

# Baristanet

September 17, 2013

## **Teaching Our Children to Think**

Consider the child who has just learned to crawl. She moves from one toy to the next, lingering on those she finds especially interesting. She bangs her rattle against the floor and mouths the hand of her doll. She is exploring – determining use and finding meaning for herself. In her own way, she is asking questions about the world around her. This is where critical thinking and inquiry begin. As she gets older, learning will take different form.

Dr. Jennifer Robinson, Executive Director at the Center of Pedagogy at Montclair State University, shared, “Searching independently, interviewing others, more independent research, learning about new resources and sources of information, more interviews, then analysis and synthesis of what was learned. Most importantly, asking one’s own questions that leads to further research and inquiry. This is what learning looks like. It is messy and non-linear in nature.”

Unfortunately, with loads of material to cover and tests to prep for, many classrooms have not had enough time to foster critical thinking. Joe Oyler, Program Coordinator for the Institute for the Advancement of Philosophy for Children (IAPC) at Montclair State University adds, “School has been set up to give answers. There is an expectation that kids will come out with concrete learning from the lesson.” The introduction of the Common Core State Standards, though, has thrust critical thinking into the classroom hot seat. We, as parents and as a community, will have to see how it plays out.

However, learning is not confined to the formal classroom. We can help shape our kids into better students – not just better test-takers. We, too, can also create opportunities for our children to explore freely – and learn. Without the added pressure of test scores, perhaps we can help teach our children to think.

## **A Philosophical Approach**

According to the IAPC website, Philosophy for Children aims to “...offer children the chance to explore ordinary but puzzling concepts, to improve their thinking, to make more sense of their world and to discover for themselves what is to be valued and cherished in that world.” Children who engage in philosophical dialogues push each other to think critically and learn to be comfortable with ambiguity. They learn to build solid arguments and work through complex material. They come to care more about what is most reasonable than who is right. They develop trust in themselves and require little external motivation. Dr. Maughn Gregory, Professor of Educational Foundations, explains, “Children’s lives are already full of ethical, aesthetic, and other kinds of philosophical meaning; we merely give them the opportunity and a method to explore it together.” He adds, “You can only become a better thinker by participating in a thinking community.”

How do we create a ‘thinking community’ for our children? First, follow your child’s wonder. Sparked by internal motivators, children will naturally explore what they find

interesting. Whether your child is into books, poetry, nature, cooking or puppet stories – identify what excites them and start there. Are their freshly baked chocolate chip cookies too sweet? Instead of offering to make a new batch yourself, urge them to keep trying until they get it right. If your child just finished reading a book that they particularly liked, ask them what questions they would like to explore about the book and discuss them together. Use ‘dinner time’ to address larger issues and work through them as a family. According to Mr. Oyler, even young children like to explore big topics like fairness, beauty and being good. One session he facilitated in a classroom of youngsters revolved around the question, “Is my doll real?”

### **Ask. Ask. Ask.**

Since dialogue is paramount to critical thinking, ask questions. And encourage your child to do the same. Some good questions to spark dialogue include: “That’s an interesting question. Where might we look to find your answer?” or “I wonder why that is,” or “I wonder if that’s always the case.” Remember, these questions are meant to be open-ended. Don’t jump in and answer for your child. The process of figuring it out is what matters. Also, give your kids time to ‘figure it out.’ When your child comes to a conclusion, ask for evidence and examples. Ask what they think about other family member’s or friend’s conclusions. Remind them that it’s okay to change their minds and that these dialogues are about finding their truth, not about winning or being right.

### **Brush Up on Your Own Critical Thinking**

Modeling life-long learning is key. “Adults have a lot of specialized knowledge about their working lives, but this knowledge is largely irrelevant to children’s lives. ...Children will be influenced from watching mom and dad explore their interests and will come to recognize that we are never done learning,” says Mr. Oyler. Also, show your kids how you think through problems. Think aloud about a question you are interested in and ask for their help.

### **Seek Out Inquiry-Based Activities**

Practice critical thinking outside your home, too. Montclair Art Museum, for example, incorporates inquiry-based methods like Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS) as the foundation for much of their gallery programming. VTS uses a set of open-ended questions about an image to help students build their own arguments about what they see and to consider other’s interpretations. Petra Pankow, Director of Education at MAM, said, “Here in MAM’s education department, inquiry and the sort of discussion that promotes close looking and critical thinking are very much at the root of what we do.” She adds, “Like many museums, we use inquiry-based strategies like VTS and other conversational approaches that encourage kids – and increasingly adults, too – to look closely and back up their theories about artworks with visual evidence.” MAM uses open dialogues in their Home Schooling and Park Bench Programs (Park Bench Programs introduce young kids to art in a social setting.). They have also worked with MSU in the past to incorporate Philosophy for Children into their school-based offerings and they continue to look for ways to create more critical thinking around art through their public programming.

[\*\*View Original Article\*\*](#)