

Can a belief be dangerous?

Today we have a story and some scenarios to share with you. We'll be doing lots of thinking in question time, and we'll be hearing from other children, too. Are you comfortable? Let's get started.

Let's imagine that there is a town near you called Tinsville, and that there was an outbreak of an infectious disease there. The disease spreads easily and is dangerous, especially to old people and young children. The health authorities were caught by surprise because they say that

there is a safe and very effective vaccine that prevents this disease. They thought that everyone in Tinsville had been vaccinated. But in fact, a number of residents had not, and when one of them returned from an overseas trip suffering from the disease, it spread quickly through the unvaccinated residents. This included old people and children, as well as babies who weren't old enough to be given the vaccine.

When asked why they chose not to be vaccinated, the spokesperson for a group opposing vaccination said, 'We don't believe the vaccine is safe and we're not going to risk it - especially not with our children'.

The Mayor of Tinsville responded to their safety concerns with reports from the World Health Organisation, showing that the disease was far more dangerous than any side effects that might occur from the vaccine.

But the group held on to their belief. "We are entitled to our opinion", they said.



The group said that they are entitled to their opinion about the dangers of the vaccine. Are they right? What makes you think that?

Let's hear what some other children are thinking.



Bridgette: Yes, everyone is entitled to their own opinion.

Anna: One of our school values is Tolerance.

Okay. Let's get back to our story.

The group against vaccination said 'We are entitled to our opinion'. And then the Mayor said, 'Your opinion on this issue is dangerous. Some people cannot get vaccinated because they are already



seriously ill, or they are too young. You are not only putting yourself at risk, you are putting other people at risk too. You are selfish, and I have no respect for you.'



The Mayor says that the group's opinion about vaccination is dangerous. How can a belief be dangerous? What do you think?



Bridgette: Well, what someone believes can't really hurt you ...

Casper: You can believe anything you want. You can't get arrested for believing that the bank should give you all their money – you only get arrested if you take the money.



Let's consider some other scenarios to help us think about this question: How can belief or an opinion be considered dangerous? Let's say you have a classmate who believes that walking under a ladder will bring bad luck. How would this belief effect the way they behave?



Casper: Well, if they believed that, they'd probably be careful not to walk under a ladder.



And would that action affect other people?



Bridgette: No, it really only affects them.

Anna: It might affect me too – because I mightn't want to be friends with them, because it doesn't make sense to me.

Casper: Well, you can still be friends with someone even if what they believe doesn't make sense to you. Like my friend that believes that chocolate is really bad for you. So he doesn't eat chocolate, and I still do. It doesn't worry me if he thinks that (because he gives me his chocolates).



So would you say it was a dangerous belief?



Casper: No, no-one is going to get harmed if someone believes that.

Anna: Yeah, it mightn't make sense, but it's not dangerous.



How about this example. What if one of your classmates believes that smoking isn't as bad for you as people say. She says that her grandfather has been smoking for 40 years, and this hasn't harmed him. How would this belief affect the way she behaves? What do you think?



Bridgette: She might start smoking.

Casper: And that is very bad for her. So her belief would lead her to do something that was bad for her.

Anna: And to the people around her. You know about second-hand smoke...



So, what makes some beliefs, dangerous beliefs? How might you explain it?



Anna: It's a dangerous belief if it makes you think it is okay to do something dangerous.

Casper: So, like, if I believe that I can swim to New Zealand, and I try, then I'll probably drown or get eaten by a shark.



If a belief is not dangerous – if no-one will get harmed, should you tolerate a belief that is different to your own?



Casper: Yeah – like my friend who doesn't eat chocolate. I tolerate that belief.

Anna: Well, if no-one is going to be hurt, you could tolerate it, but ... you could still try to make them change their mind.



And if a belief is dangerous, should you tolerate it?



Bridgette: No, not if it is going to lead to someone getting hurt.

Anna: If my friend thought smoking wasn't dangerous, and they were a good friend, I might tolerate it for a while. It might depend on whether she was smoking next to me ...



So does it make a difference whether the belief caused harm to other people or just to the person who believes it?



Bridgette: Yes, it does make a difference. If they want to hurt themselves, that's up to them, as long as it doesn't hurt anyone else.

Anna: Aww... that's a bit rough. I'm not going stand back and let my friends hurt themselves.



And if a belief is dangerous, should you try to change their opinion? What are you thinking?



Bridgette: I don't think it is very nice to try to change someone's opinion. Everyone is entitled to their own opinion, and you shouldn't try to force your opinion on them.

Anna: But what if they are basing their opinion on false information? You don't have to be rude or shout at them. You could just say that, actually, these are the facts, so... you are wrong.

Casper: Like the kid who thought that smoking wasn't harmful. She was basing her opinion on just one person... her grandfather, and she doesn't know what's really happening to him on the inside. Can she see inside his lungs?



Okay. Thinking about the story ...the Mayor says 'I have no respect for you'. Could you respect an opinion you disagreed with?



Anna: It would depend on what the opinion was based on. If there were good reasons behind it, then you should respect that opinion, even if you disagreed. But if it wasn't backed up by any facts...or if the information was wrong... then no.



Is it possible to respect the person you disagree with, but not respect their beliefs?



Bridgette: Well, if they believed something really silly, I might find it hard to respect them.

Casper: It's hard to respect someone when things don't add up - like someone who smokes, but they want to be a great footballer.

Anna: Hmmm ... If I had a friend that I respected, because they were a good friend, and a good person.... but they believed one silly thing, I'd still respect them.



If people hold opinions that are not based on facts and could lead to harm, should we have the right to stop people expressing their opinions publicly?



Bridgette: Yes, because it could lead to even more harm – because they may convince other people.

Anna: No, I don't agree. They have just as much right to say what they want. I mean, who gets to decide what gets published. That could be dangerous too.

We heard some really interesting ideas today! Thank you for joining us. You might like to keep thinking about when we should tolerate and even respect opinions that differ from our own. Have a talk to your family and friends about what they think, too.

Photo credit: Boy walking under a ladder by Fiona Branscombe

Thank you to our wonderful actors Bridgette, Casper and Anna who helped us to hear different points of view. While sometimes these points of view might have reflected their own opinions, at other times they were asked to express an opposing view in order to help us think more deeply about the topic.