

Thinking and learning: Suggestions for school staff

School staff have a very important role when it comes to helping children reach their potential. The guidance and support of school staff helps children learn and develop a sense of competence. Structuring learning activities, by providing clear and detailed instructions so that children know exactly what is expected, can help to encourage them to be independent learners.

Match learning to students' interests and abilities

Get to know your students' interests and design learning activities that will engage them. Find out what they already know about a topic and pitch your teaching so that it extends or challenges their existing ideas. This is very important for ensuring tasks not only interest and challenge children, but also for developing their thinking and learning skills.

Create an environment of inquiry

Asking questions is central to learning and curiosity. Sometimes children are too shy to ask questions or are unsure if they are allowed to. One way to encourage questioning is to provide a space and time for children to ask questions. For example, school staff can help all children to learn to ask and answer questions by inviting them to predict what will happen next in a book any time they read aloud. Be sure to clearly state that you want children to ask and answer questions, and that you allow enough time for them to do so.

Some other effective strategies that show questions are valued include:

- setting quiet 'thinking time'
- reserving a few pages in a journal for children to write down any questions they have so that they can be addressed in the future, either with the school staff or with peers
- starting a 'question board' where children can add to a class list of questions.

Be a role model

School staff can also use careful questioning to get children thinking in appropriate ways about a task, or to keep their attention focused on the important aspects of a particular task, for example: "I wonder what would happen if..." or "How else could we...?" This approach is also useful for showing children how to ask questions.

Encourage learners to use language and private speech

Private speech or 'thinking aloud' is a useful learning tool for everyone, including children. Learners can use it to monitor their progress and to guide themselves through challenging tasks or to master new skills. Talking things through in this way can help to better understand and remember. Encourage children to use language and private speech to support learning by modelling it and by asking children to describe their thinking as they work through a task.

Teach steps for thinking

Teaching children simple steps to guide their thinking and learning enhances metacognitive abilities and academic success. For example, to teach younger children to pay attention, you might use '1. Look, 2. Listen, 3. Learn'. Older children might be taught to use the '5Ws': 'Who, What, Where, When, Why' to analyse story plot.

Teach cooperative learning

Small group work with peers is a useful teaching strategy that encourages children's learning. It is very important to structure cooperative learning activities effectively to ensure that students participate productively. Effective cooperative learning creates an atmosphere of achievement where each member of the group is not only responsible for learning what is taught, but also helps other members of the group understand and complete the task. By listening to the ideas and perspectives of others, small group work can enhance thinking skills, as well as important verbal and social skills.

This resource is part of a range of KidsMatter Primary information sheets for families and school staff. View them all online at www.kidsmatter.edu.au



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