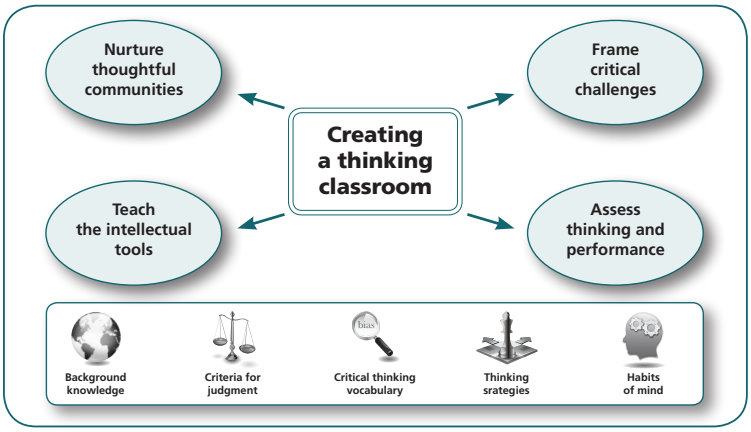
Tips for Teachers

Critical thinking with early primary students

To lay a foundation with young children, introduce a handful of tools, create a supportive climate and encourage them to think for themselves.



At the early primary level our critical thinking goal is to develop students' ability to answer a range of simple questions that require choice among two or three options based on one or two criteria.

The questions will be as simple as, "Which would make a better pet—an elephant or hamster? We help students go beyond repeating what others have told them (*"My parents say that hamsters make good pets"*) or voicing personal wishes (*"I like elephants"*). Instead, we want each student to make a choice or reach a decision supported with a reason (*"Classroom pets should be easy to take care for. I think a hamster would be a better pet."* Or *"Classroom pets should be interesting. I think an elephant is more interesting than a hamster."*)

We can gradually bring very young children to this stage by making four practices a regular part of our teaching.

Frame critical challenges

Wherever appropriate, frame questions that go beyond asking students to repeat information or express their likes. We want to offer students the challenge of deciding what would be a good option or what would make the most sense.

Critical thinking questions and tasks can address the everyday choices about what to do next and how to act, and also the topics students are studying. Questions can be prompted by many things:

- pictures
- objects
- stories
- real classroom decisions
- role played situations

Sample challenges

- Would a _____ or a _____ make a better classroom pet?
- Would _____ or _____ make a better friend? (comparing characters from stories that students have just read)
- Which is the better (more friendly or safer) solution?
- Which answer best fits the clues?
- Who would be the better helper if we had this problem?
- Which would be the better present? (make the person happiest and be good for them)
- Of the three choices, which is the best way to welcome a new person to the class?

Teach the intellectual tools

Effectively teaching just a handful of basic tools so students understand and "own" them will enable their thinking to reach surprising and impressive levels.

 **Criteria for judgment**	Students will be able to make a wide range of reasoned choices if they understand some very basic considerations or criteria for making decisions: • Is it fair? • Will it be safe? • Do we really need this? • Can we do this? • Will it us help us learn?
 **Critical thinking vocabulary**	Students will be able to think more effectively if they understand a few basic concepts related to thinking: • Problem and solution • Guess and clue • Evidence or reason • Consequences (What would happen if . . .)
 **Thinking strategies**	Students will be able to think more effectively if they have a few strategies to help them generate and organize their ideas: • Thinking yes and thinking no (pro/con) • What does it look like? Sound like? • How would (someone else) feel about this?
 **Habits of mind**	Students will be more effective thinkers if their commitment to a few values related to good thinking translates into ongoing habits: • Making up one's own mind (Deciding what I believe) • Caring how others might be affected (Empathy)
 **Background knowledge**	Students are able to make reasoned choices only if they know some relevant facts about the topics they are being asked to think about. For example, if students are to decide whether it is feasible and safe to have an elephant as a classroom pet, they will need to know something about its size, eating requirements and temperament.

Assess thinking and performance

To support thinking, our assessment practices must go beyond student mastery of the standard or accepted answers and look to the thinking behind their answers. A student who selects an elephant as the better classroom pet because it is more interesting has shown that she is capable of giving an accurate and relevant reason for a decision. She may also have shown that she hasn't considered all of the relevant factors, including feasibility. Our assessments should attend to how well students show mastery of the thinking tools discussed above.

Nurture thoughtful communities

Primary teachers know how crucial a supportive classroom and home environment is to student learning. There are a few simple but important practices for creating an atmosphere that supports thinking:

- Help students feel safe to express opinions in class and at home.
- Regularly ask students to express opinions (informally in individual and small group situations more than as part of whole class lessons).
- Encourage students to offer a reason/explain their thinking.
- When appropriate, turn student requests back to them. (Answer student questions with a question—"But what do you think? Do think it would be better to do X or Y?")