



think about it

Learning is about more than repeating facts and figures. *Eleanor Smallwood* and *Olivia Hungerford* explain the value of critical thinking skills, even for the youngest kids.

“**W**e’ve bought into the idea that education is about training and ‘success’ defined monetarily, rather than learning to think critically and to challenge. We should not forget that the true purpose of education is to make minds, not careers.”

So says Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist and author Chris Hedges, and his concern is one that will resonate with many Hong Kong parents. The education system here has for many years been criticised for giving priority to content at the expense of teaching children how to learn and developing their critical faculties. The concern is that Hong Kong children can apply technical knowledge faultlessly but are unable to think for themselves or form an opinion – vital life skills for any age.

The ability to think critically enables us to make self-assessments, balance contradictory viewpoints, form reasoned judgments, learn from

new experiences and become rational and reasonable human beings. It is a skill that benefits businesses and communities locally, nationally and globally, by creating informed and responsible members of society; it’s what sets us apart as humans. But have our children been missing out on this crucial skill?

Lifelong learning

To try to address the criticism, in 2009, the Hong Kong government introduced “liberal studies” as part of its core secondary school curriculum. The Hong Kong education department stated that the new subject would provide a “useful foundation for further studies, future employment and a life of fulfilment”. Kenneth Chen, Hong Kong Under Secretary for Education, said in an interview that, “Obviously, you need content and subject knowledge ... but more importantly, we feel that kids need to have that attitude that they need to learn continuously.” The plan

is to encourage the next generation of Hongkongers to have enquiring minds and breadth in their education, to see learning as something that takes place everywhere, not just in the classroom and not just for the purpose of getting a good, well-paid job at the end.

It has, however, been a controversial addition to the syllabus with many teachers and students worried that it is too vague and unquantifiable an exam to be marked. Tutorial centres have seen a boom in the number of students coming to them for the “answers” to the papers – which defeats the very purpose of the curriculum!

Perhaps the problem is that adding a brand new subject for the last three years of a student’s schooling is bound to be confusing for the majority of learners who have never been faced with this approach to thinking and schoolwork before. The development of critical faculties should happen throughout life, starting at a young age, by teaching children how to understand themselves, their relationships with other people and

their environment. Only then will students be able to cultivate and hone these skills as they get older so that thinking and analysing become second nature.

At our centre, we see a number of our primary age students lacking the ability to judge what they see or read. Many of our students are great technical readers but, on finishing the story, will have no comprehension of what they have read. When asked, “Do you like this character?” many will look blank and respond: “What is the right answer?” Working with these children over time, we are able to tap into their natural curiosity about life and encourage them to think, question and argue in order to understand.

Children should not see teachers and tutors as purely didactic figures whose role is to tell them the right answer. The best teachers are those who are able to draw ideas out from the student’s own mind, to guide and instruct rather than to tell. But how can we encourage our children to think freely and develop questioning minds from a young age? Below are

a number of suggestions for activities to do at home with your children from pre-school age up until the end of primary school to help lay a foundation for learning how to learn.

Little learners

At pre-school age, children are at their most inquisitive and this should be encouraged in every way. Let them explore through all of their senses – touch, taste, sound, smell and sight – and encourage them to talk about what they are doing and how it makes them feel. Do they like the taste? If not, why not? What does that rug feel like? Have they ever felt anything similar? Does that smell good? Does it remind them of anything? Take your pre-schooler for a walk, pick up leaves and talk about them. Then take them home and draw them. Ask them to describe what they’ve drawn and how it makes them feel. Ask them why they think trees have leaves.

Read to your child every night and talk to them about the story as you are reading. Do they like the characters? What do they think will

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happen next? At all stages, encourage them to think and articulate their thoughts as best they can.

Ages four to six years

At this age, children should start to have more ownership over their learning process. Encourage them to keep a daily journal to log their feelings and experiences. This can start as simply as a picture encapsulating part of their day, and build up to include words over time.

They should choose books that they like to read, both independently and with you. Read the same books over again and discuss different themes each time: How do they think the character feels? Why? How would they feel in this situation? Discuss with them moral choices both in literature and in their own lives. Why is sharing important? How could they resolve arguments they may be having with friends? This is also a good age to introduce a children's newspaper to broaden their reading to new and diverse topics, to expand their horizons and to encourage inquisitiveness.

Ages six to eight years

At this age, try to encourage a breadth of learning. Introduce reading in many different forms to look at how language can be used for varying purposes: fiction, factual books, articles, plays and poetry. Discuss the topics that these pieces bring up and ask children for their opinions and reactions to what they are reading. Extend this to other areas of their lives, too – discuss plays or performances that they have seen. Perhaps they could write a book or film review that not only summarises the plot but also explores their emotional reaction to it. They might even discuss these with friends to see how their responses differ.

Ages eight to 11

Read newspapers or watch the news with your children and discuss issues raised both locally and globally. What are the contrasts and comparisons between Hong Kong and other countries? What makes Hong Kong different? Might people from a different country view the same piece

of news in a different way? Read about and discuss other cultures, perhaps choosing books about children their own age who live in different countries or from different periods of history. How can they relate to them and what sets them apart? Perhaps they might like to write to a foreign pen pal to discuss these issues.

Secondary students

As your children move into secondary education, they should begin looking at history, science, literature and geography with a more critical eye. At all stages of their education, encourage opinions, discussion and debate. In essays, as in life, there is usually no such thing as being right or wrong, but rather being effective or not in making your argument. 

Olivia Hungerford and Eleanor Smallwood are the managing directors of British Tutors Ltd, a company which brings the highest standard of academic, one-on-one tuition to homes in Hong Kong. For more information, see www.britishtutors.com.