

# You are never too young!



**Jill Potter** explains how and why to adapt teaching thinking activities for children in the early years

I am sure many of us would agree that an essential aim of early childhood education is to promote effective thinking in young children. We can achieve this, in my view, with the help of teaching thinking activities. I see the early-years environment as a rich and fertile ground for using such activities for cultivating and cognitive development.

Early years settings already nurture many of the dispositions teaching thinking activities seek to develop. In a nursery or reception classroom, one is instantly struck by the buzz of creativity and by the bombardment of questions from wondering and enquiring minds. One observes children engaged in reflection through acting out past experiences and creating their own meanings from learning in concrete ways with sand and water. Using teaching thinking strategies in this context highlights, extends and makes explicit the appropriate dispositions for learning that are already so evidently beginning to be developed here.

### **Are young children ready?**

There are a many reasons why I feel teaching thinking activities are not only appropriate for use with young children, but also help to create a culture of adventurousness and strategic thinking. I will illustrate a few of the main reasons below.



*Pupils are actively involved in building their own conceptual understanding through open, challenging tasks that engage their interest and encourage good behaviour. Piaget argued that children learn best when their curiosity is nourished and extended rather than just satisfied. He saw the role of open-ended activities and questions as key in driving this curiosity and thus intensifying engagement. This openness is also a fundamental principle of teaching thinking activities. The children involved are asked to think without the pressure of being right or wrong. They are also encouraged to listen to and consider other people's ideas and points of view. Teachers help children to self-regulate and accommodate new information as they modify their thought structures to accommodate new experiences.*

*Collaborative talk is an essential part of the teaching thinking activities. It is widely acknowledged that few people learn in isolation. With teaching thinking activities, the children and the teacher talk about thinking and learning together, co-constructing new meaning, knowledge and understanding. Through effective discussion and enquiry, children can internalise significant aspects of a dialogue and learn more about both the process and content of learning.*

*The teacher acts as mediator. During teaching thinking activities, the teacher's role is very much that of supporting,*

prompting and questioning the process of learning rather than giving answers. Teachers 'scaffold' the learning and provide opportunities for children themselves to scaffold learning for each other. The teacher asks process-orientated questions – 'what made you think that' or 'what are the other possibilities' – that challenge both correct and incorrect responses. Such questions nurture enquiry and require the giving of reasons. The teacher in this position is able to cultivate the children's own creativity without limiting it or dominating it with adult views and perceptions. The children are given the freedom to think their own thoughts.

*Teaching thinking activities provide learners with explicit strategies and an explicit language for thinking which promotes metacognition and transfer. It is important that children are able to recognise processes of good thinking if they are to use them again and transfer them to other situations. An important part of teaching thinking is the debriefing of the learning in order to highlight and model good thinking, promote metacognition and aid transfer. This process makes good use of analogy in order to take the learning outside of the immediate context and put in into other contexts both inside and outside school. Another key aim is to develop a language for thinking that becomes natural to children so they have an active role in employing, developing and reflecting on their own thinking. They become aware of the tools that help them to think.*

As a class teacher and then as a Teaching and Learning consultant, I have used a great variety of teaching thinking activities with many different groups of nursery and reception children. Two examples of these activities are the *Why is Teddy feeling unwell mystery* and the *People who help us ranking activity*.

### **A mystery**

The mystery, *Why is Teddy feeling unwell* (Figure 1), has been used successfully with numerous groups of children in reception classes. I usually start the session with the children and I sitting in a circle. I explain that I have a problem that I need to solve and that, because they are so clever and such good thinkers, I am sure they will have lots of ideas about how I can find a solution. After explaining this to one group, a concerned five year old that I had worked with previously quickly retorted: 'Oh Miss Potter, you have lots of problems don't you!' Resisting the urge to reply, 'Don't get me started', I carried on introducing the activity and brought out Teddy to greet the children.

Teddy, I inform them, is feeling very unwell and has been feeling sorry for himself for most of the day. In order to

Figure 1

	He fell out with his friend		He played on the computer late at night
	He threw his banana skin on the ground		He ate three bananas
	He hurt his knee		He went to a party
	He got very wet in the rain		He drank lots of orange juice
	He ate two small cakes		He tasted some berries from a bush
	He played lots of football		He woke up early in the morning

establish some empathy with the character and make the scenario more meaningful to the children, I ask them to think about how they feel when they are unwell. The problem is, I explain, that nobody knows why Teddy is feeling unwell and we need to find out so that we can try to help him. I ask if they think they will be able to help me find out, and if they have any ideas of how we can find out. This request is usually met by a huge range of responses from 'ask him', 'ask his mummy' and 'take him to the doctor' to the slightly less orthodox, 'cut his tummy open and see what is inside'. I tell the children that Teddy is feeling too unwell to tell us himself, but he has left us some clues – some information about what he has been doing – that might help us to decide. The information is presented to them on cards as an unsorted mixture of potentially useful and potentially misleading data. I read each card in turn, drawing attention to the picture that represents the text, and place it face up in the centre of the circle.

After all the cards have been placed in the circle, I ask the children to put their thumbs on their knees if they have any ideas or thoughts about the information. Often, each initial idea is based around an individual card that has attracted a child's attention. I respond to this by posing the following kinds of questions to the child and the group:

- Why do you think that made him unwell?
- Is that the only reason he is unwell?
- Is that the most important reason for him being unwell?
- Does anyone agree?
- Does anyone disagree and think this did not make him unwell?
- Does anyone think there is a different reason for him being unwell that is more important than this one?
- Are there any cards that you feel are definitely not reasons for him being unwell?

This type of questioning helps to mediate sharing ideas and listening to other points of view. It also prompts the children to re-assess their initial thoughts, to build on them or explore other possibilities.

Once potential reasons have been identified, then the sorting process can become more explicit by the placing of cards in different areas on the floor according to the category they fall into. So, for example, there could be *good reasons for him being unwell*, *poor reasons for him being unwell* and *things that definitely didn't make him unwell*. It is best to draw out the sorting criteria from the children while they are discussing and evaluating the information.

An alternative way to sort the cards would be to place them on a continuum (line of string) with the most significant reason at one end and the least significant

reason at the other. This method encourages children to evaluate each piece of data in relation to the rest of the data as well as to the situation (Teddy being unwell).

One should question the children's understandings of the information and the concepts involved. An example of this might be to focus on the cards 'He hurt his knee' and 'He fell out with his friend' and question the similarities or differences between being hurt and being unwell and being sad or upset and being unwell. Are they the same? Are they different? Can they be linked?

Generally the whole activity can take between thirty and forty minutes and it concludes with the children speculating and constructing their own hypotheses based upon their choices and categories. The process is also debriefed with the children by asking them how and why they have reached their ultimate conclusion about why Teddy is unwell. It is usual to question the children about what they feel they did that was most successful in helping them reach their answer, and to discuss how this strategy could be used in other situations, both in and out of school.

### A ranking activity

The *People Who Help Us* ranking activity is suitable for use with nursery and reception classes and puts a slightly different slant on a familiar theme. A general 'thought shower' of *people who help us* is a usual way of beginning the activity. As each answer is offered, I display a corresponding card to go with it and place the card on the floor as a memory aid (Figure 2). If I don't have a suitable card for any of the suggestions, then I draw or write the suggestion on a small piece of paper and add it to the rest, while praising the child for creative thinking. Once all the cards are displayed, I introduce the ranking frame (Figure 3). Occasionally it may be best to begin with just the sad face and the happy face and miss out the two middle faces. I inform the children that we are going to think about who would be good people to help us and I tell them that I don't know what the answers are so I would like their help to think about the problem. I continue to explain that, if we think a particular person would be the best to help us, then we place the card representing that person on the smiley face. The card for the 'worst helper' card would go on the sad face and people who might help 'a little but not a lot' would go on the middle faces. I then introduce some key contexts with questions such as: 'Who would be the best person to help you if you needed a wall built?' The responses given are always positively and sensitively explored with me encouraging children to state the reasoning behind their answers and look beyond the obvious. For example:

- Why would the builder be the best person to help us?
- Is there any situation when the builder wouldn't be the best person to help us do this?
- Who would be the worst person to help us do this? Why?
- Does anyone disagree? Why?
- Does anyone agree? Why?

The activity would progress by introducing more abstract questions such as 'Who would be the best person to help you if you were sad?' (Figure 4) Continue to explore in more depth the reasoning behind the answers, exploring context and generality with questions such as:

- Would that always be the case?
- Would it be the same person if you were at home/school/playing out?
- Does everyone feel that would be the best person to help if you were sad?
- Does anyone have a different answer? Why?

As this activity is concerned with ranking, it is important that the children are expected to place a value on the cards, prioritise, create a hierarchy and understand that they have done so. The teacher must draw the children's attention continually to these processes using the frame and the cards within it as points of reference. Questions might include the following:

- Are you saying that this person would be a better/worse help than this person? Why?
- In what ways would this person be a better/worse help than this person?
- Is there anyone who would be exactly the same help as this person? Why? How?

This kind of ranking activity is most obviously extended by the teacher asking more challenging questions of the children regarding their choices and reasons, and by choosing more abstract or subjective criteria to guide the ranking. It could also be extended by the use of a continuum line (a length of rope or string) with the most helpful card at one end and the least helpful at the other. This encourages the children to prioritise a greater number of cards and to order them according to the value placed on each one. Yet another means of extending the activity would be to draw the criteria for ranking out from the children. You can do this by asking questions such as; 'Who can think of something that we might need help with that we haven't thought about yet?' or 'What might *our friends* be best to help us with?' Again, as with the previous activity, it is usual to debrief the process and to discuss how some

of the successful strategies used could be used again in different contexts.

### Effects on children's thinking?

There are many benefits, both social and cognitive, to be gained from involving young children in the types of activities described above. Here are some of the thinking skills that are exercised by the two activities described in this article:

- Sorting relevant information
- Interpreting and analysing information
- Making links between disparate pieces of information
- Speculating to form hypotheses
- Checking and refining
- Explaining
- Reasoning
- Empathising
- Reflecting
- Evaluating
- Questioning
- Making value judgements
- Prioritising
- Creating and recognising hierarchy
- Justifying
- Drawing conclusions
- Comparing
- Accepting and recognising different view points

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The samples of cards in this article have been produced by the writer using clipart from **Microsoft Publisher**. They should not be photocopied and are meant only to illustrate the use that teachers can make of clipart available with standard word-processing and desktop publishing programs for thinking skills activities in schools.

Figure 2

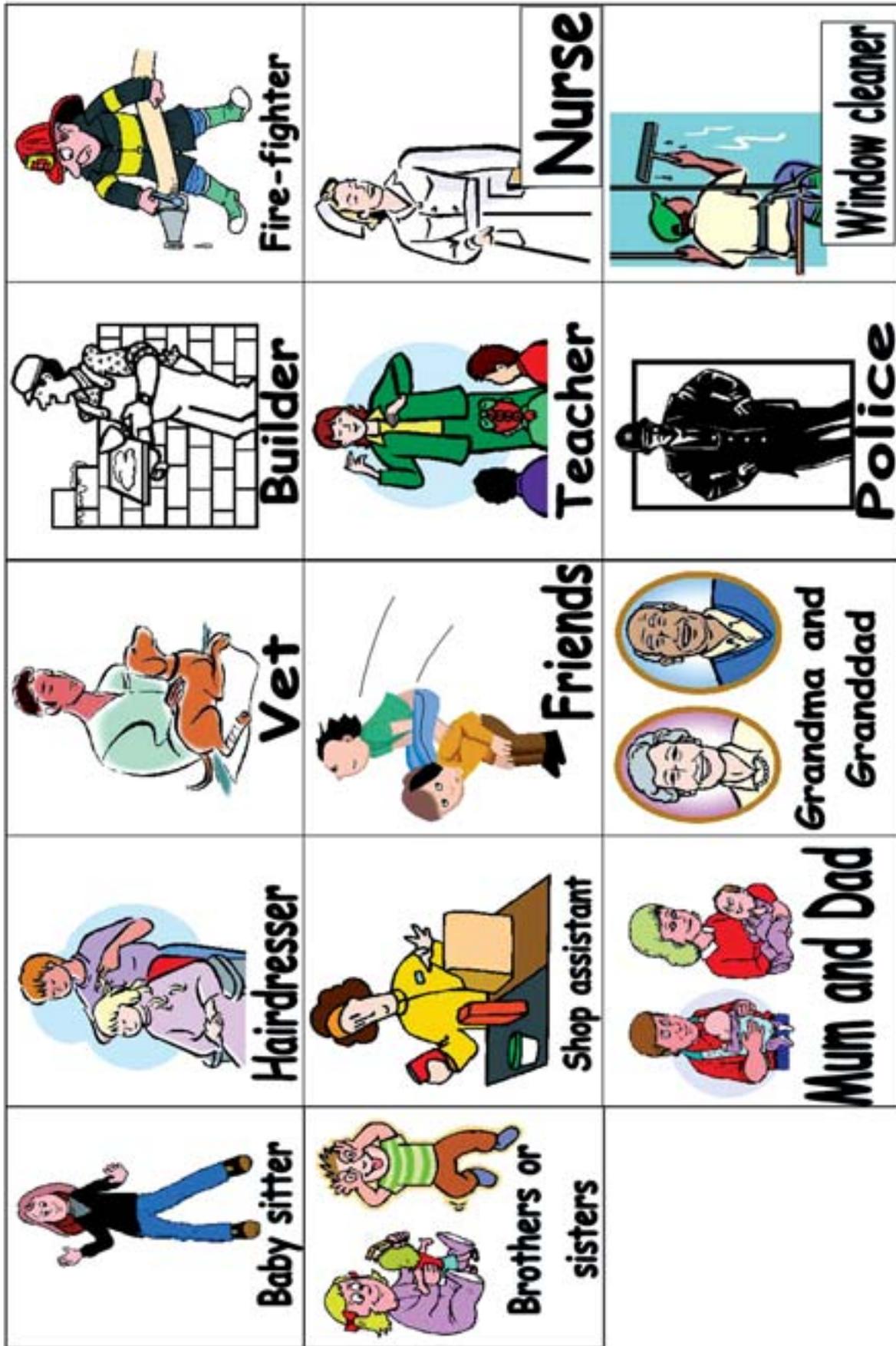


Figure 3

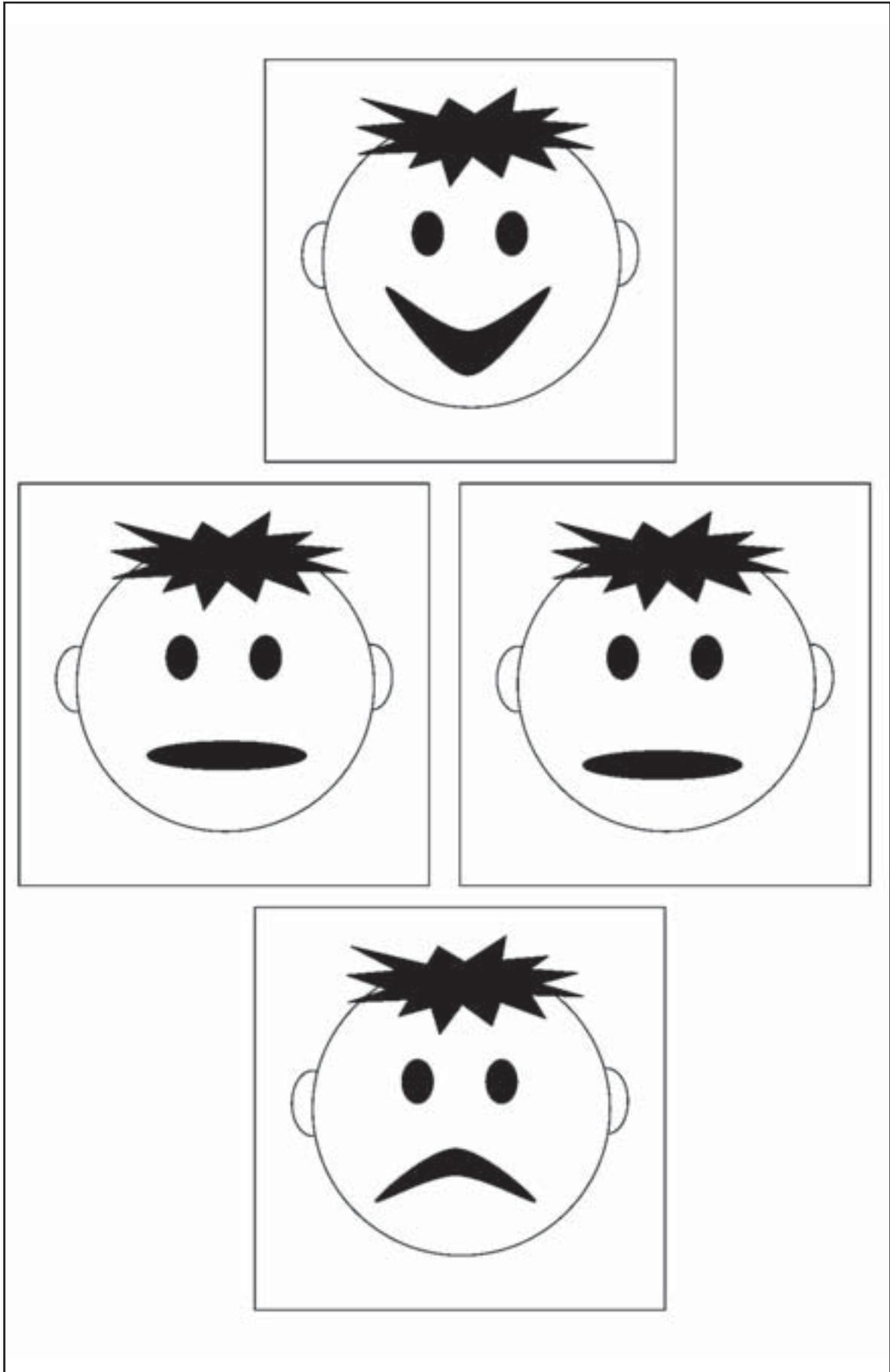


Figure 4

Who would be best to help you if ...

You wanted a wall built?

You fell down and hurt your knee?

Your dog was poorly?

You wanted to hear a story?

You were feeling sad?

You wanted to have fun?

If you were scared?

If something was on fire?

You were getting wet in the rain?

If you were hungry?