



7 Tips for Cultivating Critical Thinking for Kids Throughout the School Year

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In the world of education, the phrase “critical thinking skills” is used so widely, that most of us don’t stop to truly contemplate about what it means for our early learners. Over the years, many educational buzzwords have come and gone, but now more than ever before are teachers and researchers realizing the true importance of planting the seeds for critical analysis.

Most of us already know that our little learners are notoriously concrete learners, which is to say that they tend to think literally about ideas and concepts. Any teacher could tell you that students don’t actually develop the ability to think critically in an authentic way until well into adolescence. So naturally, you might be wondering just how we can go about teaching critical thinking skills to children.



That's why it's important to know that critical thinking isn't just about possessing the skills or ability to be able to do it; instead, teachers and parents must form the foundations for such analysis by cultivating a mindset in which kids are able to develop throughout their elementary and middle school years. As a result, the goal is for students to use such skills effectively as they approach complex topics and ideas in high school.

Before exploring strategies parents and teachers can use to foster critical thinking for kids, it's important to understand exactly what analytical thinking entails and how it helps kids grow into successful adults.

Why Critical Thinking Matters?

Simply put, it is the ability to think clearly and rationally about a complex topic or idea and analyze it in a way that helps us solve problems. Deep analysis over a topic or problem is key to success in college and in our careers, as it helps our society move forward with solutions to our everyday problems. Without it, doctors and researchers wouldn't be able to create different therapies for common ailments, and law enforcement agencies wouldn't be able to solve crimes. In all walks of life, critical thinking is essential to our lives.

[To think critically, kids must have key content knowledge to set the stage for deep analytical thinking! Try our all-in-one learning app to hone academic skills. Try it for free today!](#)

For elementary students who aren't yet developmentally able to think deeply as adults, developing these skills mean that parents and teachers must plant the seeds to form a foundation on which kids can grow their ability to do so. This means that we must encourage a critical thinking mindset, which goes beyond just having the skills themselves; fostering an attitude or frame of mind that allows children to learn to think analytically is what teachers and parents should really strive for. As adults guide elementary school children towards deep thought, they should notice the attributes listed below of a budding critical thinker.

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What Does a Critical Thinker Look or Act Like?

To continue with the above metaphor, once teachers plant the seeds for critical thinking, how do they know if those seeds start to sprout? Pay attention to the following attributes that show a student moving from concrete to critical thinking:

- They approach learning situations with an open mind
- They understand that there might be more than one right (or wrong) answer
- They look for evidence to support their ideas
- They ask questions based upon evidence



If you found the list above eye-opening, don't worry! Kindergarteners certainly do not step foot in the classroom already armed with the above qualities. At this point, you might be wondering how children can reach such a level where they exhibit the mindset above. Let's take a look at strategies to help move kids from literal to analytical!

7 Tips for Cultivating a Positive Critical Thinking Mindset

Whether you're a teacher or a parent, you might be curious what you can do to support your kids in their learning journey. Try the following strategies to unleash your child's inner analytical thinking skills:

- Ask open-ended questions

Think about the last time you read a book with your kids. Chances are, you might have asked a few comprehension questions. But were those questions yes or no questions? Did they necessitate more than a one-worded response? Any question that can be answered using one word is a close-ended question.

Because a student can easily answer them with simple recalled facts, these types of questions are unhelpful when it comes to fostering critical thinking. Instead, ask questions that allows children to think about a response and provide a full sentence (or more!) response. Don't forget to allow students enough time to process information, so be patient while waiting for a response. If they get stuck, give them a small hint to guide them down the right path.

[Set the stage for effective critical thinking by reinforcing key academic knowledge in a fun and engaging way! Check out our Talented and Gifted app to find quality learning games, lessons, worksheets and more, free for 30 days!](#)

- Create an atmosphere where kids aren't afraid to be wrong

Teaching critical thinking in schools is important, but it isn't affective if students are afraid to raise their hand and join in the discussion or answer the question! Oftentimes, kids are reluctant to speak in class because they're afraid of how they will be judged by their peers if they answer incorrectly. Instead, to foster critical thinking skills, create a classroom (or family) environment where they can feel free to think deeply without the fear of being laughed at.

To do this, stress to children that it's okay to be wrong sometimes, and that we learn the most when we learn through our mistakes. Create a strong rapport with children to ensure that they know that you care about them as a person, so they will be willing to take risks, think deeply, and volunteer ideas and answers, even if they might be wrong.

- Connect different ideas and examine relationships between them

During class or family discussions, games, or activities, it's important to connect different ideas together to see the relationships that exist between them. For instance, if a child is volunteering at a soup kitchen for homeless people, they might eventually wonder how people end up in that position where they need such public assistance. This

would be the perfect time to connect different ideas in an age-appropriate way, like poverty, racial inequality, or family issues. Talking about these subjects would help connect certain issues, like poverty, to homelessness, showing the relationship between them.

Kick off a conversation with your little learner after watching a video. Explore topics your kid is curious about and discuss them in a fun and engaging manner! Check the video below to get your conversation rolling:



Watch on [YouTube](#)

- Examine different points of view

Oftentimes children will believe that there is only one “right” way of thinking, when in fact everyone is different and has the right to have varying opinions on complex topics. When faced with a subject like social studies, it’s important to encourage kids to seek out and try to understand topics from others’ point of view. This not only will help kids learn to think critically, it will also make them more compassionate and empathetic towards others.

- Inspire imagination and creativity

It’s hard to think critically about any topic that’s boring for kids! Children are known for their vast imaginations, and it’s important to use it to their full advantage! To do this, think about project-based learning, or allowing kids to have a choice about what topics they explore in [preschool learning worksheets](#) within the wider curriculum. As a teacher, write (guided) student choice into your lesson plans for a particular activity or project. As

a parent, explore ideas your child is interested in through science experiments, art projects, etc.

- **Collaboration: work with a friend!**

As it is often said, two brains are better than one! Working collaboratively with other peers help children consider viewpoints or thoughts that maybe they themselves wouldn't think of naturally on their own. If you're a teacher, plan in group work to allow students the opportunity to bounce ideas of their classmates. As a parent, it's important to find a way your child can work with other children. Organize a play and study group if you have an only child, or if your kids are not similar in age. Otherwise, let kids work together with siblings or cousins as they tackle science experiments or play-based learning.

- **Use evidence to create questions**

One of the best ways to tell if kids are developing the skills they need to become critical thinkers is to observe their reactions to lessons, or projects. As they look at evidence to drive their conclusions, are they actively asking questions of their own? If so, are these questions relevant to what they've observed or learned, or are they more randomized? Guide children to create their own questions based upon what they learn to further help them think more deeply. Over time, children will learn how to use their own questioning to propel their learning to greater heights, coming to conclusions that they wouldn't otherwise have created without their analytical thinking skills!

Teaching critical thinking skills to children might at first seem like an impossible task considering the developmental capabilities of children as our kids tend to think on a more literal level. However, students don't suddenly develop analytical thinking skills overnight, and the process must be taught and reinforced throughout a child's education! Use the tips above to get kids in a critical thinking mindset to prepare them for high school, college, and beyond!

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