

Disagreeing Respectfully

by Dr Sue Knight

Topic objectives

This topic invites students to think for themselves about disagreement and, more particularly, about the distinction between what we will call ‘respectful’ and ‘disrespectful’ disagreement. Students are encouraged to think for themselves about:

- What it means to disagree with another person’s ideas;
- Whether voicing disagreement is always disrespectful;
- (If not) what respectful disagreement looks like. More particularly, whether it involves
 - Refraining from put downs and
 - The giving of reasons;
- Whether there are times when it’s disrespectful *not* to voice disagreement; and
- Whether disagreeing with someone helps you work out what you think.

Background to the topic for teachers

The Primary Ethics curriculum: encouraging the evaluation of beliefs

The discussions that take place in Primary Ethics classes are aimed not only at helping students become clearer about their own ethical views, but also at encouraging them to evaluate those views and the views put forward by others. Michael Pritchard explains the dangers of ignoring the evaluative element:

Programs [focused solely on “values clarification”] do help students become clearer about their own values, [but at the same time discourage] children ...from making evaluative or critical remarks about one another’s values. Thus, respect is shown for each student’s point of view, and charges of indoctrination in the classroom are avoided. However, the underlying message [would seem to be] that moral values are relative to those who happen to embrace them. Morality is quietly endorsed as being “subjective”, with each person’s ideas being as “valid” as anyone else’s.¹

The Primary Ethics curriculum, in contrast, is designed to encourage students to evaluate one another’s views. We encourage students to engage in the process of reason giving, not just in support of their own beliefs, but also in voicing arguments that run counter to the views expressed by others. Students are encouraged to engage in critical dialogue, to voice disagreement - but not with the aim of one-upmanship or, as in a formal debate, winning a contest. Rather, the disagreement is to be seen as part of a genuinely collaborative process directed at understanding and progress towards truth.

It goes without saying that shouting matches and ‘put downs’ are at odds with the process just described. Following Lipman and many others, we will call this process ‘respectful’ disagreement: ‘respectful’, because it is based on an attitude of respect for ourselves and others as reasonable, thinking individuals, as well as respect for the process that leads to understanding and truth.

Stage 2 (even year) Topic 3

The value of respectful disagreement

As well as guarding against relativism, respectful disagreement encourages students to see the limitations of their beliefs; to realise that coming to reliable beliefs about complex moral issues requires sustained thinking and questioning of their underlying assumptions and, in addition, **that this process involves engaging in dialogue with those whose beliefs differ from theirs.** And as Pritchard points out, ‘participants may learn..... that [discovering] that one’s thinking is inadequate, or even mistaken, is not “the end of the world” – it may be...[in fact] the beginning of a new and exciting one.’¹

We may worry that, despite our best efforts, students will be wary of disagreeing with their peers and perhaps fearful of having others disagree with them. Yet research (including the evaluation of the NSW Ethics Course pilot) has shown that in classrooms where respectful disagreement is encouraged, within a few weeks students become more likely to approach moral disagreements and less likely to avoid them.

This topic is a precursor to the Stage 3 topic, ‘Beliefs, Opinions, Tolerance and Respect’.

In ‘Disagreeing respectfully’ we encourage students to think for themselves about the process of disagreeing; to distinguish respectful from disrespectful disagreement and to consider the role that respectful disagreement might play in helping us work out what we think. For simplicity in this topic, the focus is on disagreements between children.

¹ Excerpts from Michael S. Pritchard, ‘Moral Education: From Aristotle to Harry Stottlemeier’, in Ann Margret Sharp and Ronald F. Reed (ed.) *Studies in Philosophy for Children: Harry Stottlemeier’s Discovery*, Philadelphia, Temple University Press, 1992.

Topic Structure and Resources

Aim of lesson	Resources
<p>Lesson 1: Introduction to the topic</p> <p>To encourage students to think about their own attitudes to disagreement by recalling disagreements they have been involved in. Students are asked to think about how those disagreements ended and why they ended that way.</p> <p>For example: if the disagreement ended ‘badly’, might it have been because one or both of you</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Spoke in an angry or derisive tone, or directly used put downs (e.g. ‘That’s stupid’)?• Failed to give reasons, so that the interchange is along the lines of ‘Is so./ ‘Is not’?• Refused to consider the other’s point of view?• Failed to voice your disagreement?	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Access to whiteboard, if possible
<p>Lesson 2:</p> <p>Part A -Should we say we disagree?</p> <p>To encourage students to think about whether it is always disrespectful to disagree, or whether disagreement can be seen as part of a genuinely collaborative process directed at understanding and progress towards truth.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• 1 copy of scenario 1: Amelia and her bike• 1 copy of scenario 2: The project• 2 copies of scenario 3: Jake and the skateboard

Stage 2 (even year) Topic 3

<p>Part B - Are some ways of disagreeing better than others? To encourage students to think about whether it is more helpful to avoid put-downs and to give reasons for disagreeing.</p>	
<p>Lesson 3: Does disagreeing with someone help you work out what you think? To encourage students to think about how 'respectful' disagreement may highlight the limitations of their (often firmly held) beliefs and to realise that making progress towards answers to complex moral questions is facilitated by engaging in dialogue with those whose beliefs differ from theirs.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Copies of the short story, 'Pixie and the zoo trip'

References

Lesson 3
Pixie and the
zoo trip story

Acknowledgement: The idea for this story comes from a brief dialogue in Chapter 1 of Mathew Lipman's philosophical novel, *Pixie*. The dialogue is included here, in italics. Used with permission from the copyright holder. (Mathew Lipman, *Pixie*, Montclair N.J.: First Mountain foundation for the Institute for the Advancement of Philosophy for Children, 1981.)

Lipman dialogue

'Who wants to go to an old zoo anyhow?' said Neil. And he made a face and held his nose.

That made Pixie angry- really angry. She said, 'Neil, you're so smart! How do you think you'd smell if you had to stay in a cage all day long?'

Then Neil stuck out his tongue, and Pixie made a face back at him, with her thumbs over her ears and her eyes crossed.

Lesson 1: Introduction to the topic

If you have access to a whiteboard, write the word 'Disagree' in clear letters before the class starts.

Start with a discussion to reflect on personal experience

20 minutes

👏 Who has ever disagreed about something with a friend or a brother or sister or cousin...?
Hands up. *Don't take responses yet*

Everyone try to think of the last time you disagreed with someone. *Allow a minute of thinking time.*

👏 What did you disagree about? *Take quite a few responses here. It's important that everyone recalls a specific disagreement.*

👏 Who can remember how the disagreement went - what you said and how you said it? Did you yell or did you speak softly - or in a 'put down' sort of way? Hands up. *Give students 30 seconds to think, but don't take responses.*

👏 Who can demonstrate - tell us what you said and say it in the same tone of voice you used. Don't use people's names – we don't want to know who you said it to. *Take 3 responses*

👏 What did the other person say then, and how did s/he say it? Who can demonstrate? (And remember, don't use names.)

👏 How did the disagreement end?

👏 Why do you think it ended like that? *Take a response, then ask;* Does anyone have any other ideas about why it ended that way. *Foster a discussion if possible, but don't put words in their mouths.*

Reflections on silent disagreements



10 minutes

Has this ever happened to you: You are talking to your friend or brother or sister or another student and they say something you disagree with. For example, 'I think the Lion King is the best movie of all time.' or 'That new kid is really irritating.' You disagree with what's been said, but you don't say anything - you just keep it to yourself.

Take a minute to think about this and see if you can come up with an example of your own.

Take three responses and, for each, ask:

- Why didn't you say you disagreed?
- Looking back on it, are you pleased you didn't disagree out loud?
- Can you explain why?

1. Do you think there could be times when it's important to tell your friends you disagree with them, even if you know it will annoy them or hurt their feelings? Can anyone think of an example? *Conduct this as a think, pair share. Allow students some thinking time and then suggest that they might like to discuss the question with the person next to them. Then have some students share their examples with the class.*

End the lesson

It doesn't matter if you are not sure – we'll be thinking about this some more over the next few lessons.



Lesson 2: Part 1: Should we say we disagree?

For this lesson you will need

- 1 copy of scenario 1: Amelia and her bike
- 1 copy of scenario 2: The project
- 2 copies of scenario 3: Jake and the skateboard

Remember last lesson

2 minutes

-  Who can tell me what we were talking about last lesson?
-  Can you remember any of the examples people gave?


Discussions: Is it OK to keep silent if you disagree?

8 minutes

Now we are going to think about two different scenarios, and in each one, someone disagrees with what his classmate says, but doesn't speak up - just remains silent. We are going to be thinking about whether that is OK.

You might ask for a volunteer to read the scenario. Choose someone who you know is a confident reader, and hand them a copy of this scenario.

Scenario 1: Amelia and her bike

 Amelia loves riding her bike. She lives in a small town in the country, and she and her friend Ella ride to school together every day. They keep away from the main road and don't see many cars.



For the past week it's been hot- very hot - even in the mornings. By the time the girls get to school and take off their helmets, their faces are red and their hair is sweaty.

Today Amelia has had enough. 'That's it', she says. 'Tomorrow I'm not wearing my helmet. It'll be so much cooler without it. It can't be that dangerous to ride without a helmet.'

Ella is shocked. All sorts of thoughts run through her head. 'What if Amelia runs over a rock on the road and falls? What if a car comes too close? What if she goes too fast down the hill and loses her balance? It's too dangerous to ride without a helmet.'

But then she thinks, 'I'd better not say anything. I should let Amelia make up her own mind.' And so Ella keeps her thoughts to herself.

Here are some questions about that scenario:


-  Does Ella agree with what Amelia says? Or does she disagree?
-  Why do you think Ella doesn't tell Amelia what she thinks?

Use your procedural questioning skills to facilitate a discussion around the following question. You could ask: Would you do the same as X? Why? Who would do something else? Why?

1. If you had been Ella, what would you have done? Would you have kept your thoughts to yourself, or would you have told Amelia what you were thinking? Why?

Again, you could ask for a volunteer to read this next scenario.


Scenario 2: The project

 Seth is standing with a group of kids from his class, waiting for someone to open the art room for their lesson. Today they are going to finish illustrating their projects on endangered species.

'I think it's funny that no one has done their project on pandas', Oscar says. 'They're in more danger than any of the other animals. There are no pandas left in the wild. The only pandas there are live in zoos.'

'That's not true', Seth thought. 'There are still pandas in the wild in China. I'm sure of it.' And then just as he was about to tell Oscar, he thought again. 'Oscar might be offended if I tell him he's wrong. So I'd better not say anything.' And he didn't.

Here are some questions about that scenario:

 Is Seth right? Are there still pandas in the wild in China? *If children aren't sure, you can tell them that there are. WWF estimated in 2014 that there were 1,864 giant pandas alive in the wild.*

Use your procedural questioning skills to facilitate a discussion around the following questions:

Why doesn't Seth tell Oscar he's made a mistake? Imagine you were Oscar.

1. Would you feel embarrassed if Seth told you that you were wrong - that there are still pandas in the wild in China?
2. Would you want Seth to tell you that you're wrong about the pandas? Or would you rather he kept quiet?

Follow up question – ask if students haven't raised this important issue:

- If no one tells you you've made a mistake, will you go on believing that pandas are extinct in the wild? Does it matter if you do?

Are some ways of disagreeing better than others?


20 minutes

For the rest of the lesson, I'd like you to work in pairs or threes.

Organise the groups. Then select two students to read the parts of Jake and Nat, and give them a Scenario 3 card each. You read the part of the Narrator, so that you can stop and ask questions when required.

Scenario 3: Jake and the skateboard

Narrator: All summer holidays, Jake has been learning how to ride a skateboard. His parents gave him the skateboard for his birthday, just before the end of school for the year. They gave him a helmet and kneepads too, and made him promise to always wear them. Now Jake's pretty good. He can do jumps and turns, but the thing he likes most of all is going downhill fast.

 Does anyone have a skateboard? Where do you ride it? What's it like going downhill?

Nat is Jake's friend. Nat has a skateboard too, but he's not as good as Jake. And he's scared of going too fast. Right now, Jake is telling Nat about a hill he has just discovered close to the skate park where the boys ride their boards.

Jake: It's steep. It'd be such a good ride. There's just one problem though - no footpath.

Nat: Well then, you can't do it. You know you can't skate on the road.

Narrator: Is Nat right? Or is it okay to skate on the road? *Take a couple of responses.*

Let's see what Jake thinks.

Jake: I think it might be okay. I don't think the road's very busy.

Nat: I can't believe you're saying this. Skating on the road is totally dangerous.

Jake: Well, I'm going to give it a try.

Nat: You're crazy! You're an idiot! You're mad! I've had it with you!


Narrator: And he ran off.


 Are Jake and Nat disagreeing? (If so) What are they disagreeing about?

I'd like you to discuss the next questions with your partner, and then I'll ask some people to share their answers with the class. *Ask one question at a time, give them 30 seconds to talk to their partners, and then ask some groups to share their answers with the whole class, before going to the next question.*

1. Do you think Nat should have kept his opinion to himself? Or was he right to tell Jake what he thought? *Give partners a minute to discuss. Who'd like to tell us what they thought? Take one answer, making sure they give a reason. Then ask if anyone disagrees and why.*
2. When Nat yelled at Jake, and called him 'crazy' and an idiot', was that okay? Talk to your partner.
3. Do you think that yelling at Jake and calling him names would have changed Jake's mind?
Follow up question – ask if students haven't raised this important issue:
 - Is it possible that yelling at Jake could make him more determined to prove that he could do it?
4. Some people might say that it was disrespectful of Nat to yell at Jake, and call him an idiot. What do you think?
5. If you were Nat, what would you say to try to change Jake's mind?

Scenario 4: Bianca's new dog

 For as long as she can remember, Bianca has wanted a dog. But each time she asks her dad, he says the same thing: 'You can have a dog once you're old enough to look after it yourself.'

 What do you have to do to look after a dog? How old do you think you need to be to do that?

In two weeks it will be Bianca's birthday. She will be eight. And this morning at breakfast, her dad said, 'Bianca, I've made a decision. This birthday we'll get you a dog.'

Bianca couldn't believe it. She'd wanted a dog for so long. 'Thanks.... thanks dad!' she said, and gave him a big hug. And then she ran off because she felt like crying. She didn't know why.

Now she's on her way to school. She can't wait to tell Hannah. She and Hannah have been friends since kindergarten. Hannah loves dogs too.

She runs straight to the seat where she and Hannah meet every morning.


'You won't believe this, Hannah', Bianca says. 'I'm getting a dog for my birthday!'

Hannah is really happy too. 'That's fantastic!' she says. 'What kind of dog do you want? Do you get to choose?'

'I hope so,' Bianca says, 'because I really want a Labradoodle.' 'Oh no!' says Hannah. 'Don't get one of those.'

'Why not?' says Bianca. 'I think they're beautiful dogs.'

'Just trust me', says Hannah. 'They're useless. Get something else.'

 Are Hannah and Bianca disagreeing? (If so) What are they disagreeing about?

Here are the questions. *Use procedural questions to facilitate a discussion around the following questions:*

1. Is it okay for Hannah to tell Bianca she shouldn't get a Labradoodle?
2. Does Hannah say why she thinks a Labradoodle isn't a good choice? Does she give Bianca any reasons?
3. What do you think her reasons might be?
4. Why do you think Hannah didn't give those reasons to Bianca?
5. If you were Bianca, would you take Hannah's advice? Or would you want to know her reasons?
6. Someone might say that it was disrespectful of Hannah not to bother to give Bianca her reasons. What do you think?

End the lesson

Next lesson we will be reading a short story about some students who are disagreeing, and we'll be talking and thinking about it.

Lesson 3: Does disagreeing with someone help you work out what you think?

For this lesson you will need

- *Copies of the story: Pixie and the zoo trip (one between two), so students can follow along.*

Story: Pixie and the zoo trip

10 minutes

We're going to start this lesson with a short story. You'll need to listen carefully because we will all be thinking about and discussing the story for the rest of the lesson. We need 6 people to read the parts. *Choose 6 students and give them a copy of the story. Give out extra copies to share between two so those listening can follow along.*

Narrator: Pixie was counting in her head - '47, 48, 49...'. She was trying to get to 100 before the lunch bell went. It was a game she liked to play when she finished her work early. Sometimes she got there, and sometimes she didn't. But today, when she got to 89, she just stopped, because she saw the teacher, Mr. Mulligan, stand up and she heard him say, 'Next week our class is going on an excursion - to the zoo'.

The zoo was Pixie's absolutely favourite place. She loved to watch the animals - the elephants swinging their enormous trunks from side to side as they walked; the giraffes, as tall as a two-story building; and the penguins. Pixie liked the penguins most of all.

She raised her hand.

Pixie: Mr. Mulligan, will we be there at one o'clock?

Mr. Mulligan: Yes Pixie. Why do you ask?

Pixie: Because that's when they feed the penguins. Can we watch them, Mr. Mulligan? Can we?

Mr. Mulligan: We'll see.

Narrator: And then the bell rang. Pixie had forgotten about her counting. She grabbed her lunch and sat down next to Isabel. Isabel was Pixie's best friend, and today she was sitting with Kate and Neil.

Pixie: I can't believe it! We're going to the zoo!

Neil: Who wants to go to an old zoo anyhow? *(Neil makes a face and holds his nose.)*

Narrator: That made Pixie angry - really angry.

Pixie: Neil, you're so smart! How do you think you'd smell if you had to stay in a cage all day long?

Neil: *(Sticks out his tongue at Pixie)*

Pixie: *(Makes a face back at Neil, with her thumbs over her ears and her eyes crossed, then turns her back on Neil.)* Well we all think the zoo is great - so there!

Kate: *(frowning)* I don't know, Pixie. Sometimes I feel sorry for the animals, shut up in their cages. Like the lions - all they do is pace up and down. They can't even run.

1. Has anyone here ever thought about this? *Allow a bit of discussion....3 minutes maximum.*

Then ask 'Kate' to read her last line again.

Pixie: Isabel, listen to what Kate's saying. Everyone knows they take good care of the lions - and all the other animals in the zoo.

2. Is Pixie right? What makes you think that?

Isabel: Well, I feel sorry for the lions too - and the giraffes. But remember that project on endangered species? Lots of animals in zoos - like pandas and orangutans and rhinos - are in danger of dying out. And zoos keep them safe and try to breed more of them. Then they release some of them back into the wild.

3. Is Isabel right? Can you think of an endangered animal that zoos try to breed?

Kate: But not all the animals in the zoo are endangered. Some of them are kept there just so we can look at them - like the penguins. And it's just not fair.

Pixie: (*looking upset*) But I love watching them. Now you've spoiled everything. I've never thought about any of this. And now I don't know what to think about the zoo.




Kate: Is that so bad?

Isabel: (*quietly*) You'll work it out, Pixie.

Whole class discussion: Pixie and the zoo trip

20 minutes

Here are my questions.

-  Are Neil and Pixie disagreeing? If so, what are they disagreeing about?
-  What does Pixie think?
-  What does Neil think?

Use procedural questions to facilitate a discussion around the following questions:

1. Neil made Pixie angry. Would you have felt angry if you'd been in Pixie's place? Why or why not?
2. Would you have tried to get him back, like Pixie did?
3. Should Neil have kept his opinion to himself?
4. Are Kate and Isabel disagreeing with Pixie?
5. Do they give reasons why they disagree?
6. Would you say that Kate and Isabel are disagreeing respectfully? Or disrespectfully? *Ask for reasons.*
7. What about Neil?
8. Pixie says that Kate and Isabel 'have spoiled everything'. What do you think she means?
9. Before Neil and Kate and Isabel disagreed with Pixie about the zoo, had she thought about whether it was okay to keep animals in captivity?
10. I asked you earlier if you thought that Neil should have kept his opinion to himself. Now that we have talked about this a bit more, and the impact their words have on Pixie, I want you think about that question again. Has anyone changed their mind? Do you think Neil, and Kate, and Isabel, should have kept their opinions to themselves? Why or why not?

Encourage and broaden discussion with the following question, as needed:

– *Do you think Pixie’s friends might have spoiled the zoo trip for Pixie? Is that okay?*

11. Do you think that it is important for Pixie to think about what her friends have said? Why do you think that?
12. At the end of their discussion, Pixie says that now she doesn’t know what to think about keeping animals in zoos. And Kate says that’s not such a bad thing. Is Kate right? Why do you say that?

Follow-up question to use only if students are finding the question difficult:

– *When you are trying to work something out, are you sometimes not sure what you think? Does anyone have an example?*

13. Isabel says, ‘You’ll work it out, Pixie’. Do you think what she and Kate have said will help Pixie work out what she thinks about zoos?
14. Can you think of anything Pixie could do that would help her work out whether or not zoos are okay?
15. Does disagreeing with other people sometimes help us work out what we think?

End the lesson

You might like to continue to think about these issues and perhaps to talk about them with their families and friends.

~~~END OF TOPIC~~~

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