PHILOSOPHY FOR CHILDREN
A PEDAGOGICAL INTRODUCTION

Alex Richardson, Ph.D., Jamie Herman, Ph.D.
The Prindle Institute for Ethics, DePauw University

OVERVIEW

Philosophy for Children (P4C) is a global educational movement grounded in a simple but powerful conviction: children are natural philosophers. From a young age, they ask genuine questions about fairness, friendship, courage, truth, identity, and what makes a life meaningful. Too often, these questions are brushed aside, answered too quickly, or postponed for later. Philosophy for Children takes the opposite approach. It treats children's questions as serious invitations to inquiry and creates structured, supportive spaces where young people can think together about life's biggest ideas.

The approach outlined here understands Philosophy for Children as a form of ethical inquiry rooted in dialogue, curiosity, and respect. It builds on decades of philosophical scholarship and classroom practice while remaining flexible, accessible, and developmentally appropriate. Whether in classrooms, libraries, museums, or homes, the goal is not to teach children what to think, but to help them learn how to think together—carefully, imaginatively, and with openness to disagreement.

A TRADITION OF INQUIRY

The roots of Philosophy for Children can be traced to the work of Matthew Lipman and Ann Margaret Sharp in the 1970s. They challenged the assumption that philosophy belongs only to adults, arguing instead that children are capable of rigorous, meaningful inquiry when given the right structure and support. Their Community of Philosophical Inquiry (CPI) model reimagined learning as a collaborative process: students sit together, encounter a shared text or experience, raise questions that matter to them, and explore those questions through dialogue rather than lecture.

Philosopher Gareth Matthews further reinforced this vision by documenting how children spontaneously raise philosophical questions that mirror those of professional philosophers—questions about death, knowledge, justice, identity, and reality. His work made clear that children do not need philosophy imported into their lives; it is already there, waiting to be taken seriously.

Thomas Wartenberg's Teaching Children Philosophy approach builds on this foundation by pairing philosophical inquiry with children's literature. Picture books, already central to children's lives, provide rich narrative and emotional contexts that naturally raise philosophical questions without offering easy answers. A story about sharing can spark inquiry into fairness. A tale about an imaginary friend can open discussion about imagination and reality. Philosophy emerges not as an abstract subject, but as a way of making sense of stories children already love.

This approach is especially influential in our work, as the Prindle Institute serves as the institutional home of the Teaching Children Philosophy digital library—a resource that grew directly out of Wartenberg's scholarship and classroom

practice. By stewarding and continuing to develop this collection, the Institute carries forward a vision of philosophy with children that is accessible, literature-based, and rooted in children's natural curiosity about big ideas.

THE COMMUNITY OF PHILOSOPHICAL INQUIRY

At the heart of this pedagogy is the Community of Philosophical Inquiry. A CPI is not a debate, a free-for-all discussion, or a lesson disguised as conversation. It is a carefully facilitated form of dialogue in which children work together to explore a shared philosophical question. What distinguishes a CPI from ordinary classroom talk is its emphasis on collective reasoning, mutual respect, and the ongoing refinement of ideas.

A CPI typically begins after a shared stimulus—most often a picture book—has been read aloud. Rather than moving directly to pre-set questions, children are invited to articulate what the story made them wonder about. These questions are taken seriously, recorded, and treated as legitimate starting points for inquiry. This moment is pedagogically significant: it signals that philosophy begins not with expert answers, but with genuine puzzlement.

Once several questions have been raised, the group selects one to explore together. The chosen question becomes the shared focus of the inquiry. From there, the conversation unfolds through a process of reason-giving, listening, responding, and revising. Children are encouraged to explain why they think what they think, to offer examples, to challenge ideas respectfully, and to build on one another's contributions.

The facilitator plays a crucial but deliberately limited role. Rather than steering the group toward a predetermined conclusion, the facilitator supports the inquiry by shaping the conditions under which good thinking can happen. This includes asking clarifying questions, inviting quieter participants into the conversation, slowing the pace when ideas become tangled, and highlighting points of agreement or disagreement. Simple moves—such as asking "What makes you say that?" or "Does anyone see it differently?"—help deepen the dialogue without taking it over.

Disagreement is central to the CPI model, but it is disagreement of a particular kind. Children learn that disagreement is not about winning or being right, but about understanding ideas more fully. They are encouraged to critique reasons rather than people, to listen carefully before responding, and to remain open to changing their minds. Over time, this practice helps children develop intellectual humility and resilience: they come to see uncertainty not as a failure, but as a natural part of inquiry.

Equally important are the norms that sustain a CPI. Norms such as taking turns, listening attentively, giving reasons, and treating others' ideas with respect are not merely classroom management tools. They are ethical commitments that make shared inquiry possible. When these norms are established and revisited regularly, children begin to internalize them, carrying habits of respectful dialogue beyond philosophy sessions and into other areas of their lives.

Through repeated participation in a CPI, children learn how to think together. They experience what it means to belong to a community where ideas matter, voices are valued, and understanding is built collaboratively rather than imposed from above.

WHY PHILOSOPHY FOR CHILDREN?

Philosophy with children matters because it takes young people seriously as thinkers. Children do not simply absorb ideas about the world; they actively try to make sense of it. They notice inconsistencies, question rules, and wonder about what is fair, real, or meaningful. Philosophy for Children creates structured opportunities for this sense-making to happen out loud and together.

Research consistently shows that regular participation in philosophical inquiry supports critical thinking, reading comprehension, and collaborative learning. In a Community of Philosophical Inquiry, children practice articulating their ideas clearly, giving reasons for their views, and listening carefully to others. These skills transfer across subjects, strengthening literacy, discussion, and problem-solving throughout the curriculum. Just as importantly, children gain confidence in their own voices as they learn that their ideas are worth examining and refining.

Philosophy with children is also a form of ethical education. Many of the questions that arise naturally in stories—about fairness, harm, responsibility, belonging, and care—are moral questions at their core. Exploring them together helps children develop empathy and perspective-taking. They learn that reasonable people can disagree, that disagreement does not require disrespect, and that understanding often deepens when we take time to listen to one another. These are not only intellectual skills, but ethical ones.

Beyond individual development, Philosophy for Children supports democratic habits of mind. In a CPI, children experience what it means to participate in a community where every voice matters, reasons count, and ideas are evaluated collaboratively rather than imposed by authority. They practice patience, openness, and intellectual humility —capacities that are essential for life in a pluralistic society.

Ultimately, Philosophy for Children helps young people see philosophy not as a distant academic subject, but as a shared human practice. It affirms that big questions are not reserved for experts and that thinking carefully together is both possible and worthwhile. In a world marked by polarization and uncertainty, these habits of inquiry and dialogue are not optional extras; they are foundational.

One of the strengths of Philosophy for Children is its flexibility. Because it begins with stories and children's own questions, it can thrive in many settings: classrooms, after-school programs, homes, libraries, and museums. Across these venues, the goal remains the same: to create communities where children's questions are taken seriously, their reasoning is respected, and inquiry becomes a shared, joyful practice.

PHILOSOPHY AS A SHARED PRACTICE

Philosophy for Children is not about producing young philosophers in the academic sense. It is about nurturing thoughtful, curious, and caring human beings—people who can listen well, reason together, and engage disagreement with integrity. With a story, a question, and a community willing to wonder together, children discover something powerful: the big questions of life are not reserved for experts. They belong to all of us.

GETTING STARTED: GUIDANCE FOR FACILITATORS

Philosophical conversation with children begins simply—with a story, a question, and a conversation. You don't need to be a philosopher to lead these discussions. What matters most is curiosity, patience, and a willingness to take children's questions seriously.

Children in grades K–5 are naturally curious and often raise profound questions about fairness, friendship, truth, and identity. The goal of a philosophical discussion is not to supply them with final answers, but to create a space where their ideas can be heard and explored. Keeping language simple, avoiding heavy jargon, and tying every idea back to the story they've just heard helps ensure the conversation is developmentally appropriate.

A typical session begins with a picture book read aloud. Sharing a story gives everyone a common starting point. As you read, pause occasionally to look closely at the illustrations, notice the emotions of the characters, or invite quick observations. This kind of attentive reading sets the stage for the questions that follow.

Once the story is finished, the Community of Philosophical Inquiry begins. Invite children to share the questions the story sparked for them. Write them down or repeat them so everyone can hear. Choose one to explore together, and then shift into dialogue.

Here the facilitator plays a crucial role. You are not there to lecture or to give the "right" answer, but to guide the group's inquiry. In practice this means:

- Helping children build on one another's contributions, by connecting ideas across comments.
- Asking for reasons: *"Why do you think that?"* or *"What makes you say so?"*
- Encouraging respectful disagreement: *"Does anyone see it differently?"*
- Making space for quieter voices while managing dominant ones.
- Modeling openness by admitting when you don't know and showing comfort with uncertainty.
- Keeping the group focused on the chosen question, while staying flexible if the conversation takes a promising new turn.

Think of yourself as both a conductor and a participant: you help orchestrate the flow of voices, while also sharing your own curiosity in a way that supports—not overshadows—the children's ideas.

When the discussion begins to wind down, take a few minutes to reflect together. Ask questions like, "What did we discover today?" or "Did anyone hear something that made them think differently?" This reflection helps children recognize philosophy as an ongoing process rather than a hunt for final answers.

Philosophy with children is not about producing young philosophers in the academic sense. It is about nurturing thoughtful, caring, and inquisitive human beings. With a story, a question, and a facilitator ready to guide the process, children can discover that big ideas are theirs to explore.

Discussion Norms for Inquiries with Children

One of the most important steps in creating a successful Community of Philosophical Inquiry is establishing discussion norms. Children thrive when they know what is expected of them, and philosophy works best when everyone feels safe, heard, and respected. Norms help set the tone for dialogue: they remind students that we are doing something different from ordinary classroom conversation, and they model habits of democratic exchange—listening carefully, offering reasons, and welcoming disagreement. These skills don't develop overnight, which is why it is crucial to revisit and

practice the norms often. Over time, children come to see the norms not as rules imposed from above, but as shared commitments that make inquiry possible and enjoyable.

Here is a set of simple, child-friendly norms you can use or adapt with your group:

- We raise our hands before we speak.
- We never speak when someone else is speaking.
- We listen carefully to what is being said.
- We don't have side conversations.
- We are respectful of others' opinions.
- We justify our opinions by giving reasons for them.
- Disagreement is good, so long as it is done with respect.
- We have fun thinking together!

When these expectations are clear and practiced, children gain confidence in sharing their voices, responding thoughtfully to one another, and recognizing that even disagreement can be constructive. The norms aren't just classroom management tools—they are the foundation of a community of inquiry.

General Advice for New Facilitators

Leading a philosophical discussion with children can feel intimidating at first. It's hard to predict what students might say, and the unpredictability can feel daunting. But that openness is also what makes philosophy with children exciting. Here are some pieces of advice to help you prepare and lead your first Community of Philosophical Inquiry (CPI).

Be prepared. Familiarize yourself with the book, the discussion questions, and the philosophical themes in advance. Read the story out loud and practice bringing real energy to your delivery—maybe even rehearse with a friend. Look through the suggested questions and identify a few that feel most important. The more comfortable you are with the material, the more confident you'll be in guiding children toward meaningful dialogue.

Show excitement. Your energy sets the tone. Children respond to facilitators who are genuinely interested in them and in the conversation. Even if you feel nervous, let your enthusiasm shine through—show that you're excited to be there and eager to hear their ideas.

Listen carefully. It's tempting to move quickly through a list of questions, but resist that urge. Pay attention to what children say and use follow-up questions to deepen their thinking. There's no pressure to "cover" everything. If one question sparks a lively discussion, stay with it. The goal isn't to get through a script—it's to nurture inquiry.

Mark progress. Help children recognize what they've accomplished together. Pause to summarize where the discussion has gone, highlight points of disagreement, or celebrate moments of insight. Simple markers—"We've heard two different ideas about fairness today"—give children a sense of progress and encourage them to keep thinking.

Facilitate, don't dominate. Remember, your role is to guide, not to give answers. Encourage children to respond to one another rather than always directing their comments back to you. Use prompts like: "What do the rest of you think about what Maya just said?" or "Does anyone see it differently?" or "Let's each share an example." These moves keep the focus on dialogue rather than lecture.

Enjoy the process. Philosophy with children can be funny, surprising, and profound. Stay open to their curiosity and allow yourself to learn from them. Children are natural philosophers, and their insights often stretch our own thinking. Relax, listen, and enjoy the experience of wondering together.

Quick Tips for Facilitating a Philosophical Inquiry

- **Start with a story**: Read a picture book aloud slowly, pausing to notice illustrations and character emotions.
- **Ask for questions**: Invite children to share what puzzled or interested them. Write or repeat their ideas.
- **Choose one to explore**: Select a question together and use it as the focus of discussion.
- **Guide, don't answer**: Encourage children to give reasons, listen carefully, and respond to one another. Use prompts like *"Why do you think that?"* or *"Does anyone see it differently?"*
- **Keep it age-appropriate**: Use simple language, connect ideas back to the story, and let children's curiosity set the pace.
- **Reflect together**: End by asking what the group discovered or how their thinking changed.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

For educators, facilitators, and families interested in exploring this work further, the Prindle Institute maintains a growing collection of Philosophy for Children resources, including the *Teaching Children Philosophy* digital library, facilitator guides, and curated classroom collections. More information and free discussion materials are available at **prindleinstitute.org/tcp**.