Would you rather choose..."

- monsters as small as ants, or;
- ants as big as monsters?

Each option is written on a card, and they are placed on the board next to each other. The children discuss the question and choice, place their name under the card that represents their choice and are encouraged to say why.

I greet the children and adults at the board and model language such as "Why



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do you think that? Do you think the same as your grown up or do you disagree? I wonder what would happen if..." The parents pick up this way of interacting with the children very quickly. It sends a powerful message to them that we listen to and value their children's ideas and place emphasis on their intellectual and imaginative development.

The activities on the question board follow the progression of philosophical skills. The cards that I display can also be used as stimulus for short, enquiry-based activities. Often the children refer to the question board cards during carpet times, making connections between things we might be discussing or just reminding me of what they thought.

Sometimes, children might approach me and say that they can't make a decision. On these occasions we take the problem to the whole group and discuss it together to help decision-making. I don't allow children to opt out of decision-making. Instead, I encourage them to take the role of a scientist. Often we do not know which answer to give; we may not have enough information to make a decision or we may fear giving the wrong answer. In this case we have to go with one decision, treating it in the same way we would if we were creating a hypothesis in a science experiment: make a decision, see what happens and then adjust our thinking based on the result, if necessary. In philosophy we should embrace indecision as a way forward. When this happens we can encourage dialogue and debate about the issue, offering the puzzled child opportunities to talk it through and become an active participant in an investigative thinking process.

What skills are we developing?

Firstly we start with the skill of 'decision making'. It is the first stage in a discipline that will encourage children to make choices and give reasons for them. Sometimes this is hard. We acknowledge this and support children by telling them that not knowing an answer is OK, that answers become clearer when we listen to the ideas of others. We begin to formulate our own ideas and challenge through making an initial decision and testing whether we still believe in our choice and reasons. Examples of these questions might be:

"Which would you choose?"

- Scary kittens or happy monsters?
- Castle or pirate ship?
- Purple face or green fingers?
- Cuddles or presents?

Moving from a choice between two things and three is the next step to expanding playfulness in thinking and decision-making. Here we present three options to choose between:

"Who would you rather..."

Be chased by...

- An angry wasp?
- A grumpy fairy?
- A tickle monster?

Invite to your party...

- A burglar?
- An alien?
- A witch?

Look after...

- A baby giant?
- A giant baby?
- A tiny elephant?

Be left in a room full of...

- Boring grown-ups?
- Crying babies?
- Barking dogs?

When the children are confident about making a choice, we can move from giving a straight decision between two or three options to a scenario where there is only one outcome – a 'yes or no' choice – the implications of which have to be considered and justified. For example:

"Should we have..."

- Snowmen in summer?

Questioning behaviour

These question board activities complement the work we do in weekly philosophy sessions, which I will look at in the next issue. In the later dialogues and enquiries children use language that we have modelled through the question board activities such as, "How do we know that?", "What do you mean by that?", "Do you agree or disagree?" and "Can you give a reason why you think that?"

It is possible by this stage to have four-year-olds who can make others explain their thinking or ask for help in making their choices, who acknowledge when their thinking or that of their peers is inconsistent. These are future facilitators, children who bring an enquiring and more logical understanding to all of their learning. Most of all, these are children who are not afraid to say what they feel to each other in a reasoned and reasonable way.

If you envisage a classroom where questions buzz through every learning opportunity, where children can see the point of fairness and take responsibility not just for their behaviour but for their thinking, then the daily question board could be a good place to start developing philosophical skills for life.

- Six hands?
- Tiny elephants?
- Lollipop trees?
- Flying cars?
- Talking chickens?

Next, we look at 'what ifs' – making and justifying a choice with extended reasoning and creative thinking. Here the children are drawing upon imaginative reasoning using the skills they have developed so far. At this stage of philosophical development, the children are expected to engage with the positive and negative implications of the choices they make.

"Would it be a good thing or a bad thing if..."

- We grew 1cm a day?
- People walked on four legs?
- All stories came true?
- Dinosaurs still roamed the land?
- Everything in the world was edible?



When the children have worked through the processes of making confident choices, we move on to the next skill: agreeing and disagreeing with a statement and explaining why.

“Do you agree or disagree with these ideas?”

- We should share everything.
- Dinosaurs are scarier than lions.
- Everything should be made from chocolate.
- Boys and girls should wear the same clothes.

Taking it further

The next skill the children need is the ability to think about some of the themes or concepts that exist within philosophy. Philosophy requires an understanding of the big issues in life, for example, why do people do bad things? Why isn't everything fair? And, how do we know what is real? The obvious place for young children to start understanding these

issues is to begin with familiar fairy tales and the behaviours of the characters within them.

TRY: Goodies and baddies

The children are presented with a choice of two characters on the question board. These picture cards might include characters such as a witch, fairy, king, knight, giant, dragon, wolf, robber, troll, bad queen, princess, frog prince, pirate and ogre. They must then decide which of the selected two characters might be either the happiest, kindest, scariest, saddest, cleverest, the best leader, or the best friend.

Up to this point the children have been giving answers based on their opinions and assumptions. The next stage is to tease out the decision-making process and help them understand that first thoughts don't always bear scrutiny. We do this through presenting opportunities for oppositional viewpoints in their thinking.

findoutmore
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TRY: Would you dare?

The children are presented with a scenario where they have to decide whether they would or wouldn't dare to do something. When they've decided, the second part of the question is read to them to see whether they might change their mind and why. Examples of this might include:

- Would you dare... say “Boo!” to a monster?**
- But what if he couldn't see or hear you?**
- Would you dare... play with a fairy's wand?**
- But what if it turned you into a frog?**
- Would you dare... shout at your teacher?**
- But what if they were standing on your toe?**