



ETHICS TEACHER GUIDE

An introduction to teaching ethics

Contents

Overview.....	3
What do we teach in ethics classes?	3
How do ethics teachers help students learn?	4
What is covered in training?.....	5
How to use the lesson materials	7
What our students say about ethics classes	8

Overview

Primary Ethics delivers ethics classes, free-of-charge, to over 32,000 public school students in New South Wales, Australia, every school week. This is only possible due to the generosity of our donors and the dedication our volunteers.

We have a team of almost 2,000 volunteer parents, carers and community members who give their time to support, coordinate or teach ethics classes.

This Guide outlines Primary Ethics' approach to learning and provides a summary of the content of our volunteer teacher training program.

We believe our program is unique in that it benefits not only the children we teach but also the volunteers who facilitate ethics classes.

What do we teach in ethics classes?

The ultimate aim of ethics classes is to support children to develop a life-long capacity to make well-reasoned decisions about ethical issues.

The stories and scenarios provided in the lesson materials prompt children to examine the complexities of ethical behaviour. They invite students to consider what we ought to do, how we ought to live, the kind of society we should have and what kind of person each of us should strive to be.

In discussing ethical issues, students are not only considering the topic at hand but also developing important skills in collaborative inquiry and critical thinking which will support their ability to make well-reasoned ethical decisions.

Your role as an ethics teacher is central to helping students develop these underpinning skills in:

- collaborative inquiry: listening, taking turns to speak, building on others' ideas, respectfully disagreeing, respectfully challenging each other's thinking, helping each other articulate ideas, articulating values, putting a counter view, asking questions
- critical thinking: developing and evaluating arguments, using logic and reason, evaluating evidence, giving reasons and carefully considering views that are different to your own.

These skills develop over time. Younger students learn how to listen to others, give reasons and take turns to speak; older students learn to develop valid arguments, look for flaws in logic, evaluate evidence and develop their own processes of collaborative inquiry, asking each other the questions the teacher would previously have asked.

Many of our volunteers say that observing children developing these skills over time is one of the most rewarding aspects of being an ethics teacher.

As the collaborative enquiry process may be new to students, we introduce a set of ground rules to help them understand what is required. The rules are:

1. Only one person speaks at a time
2. Pay attention to the person who is speaking
3. Speak to other students, not just to the teacher
4. Give other people a chance to speak
5. Build on other people's ideas
6. No put-downs

These rules are introduced as part of the first lesson, and are revised with students as often as necessary during classes. Kindergarten children have a simpler set of rules, illustrated with pictures.

How do ethics teachers help students learn?

Ethics lessons employ a community of inquiry approach to learning, supported by teacher questioning. This child-centred approach allows students to discover ideas and concepts for themselves.

Educational research indicates that teaching methods which support children to puzzle over and discover concepts themselves, particularly in collaboration with their peers, can have a long lasting impact on learning.

Ethics lessons are designed to deliver this process and are quite different from more traditional forms of teaching. It is not unusual for this educational style to leave teachers feeling unsure if they have achieved anything. Be reassured that by engendering curiosity in the topic, by modelling an inquiry process and creating an environment in which children can think, you are actually teaching.

It can help to remember that our goal is for our ethics students to become informed and inquiring adults with the ability to recognise ethical issues and the willingness and capacity to explore those issues with those around them in a well-reasoned, productive and respectful way.

Ethics classes aim to develop this experientially, making gradual inroads to developing, not just children's abilities, but also their willingness to consider and discuss ethical issues.

Your role as the impartial facilitator of ethics classes is to support students by:

- **Modelling the inquiry process**

When you ask questions, week to week, you are actually modelling the process that we want children to learn.

When students encounter an ethical issue in their own lives, we hope that they will ask themselves whether it is right or wrong and then consider a range of questions like "why do I think that?" "What are my reasons?" "What do others think?" "What could a different point of view be?"

- **Showing genuine curiosity and interest**

Many of the ethical issues raised in ethics classes are difficult to answer. Students might want to solve the problem, offer an example from their own lives or change the topic. This is normal. Returning to the question and being genuinely curious about it and the answers the students give may draw out a range of views and increase the students' own puzzlement and curiosity.

Encouraging a range of views is important, whereas arriving at a single, agreed answer reduces curiosity. If students leave the class still thinking about what their friends said and thinking about the behavior of the characters in the story, then you will have succeeded in creating a valuable educational experience.

- **Staying neutral**

As an adult and a teacher, students will naturally assume that you know the answers to the questions you are asking. The fact is that there are often no obvious answers to the ethical questions that you will be asking the students. Your challenge is to remain neutral, and curious, so that students will come to realise that you aren't looking for a particular view, rather well-reasoned arguments and a range of perspectives.

Once students realise that the teacher herself doesn't have a clear-cut answer, they are more likely to give the issues presented considerable, genuine thought, rather than try and guess at what they think you want to hear.

Teachers must take care not to share their own opinion or even subtly guide students to a particular viewpoint. Techniques for staying neutral are covered in training, including how to acknowledge a student's response without endorsing it. Your tone of voice and your body language are part of staying neutral.

You also need to be aware that the expression of a view similar to your own may prompt you to lose neutrality.

- **Creating a learning environment**

By allowing thinking time, listening carefully to students' responses, enforcing the ethics class rules, staying neutral and encouraging a wide range of views you will be creating an environment in which students are able to express their ideas.

In this environment, students will be more enabled to practice their skills by developing arguments, giving reasons and feeling that it is okay to disagree with someone else's idea or even change their own position.

Another important skill is time management. Each lesson contains stimulus material to provide all students with the basis on which to discuss the moral questions presented. Every ethics class presents different time challenges - your planning will help you identify the important questions around which you will focus your facilitation efforts.

What is covered in training?

Primary Ethics volunteer ethics teachers undertake three stages of training to become an accredited teacher:

- Stage 1** Online learning introduces the required knowledge components to prepare for the training workshop.
- Stage 2** An intensive, 2 day face to face training workshop which includes many practice opportunities.
- Stage 3** A one on one classroom visit from our mentoring team to provide support and coaching.
- Ongoing** We also provide telephone assistance and ongoing access to classroom support.

The online and face-to-face components of training include:

- Child protection
- Primary Ethics policies and requirements
- NSW Department of Education policies and requirements
- Overview of the philosophical framework for the curriculum
- Understanding the community of inquiry approach to learning and the role of the teacher as facilitator
- How to use the lesson materials
- Facilitation skills, including non-verbal communication, procedural questioning, neutral responses, managing dominant and timid group members, managing small groups and running activities
- Behaviour management strategies and practice

An example transcript of a facilitated discussion using questioning techniques taught in our training:

Teacher (using a question from the lesson): In our last scenario, was Emma being greedy?

Student 1: That's just like my brother. He always wants the last piece of cake

Teacher (using anchoring technique, to gently direct student's attention back to the question asked):

So do you think that Emma, in our scenario, was being greedy?

Student 1: Well no, not really

Teacher (asks for reasons): Can you tell me why not?

Student 1: Because at least she asked if she could have it.

Teacher (asks for reasons): OK. Can you say why that makes a difference?

Student 1: Well, she asked permission. And it's not greedy if no-one else wants it

Teacher (opening up to rest of class): Does anyone want to agree or disagree with that it's not greedy if no-one else wanted it?

Student 2: I agree. She asked permission. She didn't just grab it.

Student 3: I agree too. She didn't just grab it and stuff it in her mouth.

Teacher: (asking for reasons) Can you say why that makes a difference?

Student 2: Well asking for permission, so that was thoughtful of her, not just grabbing it means she was thinking about whether she should.

Student 3: So it wasn't selfish.

Teacher (seeking other perspectives): What do others think about this?

Student 4: I think she was being greedy, because one piece of cake should be enough. Just because no-one else asked, doesn't mean no-one wanted it. They could have saved it for her dad.

Student 5: Or the birthday girl could have it the next day.

Teacher: (highlighting an idea): Hmm... Ok. So someone said it was being greedy because one piece of cake should be enough. What do others think about that idea?

Student 6: Can I ask a question? How much food was there?

Teacher (dealing with unknowns): The story doesn't tell us that? Why do you ask?

Student 6: Well, if there was no other food, maybe Emma was really hungry.

Teacher (dealing with unknowns): So if there was no other food and Emma was really hungry, would it be greedy to ask for the last slice of cake?

Student 7: No, because she might be starving. It's not being greedy if you are eating to stay alive.

Teacher: And what if there was other food there?

How to use the lesson materials

Lesson materials have been formatted using consistent styles and icons, to provide a quick visual guide to teachers on how each lesson should be delivered.

Each lesson is divided into segments and the estimated duration for each segment is provided. This may be varied by the teacher (for example, if the class is allotted more than a 30 minute timeslot, the teacher may choose to let a discussion run longer).

Lessons contain two types of text:

- Black text indicates that the teacher should read it verbatim. Uses include stories and questions designed to prompt a discussion around the ethical issues.
- *Teal italics indicates that the teacher should read the text to themselves.* This style may be used to give instructions for activities, or for a suggested follow-up question that the teacher chooses whether or not to ask depending on what the students have already offered without prompting. Headings are also in teal, as in most cases, the name of a topic, lesson or activity is not shared with the students.

Lessons contain different types of questions:

- Some questions require little interaction with other students (eg the question is designed to check the level of existing knowledge; check students' understanding of a story, or students' own experience with the issue). Teachers do not encourage in-depth discussion around these questions. A hand icon  is used to identify these questions.
- Other questions are designed to encourage students to think about an ethical issue. Teachers are instructed to foster a discussion around these questions using procedural questions, so that students can hear and build on other points of view. These questions are numbered to help teachers identify them.
- There are two types of follow-up questions:
 - The first type, *in teal italics*, indicates that the teacher needs to decide whether or not to ask the question, depending on whether students have already raised a range of ideas and considered the initial question at more than a superficial level.
 - The second type, in black font, is used when it is important that students consider a particular point. The questions should be asked if students have not raised the point themselves. This type of question is marked with a checkbox to remind teachers to 'check it off' once the point has been considered.

A book icon () is used to indicate that the following passage is a story or scenario, and that the teacher should use their 'story-telling voice'.



This icon indicates a commonly used activity called: Think, Pair, Share. When teachers see this icon, they should ask students to think to themselves about the question at hand.

After 30 seconds or so, children are invited to discuss their ideas with their neighbour, and then finally the teacher asks the students if anyone would like to share their thoughts with the whole class. This technique gives children some important thinking time, and then allows every child a chance to speak and put their thoughts in order.

Once they have had an opportunity to practice expressing their thoughts, and heard another opinion from their neighbour, they may be more ready and willing to share their thoughts with the larger group.

Lessons contain many supporting resources, such as pictures and handouts for the teacher to print and distribute to students (to be used, for example, in a small group discussions or a role play). Thumbnails of any images used are provided in the lesson to help teachers quickly identify the required resource.

What our teachers and our students say about ethics classes

“I don’t have to say the same as everyone.”

“I like how I can build on other people’s ideas.”

“I’m a better person now I’ve learned more about other people’s opinions.”

“It helps me speak in front of others.”

“I like how it really makes me think.”

“Everyone gets to say something.”

“It’s really cool because I see things in a way I hadn’t thought about before.”

“I liked how you didn’t have to know anything. You just had to learn and use it later.”

Quotes from 2015 Stage 2 students at Thornleigh West Public School and Stage 3 students from Killarney Vale and Northmead Public Schools.

“From a professional development point of view, teaching ethics is the best thing I have done. Every week, it makes me think - it has changed the way I think about things, about people and situations. I’m less judgmental and more mindful.”

*Carol Malcolm
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