

## ***PHILOSOPHY FOR CHILDREN***

***Maria Kasmirli***

### ***1. About myself***

- BA Hons degree (Philosophy and Sociology) from Keele University UK, with Subsidiary in Education.
- MA in Philosophy from University of Sheffield UK
- Studying for PhD at the University of Sheffield UK, working in the area of philosophy of language. Currently writing up part-time, due to kids and work.
- Lots of experience of teaching. Since 1997 I have taught undergraduates, adults, children, teachers, and spoken in numerous conferences, including one on how to teach philosophy.
- I enjoy philosophy, teaching, and spending time with kids. Philosophy for children combines all these interests!
- My partner Keith is also very interested in this and is planning to write a book on philosophy of mind for kids. Keith is a professional philosopher and has written several academic books.

### ***2. The Philosophy for Children movement “P4C”***

- The Philosophy for Children movement started in 1970s in America. It is becoming more and more popular all over the world, as research is showing the cognitive benefits for children who study philosophy.
- People used to think that you couldn't teach philosophy to pre-teens because their mental abilities were not developed enough for abstract thinking. But more recent research has show that this is not the case. Children as young as four are capable of basic philosophical thinking. And there are big advantages to starting as young as possible—though four is probably the limit.
- Another objection is that it's hard to assess students' progress in philosophy because there are no right answers. But you don't need to assess it specifically *as philosophy*, since improvements show up in students' work in all subject areas. Philosophy is basically clear thinking and clear thinking is utilised in all subjects.
- Another worry is that philosophy might encourage students to question everything and become hard to teach. But this misses the point of what philosophy is. It is not just about questioning, but about thinking rationally about different possible *answers* to questions. And again this makes students better learners overall.
- There is a world-wide body that promotes philosophy for children – the International Council for Philosophical Inquiry with Children (ICPIC). This provides advice for teachers, publishes support materials, organises conferences and seminars, and so on. I'm currently applying for membership and hoping to start up a branch in Greece.

### 3. *But what actually is philosophy for kids?*

- We can distinguish two things we might mean by ‘philosophy’:
- On the one hand there is *academic philosophy*. This is an academic discipline which has produced a huge body of literature on various deep and difficult topics, e.g. theory of knowledge, the nature of the mind, metaphysics, aesthetics, ethics. Most of this literature is far too difficult for children.
- On the other hand there is *critical thinking*. This is a method of thinking and reasoning which can be applied to practically any topic. And this is what I would be starting the children on.
- I would use simple problems they might encounter in their daily lives – for example, ethical ones relating to bullying, fairness, lying, stealing.
- I might also introduce simple problems philosophy of mind and epistemology, such as whether the mind is separate from the body, whether humans are animals, how you know that you’re not dreaming, how far you can doubt things.
- It is also possible to do very simple logic with children – for example, by asking if sentences reverse (e.g. all birds fly, but does that reverse – are all flying things birds).
- The way we introduce this is by describing simple everyday scenarios using storytelling, puppet theatre, or role playing. The scenarios involve children who encounter some problem and take different views about it – for example, about the rightness or wrongness of what somebody did. Then you invite get the children in the class to express their own views on the matter, and gradually get them to debate with each other, listening to their friends’ views, and giving reasons for their own.
- The role of the teacher is to be a **facilitator**, not a lecturer.
- One huge benefit of this is that children learn to listen and respect each other. It transforms the classroom into a ‘community of inquiry’ in which students openly and respectfully exchange ideas. So they learn respect, tolerance, and empathy.
- In effect, what you’re doing is teaching them that when they disagree each other, they shouldn’t get angry and start shouting, but offer reasons for their views, listen to the reasons the other person has for theirs, and be prepared to change their views, if the other person’s reasons are better than theirs.
- The aim is that you get children that are smarter, better informed, more tolerant, more respectful of themselves and each other, and better able to play a constructive role in society.

### 4. *Philosophy for teachers and parents*

- I’m also interested in running informal classes for parents and teachers, teaching them how to use these techniques themselves in the classroom and at home.