Primary Ethics for High Schools

Curriculum

THINK·REASON·DISCUSS

Primary
E T H I C S

Introduction

O**ur ethics education program supports students to develop skills** in **critical thinking, ethical reasoning** and **collaborative inquiry**.

We equip teachers to deliver lessons that explore ethical issues using highly-developed scripted materials that are relevant, challenging and age-appropriate. Our curriculum encourages students to both **think for themselves** and **think with others** through discussion.

Our curriculum is not about imposing a particular moral code. Students are not told what to think or what the right thing to do is in any situation. We support them to think about and articulate their own views while considering their classmates' diverse range of views.

Our underlying educational and philosophical principles

Our distinctive teaching method is based on established educational and philosophical principles and the work of experts in philosophy for children and in educational psychology and theory (notably, Matthew Lipman, Anne Margaret Sharp and Lev Vygotsky).

Ethics teachers help their students form a **community of inquiry**. In this classroom community, students work together to critically explore a philosophical problem, build on one another's ideas and develop well-reasoned responses. Discussions are facilitated using highly detailed scripts and with teachers asking Socratic questions, for example, why do you think that, does anyone agree but for a different reason, what might someone who disagrees say…

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Ethics teachers help their students form a community of inquiry.

A community of inquiry

Leading students through a planned sequence of questions on a topic means they are guaranteed to consider a range of perspectives and to consider many of the philosophically relevant aspects. This way, they are not subject to the (very likely unconscious) philosophical biases of an individual teacher.

Students are not expected to converge on a single view. Indeed, agreement isn't framed as a positive – students are encouraged to voice different views and consider counter-arguments.

Our lesson materials

- Stories and scenarios on a range of topics
- questions with no easy/straightforward answer
- balance of philosophical perspectives

in combination with our ethics teachers

- who bring the stories and scenarios to life
- create a sense of curiosity about topic and questions
- facilitate discussion of questions
- model the inquiry process, and
- remain neutral

… prompt students to

- express their own views and reasons for holding them
- consider and engage with a range of views
- judge whether the reasons they and others have are good reasons (ie. relevant, logical, supported by evidence)
- think about important ethical concepts, including intentions, circumstances, consequences and what contributes to good character
- empathise with people in different situations

… which helps students develop skills in

- collaborative inquiry
- critical thinking
- ethical reasoning.

Over 20 topics on a range of issues

Our curriculum was designed by experts in philosophy, education and educational psychology. It includes 20 topics, sequenced in two sets for Years 7 and 8. Each topic includes around 90 minutes of learning, designed to be taught over several lessons (the exact lesson length is flexible to cater to the needs of individual schools).

Each topic poses one or more big philosophical questions, such as:

• When is it important to apologise? What makes a good apology?

• How much control should teenagers have over their own lives?

• What responsibilities do we have to protect the environment?

These questions are introduced via scenarios designed to grab student attention, provide important background information (lessons don't assume existing content knowledge) and prompt them to consider the complexity of the situation. The lesson materials do not promote any particular view about the ethical issues raised. The objective is for students to consider and discuss the issues for themselves – not to gain specific ethical knowledge.

We train ethics teachers to use a range of facilitation skills, including how to be neutral and curious and how to promote deeper thinking by asking Socratic questions, such as:

• Why do you think that?

• Can anyone build on that idea?

• Suppose someone disagreed – what might their reasons be?

By asking such questions, teachers ensure students always provide reasons for their views and encourage students to consider and respond to one another's views. This approach plays a pivotal role in nurturing a vibrant community of inquiry.

Links to valuable student outcomes

By prompting students to provide their reasons and consider other views, ethics teachers model the questions that good critical thinkers ask themselves. Over time, students come to internalise these questions and begin asking them of themselves and others. Teachers report that over time students become increasingly likely to share their reasoning, consider counter-examples and make links between views, all without being prompted. The effectiveness of our approach is supported by research findings. Studies have consistently demonstrated that weekly philosophical discussions can over time lead to significant gains in cognitive ability, reasoning skills, communication skills, empathy and other related skills.

Ethics lessons also encourage students to engage with key elements of the general capabilities outlined by ACARA (the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority), including:

- **Ethical understanding** (eg. exploring ethical concepts, examining values, rights, responsibilities and ethical norms)

- **Critical and creative thinking** (eg. inquiring, evaluating actions and outcomes, thinking about thinking)

- **Personal and social capability** (eg. personal awareness, empathy, community awareness, collaboration).

The effectiveness of our approach is supported by research findings.

Topics

Each year of our curriculum begins with an introductory topic that introduces students to the fundamental elements of ethical inquiry and the Primary Ethics guidelines for discussion. Topics are then delivered in a sequenced order, where ideas are introduced and then returned to over the year. All topics include opportunities to reflect on and connect ideas to those arising in previous topics.

Here is a selection of our topics with the big questions considered in each.

You're not the boss of me

How much control should children and teenagers have over their own lives? What right do parents, adults and governments have to limit teenagers' freedoms? Why do we have age limits in Australia? Is it okay to stop people from doing things because they might get hurt?

Giving and accepting apologies

When is it important to apologise? What makes a good apology? Do you have to accept a good apology? Can individuals apologise on behalf of a group? Is it ever important for a group (like a class of students) to collectively apologise for the actions of one of its members?

Welcome to our robot overlords

Is it risky to create super-intelligent artificial intelligence? If so, should governments stop people and companies from experimenting with artificial intelligence? If we create super-intelligent artificial intelligence, would it be wrong to make them do menial tasks or switch them off?

From moon trash to migrant horses

What does it mean to be a custodian of the land – and is it compatible with owning land? Is littering always wrong – what about leaving rubbish on the moon? Should we always try to remove introduced species, such as wild horses?

Lizard people and fake news

How important is it to think carefully about what we believe? Why do so many people believe in conspiracy theories? What, if anything, is wrong with believing in conspiracy theories? Why might politicians spread fake news? Does fake news undermine democracy? Do media organisations and other groups have a responsibility to combat fake news?

Lesson excerpt – *You're not the boss of me*

Topic objectives (background information for teachers)

In this topic students consider and discuss how adults sometimes limit children and teenagers' freedoms.

Students will think critically and for themselves about:

- how children and teenagers have less freedom than adults in certain ways

- who should have authority over what children and teenagers can and can't do

- why governments limit the freedoms of citizens

- what ways governments restrict people's freedoms for their own good and whether that's okay.

Part 2: Who can restrict teenagers' freedom?

Limiting screen time (10 minutes)

- Thumbs up or down – Do you have limits at home on how much time you can spend doing certain things?

We're going to be thinking specifically about screen time.

- Are there rules in your house about how much time you can spend on screens? *Take two or three responses, keeping them short. Try to hear a variety of rules, asking 'Does anyone have a different rule' if needed.*

In 2021, a country introduced a new rule about how long teenagers and children can play video games. In the new rule, people under 18 can only play for one hour between 8 and 9 pm, on Fridays, Saturdays and Sundays – meaning they can play a maximum of three hours a week.

Use procedural questions to facilitate a discussion around the numbered substantive questions below, remembering to anchor, ask for reasons, open to others and encourage different opinions, when needed.

1. Is that a good rule?

If students argue that too much screen time isn't bad for you, say: Let's suppose for the sake of discussion that the government of this country is right – that limiting time on video games is good for you. Would it be a good rule if that was true?

2. Is it fair that the rule only applies to under-18s?

Ask if students haven't raised these points:

- The government said it was to protect the physical and mental health of under-18s. Does that make a difference to whether it's fair to treat under-18s and adults differently?

- Is too much time playing video games bad for adults as well?

3. Who should decide how much time you can spend playing video games – your family, the government … or you?

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