

Philosophy for Children

Why do we need it?

It would be impossible to count the times adults have demanded of children, "Why did you do that? Don't you ever think before you do something!" We expect children to reach conclusions that are acceptable to adults, but seldom do we realize that we don't adequately prepare children for that thinking process. All too often we pump facts into children and require them to spout back the same material. When we ask questions that require reasoning to answer, and the child answers incorrectly, we say that the child isn't capable of reasoning.

Philosophy for Children has the potential of being the tool that teachers can use successfully to help children reach these objectives we set for them. The exercises in *Harry Stottlemeier* allow children to discuss familiar topics in an atmosphere of acceptance of their ideas and their worth. Therein lies the success or failure of the program. We would like to believe that all teachers have classrooms where children feel free to discuss ideas openly without being ruled "out of order." However, we know of many counter-examples when children believe something is wrong but don't want to face the wrath of the teacher by suggesting it. The successful teaching of *Harry* depends upon the teacher and that teacher's attitudes toward acceptance of children's ideas. Training is essential for teachers who are willing to listen to the ideas and opinions of their students. In the hands of the wrong teacher, more harm than good could be done to children's self-image by not accepting their ideas. For the teacher who recognizes the glow from the light bulbs within the heads of children who are "turned on" to the discovery of their own ideas, *Harry* can be the highlight of their teaching career.

The exercises in *Harry* force children to consider many possibilities to find an answer of the highest quality rather than blurting out the first answer that comes to mind. Children tend to offer solutions carelessly unless they are required to supply the proof of their reasoning. Then *Harry* becomes a game for some children who strive to find the defensible solution that sways others to share their opinion. Watching the satisfied smirk of the child who developed a proof that the group might accept above all others is worth all the lessons a teacher might have planned for the day.

What is it?

Philosophy for Children is a tool for teaching critical thinking, using both inductive and deductive reasoning. It also allows for creative thinking and free use of the imagination. Exercises are written so that almost any child can find a solution, but the more adept child is challenged by more thought provoking questions. Some success is built in for every student.

Parents who have observed classes in which *Harry* was being used were amazed that children were learning syllogisms in elementary school. Standardization of sentences becomes a challenge once children master the understanding of the four basic parts: The quantifier, the subject, the verb and the predicate. The use of circle diagrams in the proof helps visual learners understand the reasoning process.

The standardization of sentences allows children to understand inferences. *Harry* can be supplemented by



other resources, such as Anita Harnadek's materials on critical thinking and making references and analogies. The exercises in *Harry* that teach transitive relations are especially essential for children, particularly later in their school life when they begin geometry. One of the most challenging relations taught in *Harry* is contradiction. Children really seem to enjoy thinking of a contradiction to negate another's reasoning.

Who is it for?

For many years I taught in a low socio-economic area. If *Harry* had been available to me then, I wouldn't have hesitated to use it. Even if children are below level in reading, they can benefit from a program of critical thinking skills. They certainly don't have to read to think. Their reading skills might even improve as a result of their better reasoning skills.

Although *Harry* would be good for all children, it is especially beneficial to the potentially high achieving, gifted students who are capable of advanced ideas and new discoveries. They have a very quick wit and recognize the subtle humor in *Harry*. Teaching critical thinking is an objective for every gifted program, and the logic taught in *Harry* is an effective vehicle to achieve that objective.

Analytic teaching is for the teacher who is a risk-taker, who enjoys learning new techniques and different viewpoints, and who really wants to talk "with" children. The class that discusses problems together may be the class that has few problems of their own.

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