

How important are the reasons?

by Dr Sue Knight

Topic objectives

This topic aims to engage students in the practice of reason giving and to encourage them to think for themselves about the importance of this practice.

This topic aims to build on students' intuitive capacity for reason giving by encouraging them to think for themselves about

- Whether it is important to have good reasons for what we believe and do; and
- Whether it is always okay to follow a directive or copy the behavior of others without understanding the reasons on which the directive or action is based.

Background to the topic for teachers

This topic is related closely to the Stage 1 (odd year) topic, 'Good reasons'. These two topics are designed so that students can tackle them in any order.

About the topic

Children hold a great many beliefs, and often state those beliefs very forthrightly. We commonly hear assertions such as, 'My sister's always mean to me' or 'It's not fair that my mum spends all day looking after my baby sister'. Moreover, they are equally forthright about their decisions or choices. For example, 'Whatever you say, I'm not going to my dance class next week', or 'I've chosen to go to the beach rather than the zoo', or 'I'm not going to share my chips with Jen'. Yet, children are unlikely to think much about the reasons on which their beliefs are based or articulate the reasons behind their decisions or choices unless they are challenged to do so.

At the same time, children intuitively ask others for reasons: 'Why do we have to go home now?' or 'Why can't I have another ice cream?' or 'Why should I share my chips with Jen?' Moreover, they display an intuitive feel for what counts as a good (or bad) reason. Children are rarely satisfied when our first response to such a request is a simple appeal to authority: 'Because I said so'. Yet, as is well known, children tend to simply copy the behaviour of role models such as authority figures or peers without thinking about the reasons underlying these behaviours.

In this topic we work with students' intuitive notions of 'reason' and 'good reason' to encourage them to reflect on the importance of having reasons for our beliefs and decisions and of making an effort to unearth the reasons that lie behind the beliefs and decisions of others. It is important to stress that here we are not concerned to have children recognise the standards that distinguish good from bad reasons explicitly. This will be the focus of later topics.

Reasons, good reasons and why they are important

Why is it so important that our beliefs and decisions or choices (and the actions that flow from them) are based on good reasons? The obvious answer is that this strategy gives us the best chance of forming true beliefs and making the best decisions or choices, or in the case of moral judgments and actions, doing what is right.

Reasons for beliefs and opinions

Briefly, a reason that is put forward to support a belief or opinion must be connected in some way to that belief or opinion, so it must be relevant to the belief. Children may express this relationship by saying that the combination of reason and belief must 'make sense'. For example, suppose a child says, 'The world is round' and offers, as support, the claim that monkeys eat grapes. Clearly, although it might be true that monkeys eat grapes, this has nothing to do with the shape of the world. That monkeys eat grapes is irrelevant to the claim it is supposed to support. And therefore, it cannot give us any reason to believe that the world is round. One option in such cases is to deny that the claim counts as a reason for the belief it is supposed to support. Another is to hold that any statement offered in support of a belief or opinion counts as reason, so that, in examples where the supporting claims are irrelevant, the reasons are simply very bad ones.

However, a reason can be relevant to a claim, yet not provide sufficient support for it. For example, suppose a child states that cheetahs run the fastest of all animals on earth, and gives as his reason that cheetahs can run at up to 120 km/h. If his reason is true (as it is), it is clearly relevant. But, to justify his statement that the cheetah is the fastest land animal, he would have to add a second reason: that no other land animal can run that fast. In combination, these reasons are strong enough to justify the child's statement. (Sometimes though, a single claim is all that is required. For example, a child states that she can't take part in a PE lesson, and offers as a reason that she has sprained her ankle. As long as this reason is true, it would seem to be both relevant and strong enough to justify her statement.)

Reasons for decisions and choices

Reasons that we put forward to support decisions or choices - what we might call practical reasons - have a very direct link with our actions. These reasons include statements of our goals, and of our beliefs about how to attain them. For example, given a choice between going to the zoo or the beach, I might say, 'I'd rather go to the beach because then I'll be able to practice my breaststroke before the swimming carnival.' Stated in full, the argument is: I want to do as well as I possibly can in the breaststroke race at the swimming carnival; to do that I need to practise; if we go to the beach I can practise; doing as well as I possibly can in the breaststroke race is more important to me than looking at animals in the zoo; so I'd rather go to the beach than the zoo. In the case of practical reasons too, the reasons must be relevant to the choice or decision that is made. And again, they must be strong enough to support the decision or choice. For example, suppose a child says, 'I'm not going to dance class next week because today someone in the class accidentally stepped on my toe. Of course, it didn't really hurt...'. Here it would seem that her reason is not strong enough to support her decision.

In general then, good reasons are relevant and strong. It is important to stress that here we are not concerned to have children recognise these standards explicitly. This will be the focus of later topics.

As indicated above, in this topic we aim to scaffold students' thinking so that they begin to reflect on the processes of giving reasons themselves and unearthing the reasons of others. More particularly we aim to encourage students to think for themselves about the importance of these processes.

Topic Structure and Resources

Aim of lesson	Resources
<p>Lesson 1: Giving reasons</p> <p>This lesson aims to engage students in reason-giving through a game, helping students to recognise that reason-giving is a familiar process. Using scenarios, students are then asked to make choices and justify them.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Question cards
<p>Lesson 2: Is it important to know the reasons?</p> <p>This lesson encourages students to speculate about the reasons of others and to think for themselves about the importance of having reasons to back our decisions and actions.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Images of echidnas, ants and kangaroos – images 1 - 7

References

<p>Lesson 1 Question cards</p>	<p>Images in the question cards are licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 3.0 Unported</p>
<p>Lesson 2 The Echidnas and the Kangaroos story</p>	<p>All images are licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 2.5 Generic license.</p> <p>Echidnas: http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/c/c9/Wild_shortbeak_echidna.jpg http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/d/de/Echinda_burningwell.jpg http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Echidna_ground.jpg</p> <p>Kangaroos: http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Eastern_Grey_Kangaroo_joey_04.jpg http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/5/5d/RedRoo.JPG</p> <p>Ants: http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/a/a1/Camponotus_aeneopilosus_swarm.jpg</p> <p>* The names Wynken, Blynken, and Nod are taken from a well- known poem for children written by American writer and poet Eugene Field (published 1889).</p>

Lesson 1: Giving reasons

For this lesson you will need

- Question cards

Questions and reasons – group activity

10 minutes

Note to teachers – this activity can be run in two ways depending on the size of your class.

In this topic we are going to be thinking about reasons. *Write 'reasons' on the board or hold up that word on a printed or written page.*

Option 1: For groups of 12 or less. I am going to go round the circle and ask each of you a question. I might ask you, 'What's your favourite TV show?' or 'What's your favourite animal?', or 'What's your favourite game or sport or movie or animal?' You'll get a bit of time to think before you answer, and then I will ask you another question: 'Why do you like it so much?' and you have to try to give us a reason why you like it. You'll get a bit of time to think about that too.

For example, if I was asked about my favourite colour I would have to think about that and I think I would say *....give it some thought...* '[yellow]'. Then I would have to say why I like it so much and I would say '[because it reminds me of sunny days at the beach].' *This is a chance for you to model thinking about the reasons so take some time thinking it over – put your own answers into the brackets above.*

Go around the circle asking each child a different question from the list below, allow them a few seconds to think, if needed remind the rest of the class that they need to be quiet for others to think. Follow each response with: 'Why do you like it so much?' If a student is having trouble finding an answer, say you will come back to them (make sure you do this, writing a note can help you remember which student and question to return to). Use only the following topics:

What's your favourite:	TV show	song
	book or story	animal
	game	day of the week
	movie	month of the year
	sport	thing to do on the weekend
	colour	place to visit

Why do you like it so much?

If a student answers "I just do" as the reason, say you'll come back to them when they have thought of a reason that gives more information, or ask if another student can help.

Note: The above activity is also in the odd year topic 'Good Reasons,' with different questions. All or some students in your class may have done 'Good Reasons' last year and may recall that this is a similar activity – that's fine, just say you'll be expecting really thoughtful answers.

Option 2: For classes of over 12 students. Ask the whole group 'Who has a favourite TV show?' and choose a student with their hand up then follow with 'Why do you like it so much?' and so on using the topics above.

Discussion in pairs

5 minutes

Next we are going to think about choosing and the reasons we have for choosing one thing over another. You are going to start by discussing a question in pairs. *Establish the pairs students will work in.*

This is the question I want to you discuss with your partner:

 Suppose your parents have decided that your family should have a pet (or another pet if you already have one), and your mum says to you, 'We can have either a dog or a cat. We're going let you choose – but you will have to give us a good reason for your choice.'

Now turn to your partner and discuss what you would choose and what reason you would give your parents.

Give the students 1 minute to discuss this in pairs, walk around to each pair to check they are on task.

Now I would like everyone back in the circle. Tell us what you decided in your pairs. *Go around as many pairs as you can in the time you have and ask for their responses to both parts of the question.*

I'm going to read out another scenario now and I want you to listen carefully.

 Matt's father asks him to choose between a cat and a dog, and to give a good reason for his choice. Matt says, 'I'd like a cat, because watermelons don't grow on trees.'

 Has Matt given his dad a good reason? *Only take a few responses*

 Why isn't it a good reason? *Only take a few responses*

Question cards

15 minutes

Now we need 4 groups. *Arrange the students into 4 groups using your preferred method.*

Listen carefully to my instructions. Each group will receive one of these question cards. The questions on the cards ask you to make a choice between the two places in the pictures. Let's read all the cards before you start discussing them.

Show the class each card as you read out the text, point to the pictures as you mention them. The text on the question cards is repeated here:

1. It's school holidays, and your dad says you can have a treat. 'We can either go to see a movie, or go to the zoo', he says. 'You can choose - but you'll need to give me a good reason for your choice.' What would you choose, and what reason would you give your dad?
2. It's nearly your birthday and your mum says you can have a party. You can have it either at home or at the park. 'You can choose', she says - 'but you'll have to give me a good reason for your choice.'
3. It's a very hot weekend in summer, and everyone is looking for a way to keep cool. 'We can either go to the beach, or go to the pool', your parents say. 'You can choose, but you will have to give us a good reason for your choice.'
4. It's Friday afternoon and, just before the end of the day, your teacher says to the class, 'What do you want to do in art next week? We can do some more painting, or we can do some string art. You can choose, but you will have to give me a good reason for your choice.'

Once you have read out all the cards, hand one to each group.

Now discuss which option you would choose and your reasons – remember, you don't all need to agree but you do all need to tell each other your reasons. *Allow 1 to 2 minutes for the discussion, visit each group to make sure they are on task. Once the time is up, regain the students' attention and*

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ask each group:

What answers and reasons did you come up with? *You may need to prompt students to give their reasons as well as the answers, however, don't be too concerned if the reasons aren't particularly 'good' reasons so long as they make sense.*

Option: *If you are not yet confident enough with managing the children into groups you can run this as a whole group discussion using one card at a time, however, groups are preferable to allow children to practice small group discussion.*

End the lesson

In the next lesson we are going to be thinking some more about reasons.

Lesson 2: Is it important to know the reasons?

For this lesson you will need

- Images 1 - 7

Remember last lesson

2 minutes

👉 Who can remember what we talked about in the last lesson? *Take some responses.*

Today we are going to think some more about reasons, especially reasons that are good and reasons that are not so good.

We are going to start with a story today and you will need to listen carefully because I'm going to ask you some questions about the story.

Story: The Echidnas and the Kangaroos

28 minutes

The story we are going to hear is called 'The Echidnas and the Kangaroos'

📖 Once upon a time, in the days when animals could talk, there were three echidnas who lived side by side in a great forest.

👉 Does anyone know anything about echidnas? *Take some facts from the children then ask the questions to follow, unless they have been covered already. For the purpose of the story it is important the children find out what echidnas eat.*

👉 What do they look like? *Take a few responses then, if needed: They are spiny aren't they?*

👉 What do echidnas eat? *Take a few responses then, if needed: Echidnas eat ants and termites. They have long, sticky tongues that they use to eat the ants.*

👉 What are echidnas' babies called, does anyone know? *Take a few responses then, if needed: Their babies are called puggles.*

Show Images 1 to 4. Here are some pictures of echidnas and here are some of the ants that they eat.



The echidnas were called Wynken, Blynken and Nod*. Every day, when the sun was directly overhead, Wynken, Blynken and Nod came together at the waterhole to drink and to swim and to talk.

👉 Does anyone know what time it is when the sun is directly overhead? *Take a few responses then, if no one has mentioned it, add: Usually the sun is directly overhead at mid-day and that's when the echidnas went to the waterhole each day.*

The echidnas talked about many things: how hot it was - or how cold, where to find the juiciest ants and what the other animals - the koalas, the kangaroos and the wombats - were doing.

The kangaroos and the echidnas were good friends. They did what they could to help each other. When the kangaroos sensed danger, they thumped their tails on the ground, so that the echidnas would know to burrow down into the ground and hide.

And the echidnas tried to help the kangaroos too. The part of the forest where the animals lived was home to millions of ants. When the kangaroos stopped to eat, the ants came out of their nests and swarmed all over the kangaroos' long feet, biting and stinging. When that happened, the echidnas came and gobbled up as many ants as they could for their dinner. But although they did their best, the ants just kept on coming and biting and stinging. And the joeys were so

afraid of the ants that they wouldn't hop down from their mothers' pouches to eat.

One day, Nod came late to the waterhole. He scurried along towards his friends, puffing and panting so hard that he could barely speak.

'The kangaroos are moving' he gasped.

- 👉 Who knows something about kangaroos? *Take some facts from the children then ask the questions to follow, unless they have been covered already.*
- 👉 What are their babies called, does anyone know? *Take a few responses then, if needed: Their babies are called joeys and they live in their mothers' pouches.*
- 👉 What do kangaroos look like? *Take a few responses then, if needed: They have strong back legs that they stand on, with big feet and long tails and they hop, sometimes very fast.*
- 👉 What is a group of kangaroos called, does anyone know? *Take a few responses then, if needed: A group of kangaroos is called a mob.*
- 👉 What do kangaroos eat? *Take a few responses then, if needed: They eat plants, including grass and leaves and can go a long time without water if they need to.*

Show Images 5 to 7. Here are some pictures of kangaroos. See the joey in its mother's pouch?



Let's get back to the story.

- 👉 Who can remember what Nod said when he came puffing and panting to the waterhole?

'The kangaroos are moving' Nod gasped.

'But why?' asked Wynken.

'Never mind that', Nod said. 'We should hurry and follow them.'

'They must have some reason', Blynken said.

- 👉 Do you agree with Blynken? Do you think that the kangaroos have a reason for moving?
- 👉 If so, what do you think it might be? Can you guess why the kangaroos are moving? *Take a few responses.*

Wynken and Blynken made some guesses about why the kangaroos were moving. Let's see what they guessed.

'Perhaps the men are coming to hunt them,' said Blynken.

'Perhaps they've found a bigger waterhole - one that will never dry up,' said Wynken.

'Or a paddock with sweeter grass,' said Blynken.

'In any case,' said Wynken, 'we must find out their reason for moving.'

'What does it matter?' cried Nod.

And then the three echidnas felt the ground shake. And they heard a familiar sound: 'Thump! Thump! Thump!'

'The kangaroos are moving! They're going now!' cried Nod. 'And so am I.'

And he scurried off and disappeared into the bushes. Wynken and Blynken didn't move. They were both thinking the same thing: 'What will happen to Nod now?'

- 👉 Do you think Nod would have been able to keep up with the kangaroos?
- 👉 What do you think might happen to him? *Take a few responses.*

Let's find out...

The days went by, and Wynken and Blynken heard no news of Nod. They asked the eagle to watch out for him as she flew over the paddocks looking for mice. She could see a long way. But she saw no sign of Nod. Wynken and Blynken were very sad. They thought they would never see Nod again.

But then, one day when they were sitting and talking by the waterhole, they heard a rustling in the long grass.

'Who is it?' called Wynken.

And a tiny voice answered, 'It's me!'

There was Nod. He was dirty and his long nose was covered in scratches. And he was very thin.

'What happened?' asked Blynken.

'It was so hard, keeping up with the kangaroos', Nod said. 'But I found them, in a beautiful grassy clearing, pretty much like this. And they were very happy.'

'Why were they so happy?' asked Wynken. 'They had a beautiful grassy clearing right here.'

'Because', Nod said, 'there were hardly any ants. Even the joeys could hop about on the grass without being bitten.'

'So that's why they moved', Blynken said.

'Nod', said Wynken, 'why did you come back?' And as soon as he'd asked the question, he knew the answer.

 Can you guess why Nod came back? *Take a few responses.*

Let's find out...

Nod said, 'There were no ants. And no termites either. There was nothing for me to eat. I was so hungry.'

'And,' he went on, 'I missed my friends.'

So Wynken, Blynken and Nod wandered off together, scratching in the dirt for ants just as they used to do in the days before the kangaroos moved.

 Did Nod find out the reason why the kangaroos moved? Do you know what their reason was?

Encourage discussion of the following questions, asking students their reasons for their answers and checking whether anyone has a different view point:

1. Would it have been better for Nod if he'd found out the kangaroos' reason before he followed them? Why?
2. Before Nod scurried off after the kangaroos, Wynken said to him, 'The kangaroos must have a reason. We must find out what it is before we follow them'. Was Wynken right?

End the lesson

That's the end of this topic. Do you think it is important to try and understand the reasons behind the things that we and other people do? That is something you can go on thinking about.

~~~END OF TOPIC~~~

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