



## Why Introduce Philosophy into K–12 Classrooms?

### What is philosophy?

The word “philosophy” comes from the Greek, and is often translated as “love of wisdom.” In ancient times philosophy was understood as the search for wisdom. Many of the concepts philosophers explore have been examined for thousands of years: What is time? What is beauty? What is a good life? What is knowledge?

Philosophy explores questions about fundamental aspects of the world, ourselves and our relation to the world. Philosophical inquiry is therefore not restricted to any particular subject matter. What characterizes a philosophical question is not what it is about, but at what level it is asked. For example, someone might ask whether some social arrangement is fair; a philosopher will ask, “What is fairness?” Philosophy demonstrates that some of the simplest questions we ask are also the most difficult to answer.

### Why introduce philosophy to young people?

The United States is one of the few countries in the world that do not include philosophy as a required subject for high school students. As a result, the subject is unfamiliar and seems esoteric to many people. Really, though, children start asking philosophical questions early in life. What makes someone a friend? Why I am alive? Are stories real?

Children are always wondering about the world in which we live and about the meaning of human life. Exposure to structured philosophy sessions can help young people explore fundamental questions and to articulate reasons for their own views. Philosophy is the oldest, most effective discipline for learning how to think critically and to develop deep analytic and reasoning skills.

### What happens in a pre-college philosophy session?

Philosophy sessions, particularly with younger students, typically begin with some introduction to a philosophical question or questions, which could be a story, an activity, a puzzle, or just the posing of a question. It is most helpful to engage the students in identifying the questions in which they are most interested. Then the bulk of the session is spent discussing these questions. At the end of the session, closure can be provided by summarizing what has been discussed.

For example, the philosophy teacher might read the story *The Hundred Dresses* by Eleanor Estes with the class. This story raises questions about nature of friendship, the ethics of being a bystander, and what moral duties we owe to others. It is a long story and best read with a class over three or four sessions. After the reading, ask the class what questions the story raises for them and list them on the board. You might also have some questions to add to the list; for example, Why do some people have no friends? Is teasing cruel? Then the class spends the next 20–40 minutes, depending on the age of the students and the way the discussion flows, talking about some of the questions listed on the board. You can then spend five minutes or so summing up what the students have said, what conclusions have been drawn and what questions left open, and where the discussion has left the group.

It’s an intellectual adventure for young people to have the opportunity to talk about philosophy in a group, and to recognize that the world is puzzling to all of us! Participating in a philosophical community of inquiry allows young people to express their own perspectives, listen to one another, challenge and build on each another’s thinking, and make better sense of their own views and ideas. The discussion of unsettled and contestable questions helps students to explore the mysteries of human existence and to learn to think for themselves.





## Tips for Successful Pre-College Philosophy Sessions

### Things To Do

- Remember that the whole point is to help the students develop their own thinking.
- Let the discussion flow from the students' questions and ideas. After reading a story or doing an activity, ask, "What questions did this make you think of?"
- Support the students' building on each other's ideas.
- Show the students that what they say makes you think.
- Encourage the students to speak to one another and not just to you.
- Good leading questions to ask in a philosophy session:
  - › "What did you mean when you said \_\_\_\_?"
  - › "That's an interesting idea. Can you explain what you were thinking when you said that?"
  - › "What reasons do you have for saying that?"
  - › "So then do you agree/disagree with \_\_\_\_'s view?"
  - › "How does what you just said relate to what \_\_\_\_ said a moment ago?"
  - › "So if what you just said is true, is \_\_\_\_ also true?"
  - › "When you said \_\_\_\_, were you assuming \_\_\_\_?"

### Things Not To Do

- Tell the students their answers are right or wrong, or give a definitive answer to a philosophical question.
- Allow the students to state their views without giving reasons for them.
- Insist on your own views.
- Be uncomfortable with intervals of silence.
- Permit lengthy discussions of relatively unimportant issues.
- Monopolize the discussion.
- Resolve issues for the students.
- Try to show the students how philosophically sophisticated you are.