



# Ideas & IMAGINATION

**Sara Stanley** explains why you should be encouraging your children to don their thinking caps and practise their philosophical skills...

The early years classroom is a place which thrives on excitement, curiosity and discovery, where language and communication are the foundations of play and adventure. A classroom that introduces philosophical thinking and talking, playing and storytelling becomes a classroom alive with possibilities for past, present and future understanding.

We all philosophise at various times in our lives. We want to know about our existence, our relationships, our place within society and the wider world. Philosophy explores

these important questions and allows us opportunities to think about our answers. Both as adults and children we have an innate desire to investigate and make sense of the world around us, what happens to us, how and why? The Philosophy for Children (P4C) teaching model offers a practical, usable and exciting way of encouraging children to unlock their innate curiosity. Through the overt modelling and teaching of early philosophical skills, we can provide children with the tools for genuine enquiry.

## Philosophy in the EYFS

The most exciting thing about any classroom is the 'buzz'. The atmosphere of curiosity and engagement with learning that happens in a place where children are encouraged to take ownership of thoughts and ideas; where their voices are listened to and respected, but also challenged. This is what philosophy can do for a class of learners. Imagine being part of a class who love to respond to and ask questions such as "Am I real or pretend?", "Who would I be if I swapped brains with my friend?" or





"How do we know that we are not asleep and dreaming the same dream?" This is the sort of class I dream of – where children work together to puzzle over life's greatest philosophical mysteries, where they build confidence, respect and the ability to be reasonable and reasoned.

Over the course of three articles I will highlight methods and share activities that can develop the confidence of practitioners wishing to work in this way, and provide an overview of what a philosophical setting looks, sounds and feels like.

One of the most satisfying things you will notice is that the overt modelling of language used in enquiry generates a genuine respect amongst the children for their peers. Children are taught to listen and think in a way that extends beyond 'the self'. They become aware of the necessity to follow on from each other's ideas, order thinking for understanding and work together to develop ideas about things they are curious about. Philosophy is not a process of asking questions for the sake of asking, or indeed answering, but a process of enquiry where individuals seek to become a community.

## Observing play

Alongside the teaching of philosophical skills through the range of activities that will be covered in part two of this series, in the early years it also is important to spend time watching, listening and recording examples of children's play. Play encompasses and consolidates everything children know and many more things that they don't yet know. They wonder both whether monsters might be real and why grown-ups get cross. Their play

involves the reliving of day-to-day experiences, but can swing quickly from the mundane re-enacting to the wildly fantastical. A shopping trip with the baby can transform with unstoppable speed into an encounter with a fierce witch or dragon.

In a young child's mind the two realms of reality and fantasy are blurred yet irrevocably intertwined in the form of "What do I know?" and "What do I imagine?" However, when children start to unlock the doors to a world of play where anything is possible problems may arise. A child might wonder, "Why can a Big Bad Wolf blow the little pigs' house down but I can't knock down the bricks my friend is playing with?" When we present this problem of the bashed down bricks to the children in story form we allow them to judge the Big Bad Wolf, not the child. It is important that children are able to access familiar problems and look into the moral consequences of their play. What we can do is help build the connection between the child's imagination and the real world.

The following short dialogue – taken from my forthcoming book, *Why Think? – Philosophical Play 3-11* (Continuum, May 2012) – took place as a group of four three-year-olds played dressing up. Here the children were exploring the difference between their real identities and the personas that they created when in costume:

**Kennedy:** Where's the real me gone? I've lost her.

**Jessica:** I made her disappear, I'm a cheeky fairy.

**Kennedy:** Where is she? I'm not Kennedy any more. I'm Princess Belle.

**Ella:** And I'm snow white lady. Ella has gone, my real Ella is gone.

**Jessica:** I made all you disappear (giggles)

**Kennedy:** I must find the real Kennedy, I'm worried... Now I've lost my daddy now.

(Kennedy changes out of her princess costume)

**Kennedy:** I'm back, I'm back, it's me!

(Ella does the same)

**Ella:** Yeah, it's me again.

**Ella:** Oh, Tayla has disappeared now.

**Jessica:** Whatever's going on? It's a magic day today.

I read this dialogue as a story to the children at the end of the day.

## P4C: A potted history

The Philosophy for Children movement started in the 1970s when Matthew Lipman, frustrated by the inability of his graduate students to think critically or logically, devised a programme for younger pupils. His aim was to provide a thinking curriculum using specially written philosophical texts. These were designed to allow children as young as six to explore both the skills and subject matter required for this more reasoned approach to thinking.

The Lipman model forms the basis of the more traditional philosophy enquiries you might see in educational settings around the world today. This involves the presentation of a stimulus to the children: a book, artefact or specially written text, for example. This would be followed by reflective thinking time about the stimulus. The children would then be encouraged to offer questions based on the stimulus with a dialogue taking place on the question chosen by the group.

In order to get to the stage where children can access, be facilitated and indeed facilitate themselves in this more traditional, structured P4C enquiry, it is essential that they have first had the opportunity to play, talk and think philosophically in their early years settings.

**Facilitator:** So, did the real Kennedy really disappear?

**Sophia:** Yes, she did 'cos she was a princess. Kennedy can't be a princess and a little girl, can she?

**Facilitator:** Can you still be you if you are pretending to be someone else?

**Kennedy:** No, 'cos that's not how you play that game.

**Poppy:** Yes, you can because she is only dressed up. She's still under her dress, isn't she?

**Chloe:** But she was talking in a princess voice.

**Facilitator:** So, where did the girls go when they were dressed up?

**Tayla:** They was in the house.

**Kennedy:** No, we was on the carpet with Jessica, wasn't we?

**Jessica:** Yes, we were here, but my daddy was lost.

**Shauna:** Maybe you was lost too?

**Jessica:** Yes, I think I was lost.



**Pretend play is vital in discovering who we are, but what does it tell us about the philosophical idea of identity?**

SARA STANLEY



**Shauna:** Don't put that Princess Belle dress on again, will you.

The children here were exploring the nature of identity. Can you still be yourself whilst playing at being someone else? Pretend play is vital in discovering who we are, but what does it tell us about the philosophical idea of identity? Unless the children have experience of playing, wondering and thinking aloud these ideas, how can they authentically discuss the nature of identity as they get older?

Through engaging in our children's play we also support them to think about the consequences of their actions. Who is the strongest? Who is right? Just because you can, does that mean you should? Children are not necessarily conscious of this until it is pointed out to them in terms of what they already know and understand. This engagement can also help us deal with difficult practical situations. How can we help children who are refused entry into social cliques? What

do we do in situations where a child's behaviour seems beyond the boundaries that others are prepared to accept? What happens when a child has too much power, or not enough? These are the situations where adults can step in to examine play and allow the children to see play through the eyes and feelings of others.

As part of this process, we as facilitators must ensure that we take every opportunity to model listening skills. The best way to demonstrate that we listen is to repeat back and show interest in what our children say and why. We can take time to record play as it happens and read these dialogues back to children to explore further. The facilitator can ask questions about why things happened and what might have happened. Our children bring to the early years classroom a natural ability to create playful stories. What they might not bring is the language to communicate them or the experience to make sense of them. A philosophical setting will offer opportunities to

help children play and learn from these experiences through the dialogic process of the community where children can identify meaning, tolerance, respect and social identity.

## findoutmore

Sara Stanley is a practising teacher, SAPERE level One trainer, author and co-founder, with Maria Cornish, of [childrenthinking.co.uk](http://childrenthinking.co.uk), an online P4C resource. Both Sara and Maria work in schools in Norfolk and are currently leading practice in the Foundation Stage. Sara's new book, *Why Think? – Philosophical Play 3–11* (Continuum), will be published in May.