

## Do you really have a choice?

Today we have 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?

In this lesson we are going to be thinking about this question: 'Are we generally free to make up our own minds on what to do? Or are our choices, decisions and actions the result of what's happened to us in the past?'

Let's see if thinking about this scenario helps us.



It's the end of the school day, and everyone is getting ready to leave the classroom. Then your teacher raises his voice above the student chatter and says he's forgotten to set the homework. 'I've got to get to a staff meeting,' he says, 'but I want you to do exercises 3 and 4 on page 76 of your Maths book.' Then the teacher asks, 'Has everyone got that?' No one responds, and he disappears out of the door and in the direction of the staff room.

Then you notice two of your friends talking quietly to each other at the back of the room. One of the girls, Thanh, looks upset. You wait around for a while to see if you can help, but then realise that if you don't hurry, you'll miss your bus. So, you race out the door. You don't hear Thanh call out, 'Wait! We don't know what the homework is.'

When you get home, your phone is ringing. You rush to answer it, see that it is Thanh and answer her call. 'Thank goodness you're there,' Thanh says, 'I didn't hear the homework. I was so upset I wasn't listening. On the way back from sport, I saw a dog get hit by a car. I know he's alright, but it was still horrible.'

'That's awful,' you say, 'I know how much you love animals.' And you tell her what the homework is.



*When you got home from school, you rushed to answer the phone. What made you do that?*



**Ariana:** Well, the phone was ringing.



*And what caused that to happen?*



**Ariana:** Thanh rang.



*And what caused that?*



**Ariana:** Thanh needed to ask what the homework was.



*And what caused that?*



**Edward:** Well, Thanh didn't hear what the teacher said about the homework.



*And what caused that?*



**Edward:** Thanh wasn't listening, because she was upset and talking to her friend.



*And what caused Thanh to be upset?*



**Louie:** She saw a dog get hit by a car – and she loves animals.



*Where might Thanh's love of animals come from?*



**Louie:** Well, she might have a dog, or another animal, and she loves it.



*So, answering the phone was caused by a chain of events. Each event caused the next.*

*Would you say that all of our actions are caused by what's happened in the past?*

*What do you think?*

*Often the causes involve more than just events like a dog being hit by a car. What about our attitudes?*

*Did you answer the phone because you believe that you should answer the phone when it rings?*

*Where did that attitude come from?*

Let's hear what some other children think.



**Ty:** Well I know I need to answer the phone because it could be important, like mum calling to tell me something.

**Ariana:** I can't not answer because I might miss something important.



*Okay, and what caused you to be concerned that you might miss something important?*



**Ariana:** Once I missed a phone call about choir practice being put off and when I turned up, I was the only one there. I was really mad.



*Okay, so attitudes are caused by things that have happened in the past.*

*What about feelings? Are our feelings caused?*

*Think about a time when you felt angry. Did you just feel angry for no reason?*

*Or did something happen to make you feel that way? If so, what was it?*

*Can you remember a time when you felt really happy?*

*Were you happy about something in particular? If so, what was it?*



**Mac:** I felt really happy when I beat my time in the pool yesterday.

**Edward:** Sometimes I just seem to feel happy but there's not a particular reason. That's when my mum says it's just hormones or something.



*So, would you say that the hormones caused your feeling?*



**Edward:** Yes, I guess so. Or maybe I just saw or heard something – like a song - and that puts me in a good mood.



*Would you say that all your feelings are caused - sometimes by external or outside events, and sometimes by internal or inside events -like thinking or imagining or remembering or even hormones?*

*In fact, could we say that everything is caused, even if sometimes we can't identify the cause?*

Let's think about this scenario.



*If you feel an aching pain in your ear, and if the pain goes on all night so that you can't sleep, do you think about going to see a doctor?*

*What do you expect the doctor to do?*



**Mac:** I expect the doctor to ask me some questions and then check in my ear to see if it's infected or something.



*Suppose the doctor can't find any cause. Will the doctor assume that there is no cause?*



**Mac:** No. It's real, even if he can't find it. He'd probably want to do more tests.



*So, you think that there must've been a cause, even if we can't find it?*

*So, does that apply to everything?*

*That everything that happens was caused by something? Even every belief you have, every attitude – something caused it – it could be what you've learned and experienced and from your own thinking?*

*Perhaps it goes back to your background – your upbringing, to your birth - and back even further, your upbringing was caused by how your parents were raised, perhaps even back to the beginnings of the universe? Is that possible?*

*Getting back to the first scenario when Thanh rang you after school. Was your answering of the phone determined in advance, by many, many trillions of factors, including your beliefs, your thinking, and your experiences with family and friends, your background?*

Let's hear what other children are thinking.



**Ariana:** Aaaarrggghh! I'm having trouble thinking about this because, well, I'm not sure if I can agree that my answering the phone was determined in advance. I guess I want to think

that I decided to answer the phone now.

**Edward:** I was thinking the same - that I chose to answer the phone - I could have ignored it. But the thing is, I wouldn't ignore it. I wouldn't ignore it because of all the things that have happened to me in the past – like maybe I ignored a phone call once before and ummm... like someone said before, I didn't find out that something was cancelled and I turned up anyway, so now I don't ignore the phone. It's like I've been programmed to answer the phone.

**Mac:** Yeah, but what if the next time you answer someone gives you a hard time, and you wish you hadn't answered it?

**Edward:** Well then, that just adds to the long list of all the things that have happened to me in the past and then next time that person rings, I wouldn't answer it.

If every action we take is caused by all the things that happened before that, could we say that the action was determined in advance and not chosen freely? Mmmm... Let's think more about what that might mean - if all of your actions were caused by what's come before. Here's a situation to think about.



*What about a person who commits a crime – let's say, for example, that they rob a bank. Was this decision to rob a bank caused by what has come before?*



**Ty:** No, I still think this person had the choice about whether they would rob the bank. What's happened in the past sort of shapes what you do, but you still have a choice.

**Edward:** Yes, you still have a choice – but what makes you make those choices? You choose what to do because of all the things that have happened to you in the past... and how you're feeling, and...



*So, should we hold people responsible even if their actions are determined by forces outside their control?*



**Mac:** Yes, you can hold them responsible, even if everything in their past has shaped their decisions.

**Ariana:** It mightn't seem fair, like the robber – he'd end up in jail but at least he'd get help and he wouldn't do it again.

**Edward:** Yeah, because even if he chose to rob a bank because of all the things that had happened to him in the past, and he was sent to jail, then everyone else would learn from that and it might stop them from doing the same sort of thing. It's like that story becomes a part of their past.

We heard some really thought-provoking ideas today! Thank you for joining us. You might like to keep thinking about whether we are generally free to make up our own minds, or if our choices, decisions and actions are caused. And, if they are caused, should we hold people responsible for their actions? You might also like to have a talk to your family and friends about what they think, too.

Photo credit: [Canva.com](https://www.canva.com)

Thank you to our wonderful actors Ariana, Edward, Louie, Mac and Ty 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.