

“but why?”

Raising kids who think by **Lora Shinn**

Children have the capacity to boggle the brain of even the most intelligent adult. If something like, “Why’s lying so bad?” doesn’t give you pause, “Do I have to tell the truth, if the truth isn’t nice?” just might.

It’s okay if you don’t have Big Answers for these Big Questions. Your child is demonstrating his natural inclination to speculate, reason, and persuade. And if he were in college instead of second grade, he’d be considered a philosopher. So go with it: Encouraging philosophical conversations can boost a child’s creativity, language, and critical-thinking skills.

Philosophy wraps its arms around some sticky everyday subjects, including ethics, beauty, and logic. “By definition, questions of philosophy do not have one settled answer,” says Jana Mohr Lone, founder of the Northwest Center for Philosophy for Children at the University of Washington in Seattle. Philosophy explores the “how” and “why” of everyday life—something kids do all the time.

For example, when a friend skips a sleepover to hang out with someone else, the situation can spur a deeper discussion about the meaning of friendship. During these conversations, first listen to your child’s observations, without offering your own opinion, says Claudia Mills, Ph.D., a philosophy faculty member at the University of Colorado. Then pose some questions for her to consider: What is a friend? How can you tell if someone is a friend? What does it mean when a friend

Find more kid-friendly philosophical exercises at the blog *Wondering Aloud* (philosophyforchildren.blogspot.com).



makes an “unfriendly” choice? Are you still friends?

By working through a philosophical problem and examining a question from different angles, kids get an intelligent, observational workout. Of course, you also don’t have to split every hair, such as why your son needs to go to sleep when he’s not even tired. It’s okay to insist upon a “Lights out because I said so,” answer and offer to chat about bigger issues later.

You can create philosophical conversations, too. Ask family members to pick a question they don’t think they’ll ever

find an answer for, and write each one down, suggests Marietta McCarty, author of *Little Big Minds: Sharing Philosophy with Kids*. (One you might try: What does it mean to be a good person?) Then when you have time for a leisurely dinner together, enjoy a lively exchange around the table.

Brain-tickling discussions also enrich the heart, according to experts. “Philosophy has deepened my relationship with my kids,” says Lone. “They know I’ll take their questions seriously. A real basis of trust and openness has evolved as a result of our conversations.” ●

Ooh, that’s a toughie

Big issues, and questions to get you started:

Right and wrong: Fiction is a fantastic way to provoke deep philosophical questions. After reading *The Giving Tree* by Shel Silverstein, you might observe: Is it possible to give too much? Can we love books and paper but also dislike chopping down trees?

Time: What is time? Is right now “now,” or has it already become the past? Why does time seem to move fast when you’re having fun? Can you do anything to make time move more slowly—like clean your room?

Identity: Pull out a baby album and marvel over how your child has grown and changed, even as some food preferences or personal qualities might’ve stayed the same, author Marietta McCarty suggests. Who are you? Who will you be a few years from now? What makes you different from everyone or everything else?

Happiness: What does it mean to be happy? Is it different from feeling pleasure? What are some simple pleasures that can lead to happiness?