

Nurturing thinking: it takes a village...

What can parents and other adults do to help children grow into excellent thinkers?

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Teachers share your hope that your children grow into excellent thinkers who:

- can face complex challenges throughout their lives with confidence and competence
- become innovative contributors
- derive joy and insight from engaging with the arts and sports.

High quality thinking is something that can be explicitly taught and nurtured over time. All curriculum documents include the importance of thinking and every school board cares deeply about nurturing thinking competencies. High quality thinking includes three dimensions: critical thinking, creative thinking, and collaborative thinking.

While many educators are striving to learn how to best support the development of students' thinking abilities in school environments, we also know that so much of what children learn happens by observing and interacting with adults in all settings, including at home. You might be asking yourself:

- How do I know if a child is demonstrating high quality thinking or not? What does it look like and sound like?
- How can I help children develop their ability to think through situations better?
- How can I keep my interactions positive and playful when nurturing children's thinking?
- How can I model the power of learning together through my interactions with my child?
- Can the way I share stories and experiences with my children help to nurture their creativity?
- What should I do and say when a notice that children might need some help thinking through a situation?

In this article, we explain what critical thinking involves, how it supports creativity, why is it important and how you might help their children succeed in this area.

What is critical thinking? What does it look like and sound like?

The term 'critical thinking' can be confusing: it doesn't mean encouraging students to be 'critical' or negative about everything. In supporting critical thinking, our goal is to help students approach problems or issues in an open-minded manner, to create or carefully consider 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 we do.

At home, adults are always thinking critically about the challenges they face on a day-to-day basis. Children watch as you grapple with everything from what to make for dinner and where to go on vacation to what to do about more serious and difficult issues that arise for families. Children learn as they observe testing out creative ideas and solutions to everyday challenges, weighing pros and cons of various options, consulting knowledgeable friends and family members for their perspectives, and demonstrating perseverance and open-mindedness when coming to a decision.

Children also face daily decisions that require critical thinking. *What should I wear today? Who should I spend time with at recess? Should I speak up or tell an adult when I see something troubling? Who should I ask for help? How can I create an interesting story?* From a very young age, children are grappling with decisions that we don't always see. Helping them become better critical thinkers is an important role we all play in supporting their growth and development.

What can parents and other adults do?

In school, teachers might support critical thinking by helping students to:

- think about a problem that happened on the playground or in a story that students are reading, and then discuss the pros and cons of possible solutions before reaching a decision
- experiment with various methods before deciding the best approach to an estimation problem in mathematics or science or to a design challenge in art or business
- consider the criteria for a well-written paragraph or an effective speech, and then critique—to look for both the strengths and the shortcomings—of their own work before revising their written or oral presentation to make it even better.

What can parents and other adults do to? You can play an important role in helping their child develop this important school and life skill. 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. You support the development of children’s thinking abilities when you think together and provide support that helps children think on their own.

Think together

- Invite children to be part of every day decision making at home.
- 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 us to do ____ or ____?).
- Invite and (when appropriate) accept your child’s ideas and suggestions in planning events, establishing family rules and solving personal problems.

Provide support that helps children think on their own

- Ask thoughtful questions that spark and encourage independent thinking.
- Encourage the 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?).

- When helping with homework, encourage the child to suggest his/her own ideas and to explain why, and when correcting errors, rather than simply telling the right answer, guide the 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?).
- Help the 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).
- Praise imaginative or thoughtfully supported ideas, even if the comments are not entirely correct.

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.