



# Ethics education for primary schools

## Curriculum

### Introduction

Our core mission is to support students to develop skills in **critical thinking, ethical reasoning** and **collaborative inquiry** – skills essential for students navigating our complex, pressurised world. We equip teachers to deliver lessons which explore a range of ethical issues through scripted materials that are relevant, challenging and age-appropriate. Our ethics program encourages students to both **think for themselves** and **think with others** through discussion.

Our lessons provide a unique opportunity for students to think about and articulate their own views while considering their classmates' diverse range of viewpoints on a set of ethical issues. No particular stance on any topic is promoted.

Students are not told what to think or what the right thing to do is in any situation; they are not expected to converge on a single view.

### Carefully planned lessons

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

**THINK  
REASON  
DISCUSS**   
Ethics education  
for children

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# Creating a community of inquiry



**O**ur distinctive teaching method focuses on producing deep understanding of important concepts, skills and ideas. Our ethics teachers help students form a **community of inquiry**. In this classroom community, students and their teacher work together to critically explore an everyday ethical issue, build on one another's ideas and develop well-reasoned responses. Our teachers facilitate discussions using our highly detailed and expertly

constructed scripts and asking procedural questions – for example, why do you think that, does anyone agree but for a different reason, what might someone who disagrees say?

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

## Our lesson materials provide...

- stories and scenarios with ethical issues in a range of topics
- questions with no easy/straightforward answer
- a balance of philosophical perspectives

## in combination with our ethics teachers who...

- bring the stories and scenarios to life and create a sense of curiosity about the questions they pose
- remain neutral about the ethical dilemmas, which encourages diversity of thinking
- facilitate respectful discussion and model the inquiry process

## ... which prompts 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 express are 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 100 topics on a range of issues



Our curriculum is designed by philosophers and educators, experts in their fields. It includes over 100 topics from Kindergarten through to Year 8. Every topic has been reviewed by the New South Wales Department of Education for age-appropriateness and regularly reviewed by Primary Ethics, taking teacher and student feedback into account to ensure the high quality and relevance of our lesson materials. Each topic includes around 90 minutes of learning, designed to be taught across multiple lessons (lesson duration can be flexible to cater to the needs of individual schools).

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

- when if ever is it okay to be greedy?
- does being fair mean giving everyone the same thing?
- how do we balance the needs of people and animals?

These questions are introduced via stories and scenarios designed to grab student attention, provide important background information

(lessons don't assume existing content knowledge) and prompt students to consider the complexity of situations. The objective is for students to contemplate and discuss the issues, forming their own reasoned view. Students might come to change their mind on some issues or they might become more confident in their original view after carefully weighing the different arguments.

We train ethics teachers to use a range of facilitation skills, including how to be neutral and curious, and aid the process of reasoning and discussion by asking procedural 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



What I like about ethics is that you have an opinion, but when someone else speaks it might change your opinion, so it gets your brain working.

– Y5 ethics student.

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 students become more likely to give their reasoning, consider counter arguments and make links between views, all without being prompted. The effectiveness of our approach is supported by research which demonstrates that regular ethical discussion can lead to significant gains in cognitive ability, reasoning skills, communication skills and empathy.

Our lesson materials are aligned with the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) general capabilities, 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).



# 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 discussion rules. Topics are then delivered in a sequenced order, with ideas introduced and then returned to over the year.

Here is a selection of our topics with their big questions.



## Laziness (Stage 1)

What does it mean to be lazy? Are you being lazy if you find an easier way of doing something? Or if you spend the afternoon watching movies after winning a big game? Or don't do the optional 'extra hard' math questions? And what, if anything, is wrong with being lazy?

## Good reasons (Stage 1)

What's the difference between a good reason and a bad one? One of the most fundamental aspects of an ethics lesson is sharing reasons. This topic is a chance for students to practice giving reasons and thinking about whether the reasons given are good reasons.

## Is lying wrong? (Stage 2)

What counts as lying? Is not speaking up or not telling the whole truth the same as lying? And is lying always wrong? What if you are trying to protect someone's feelings?

## How should we treat living things? (Stage 2)

Is it okay to chop down a living tree? What about poisoning some caterpillars that

are killing a tree – is that okay? Is there a difference between how we should treat insects – like caterpillars – and other animals – like dogs? And when deciding how to treat different animals, does it matter how long they live? How big they are? How intelligent they are? How few of them are left?

## Voting (Stage 3)

Is it okay to vote for someone just because they're your friend? How should we balance self-interest and the needs of others when choosing who to vote for? For example, is it okay to vote for someone whose policies would benefit you but are not in the best interests of everyone? Should voting be compulsory or voluntary? And should voters be well informed? Or should everyone be allowed to vote, regardless of how much thought they've put into their vote?

## Punishment (Stage 3)

What is the point of punishment? Is punishment necessary to stop people from doing the wrong thing? Should people who do the wrong thing be made to 'pay' or make up for what they've done? Do punishments help restore order or 'balance' to the world?

# Topic excerpt – 'When is it fair?' (Stage 1)

## Topic objectives (background information for teachers)

In this topic students consider and discuss what it means to treat people fairly.

Students will think critically and for themselves about:

- whether being fair means giving everyone an equal share

- whether being fair means giving more to those who contributed more
- the importance of working out what being fair means.

## Milly's cake (lesson script for teachers)

Milly is in Mr Raif's class. Today is her birthday and that means a special recess. There will be birthday cake and candles and everyone will sing 'happy birthday'.

That's what always happens in Mr Raif's class when someone has a birthday.

Last night Milly's dad helped her make a wonderful chocolate cake, with creamy icing and chocolate buttons on the top. Now Milly can't wait for recess.

The morning seems to go on and on. At last the bell goes and Mr Raif brings the cake out. Everybody claps. And then, once Milly has made her wish, Mr Raif cuts slice after slice, counting as he goes: 1, 2, 3 ... and on and on until he gets to 16. There are 15 students and Mr Raif makes 16. Mr Raif loves chocolate cake.

So everyone gets a piece. And Mr Raif has been very careful to make each piece the same size. Everyone gets an equal share.

- *Do you think that's fair? Hands up if you do? Show of hands only – don't take responses yet.*
- *Hands up if you don't? Show of hands only – don't take responses yet.*

Well, some of the children in Millie's class don't think it's fair.

*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. Emma thinks she should get two slices. She thinks: 'It's only fair. Everyone knows I'm Milly's best friend'. Do you think it would be fair for Emma to get a bigger piece of cake?

*Ask if students haven't raised these points:*

- *What if Mr Raif had a rule like this: Every time someone has a birthday, his or her best friend gets an extra slice of cake. Would it be fair for Emma to get an extra slice of Milly's cake then?*
- *What about kids who don't have a best friend – maybe someone who is new to the school – would a rule like that be fair to them?*

2. Milly doesn't think Ryan should get a piece. Yesterday, when she fell over in the yard and hurt her knee, Ryan just laughed at her. 'He doesn't deserve any cake,' Milly thought. 'He's so mean.' Is Milly right? Or do you think Ryan deserves a piece just like everyone else?

