



REDFIELD COLLEGE

# Critical Thinking

Some notes and ideas inspired by Prof. David Isaacs

The development of critical thinking is one of the most important processes during adolescence. It is the ability to make correct decisions based on the right values. A person who thinks critically judges and acts from inner principles and a depth of conviction. He is not particularly susceptible to peer pressure. Nor is he prone to rash judgements or emotional reactions to situations.

At its deepest level, critical thinking implies that a person has understood and taken to heart values which will lead him to happiness both in the future and in eternity.

The virtue of **prudence**, or sound judgement, underpins critical thinking. Sound judgement always starts with a solid grasp of what the reality of a situation is. Only if the facts are considered can sensible decisions be made. How many arguments and mistakes we would avoid if we simply acted objectively, taking care to find out the relevant facts first.

## Teaching critical thinking.

Parents should help their children look for the facts in a situation. This helps them to avoid decisions based on incomplete information, emotion or personal prejudice.

Secondly they need to give their children sound standards with which to evaluate right and wrong actions. For adolescents, this mainly involves making the family values their "own" and matching their behaviour to these values. They need to learn to reflect on their motives.

Thirdly they need to build up in their children the strength to commit themselves to choices in life, and follow through resolutely on these decisions.

Some practical suggestions...

## Laying the Foundations for Critical Thinking.

1. Teach children to pay attention to facts and details. Play observation, concentration and memory games. When you need to know "What happened?" insist on main facts not trivia.
2. Give reading a high priority in the home. Children should read some time every night and every day in the holidays. Read to them. Let them see you reading much more than they see you watching TV. Have a quiet time each evening when you read too. Talk about what you have read. Take the children regularly to the library.

3. Insist that children learn to listen as well as express themselves. Each should value what others have to say at the dinner table.
4. Teach the difference between fact and opinion, and between fact and fiction. Observe your children's reactions as they watch TV. Talk about television programmes afterwards.
5. Truth is sacred. Always follow up every lie and insincerity of a child.
6. Be open to learning new things and share this fascination for knowledge with your children. Visit museums, concerts, exhibitions and performances. Explore the geography of Sydney. Let them see you making new friends. Show an active interest in other cultures, nature, and world events. Shun cultural complacency.
7. Be approachable. Make it easy for your children to ask questions and advice. Avoid extremes of passivity ("Not now, son!") and of being a parent who is a boring know-all, or who can't admit a mistake.
8. Give clear advice that works. Your son or daughter will come back if it is helpful.
9. Have clear standards for respect, cooperation, responsibility, work and personal presentation in your home.
10. Teach the process of establishing standards and then judging according to those standards. Have discussions about the relative merits of toys, cars, ads etc according to agreed criteria.

### **Teaching critical thinking to adolescents**

#### **Family Values**

1. Have a clear vision of your family values. Ensure that these values will provide answers for this life and the next, and are neither arbitrary nor self-centred.
2. Give moral leadership. Explain the motives and values that underlie your behaviour and expectations.
3. Help them to see that the way they spend money reflects their values. Talk of your family budget as a numerical measure of the family values.

#### **Teenagers need to think**

4. Require your adolescent to think much more than to do. Don't require conformity with your own behaviour. Do insist on family values and that he reflects on the consistency of his behaviour with his values.
5. Help him to focus on the facts. Ask not only "What do you know about this matter?" but also "How do you know?".
6. Ensure that your teenager's life is not dominated by activity and incessant noise which would drown out personal reflection and thought. Pick up "escapist" behaviour early...constant loud music or walkman, self imposed isolation from the rest of the family, friends who are never brought home, intolerance of other family members, going out too often, etc.

#### **Coping with influences and prejudices**

7. Watch for signs of ideological influence...stereotyped jargon in conversation, aggressiveness, changes of friends, etc. Teach him to see through the ideological arguments which society bombards us with...materialism, individuality, freedom above everything, pleasure and comfort as the goal of life, power and success, etc. Show that these values are only half-truths, are based on a impoverished view of man, and can tell us little about love and lasting happiness.

8. Encourage him not to give his opinion lightly. Help him to see the need to recognise his own prejudices, hear both sides and get all the facts before making up his mind.

### **Giving information**

9. Give standards and information according to the 3C's. Be Clear, Concise, and then Change the subject.
10. Think ahead. Be prepared to answer difficult questions with good reasons.
11. Avoid arguments. Don't lecture, nag or get angry. Disagreements usually arise when two parties have not agreed on the facts or on the criteria on which to judge those facts. Emotions cloud rationality and the teenager is likely to become intimidated, resentful or insincere.
12. When you do have an argument, talk afterwards, clarify goals and values, and reconsider sanctions which may have been excessive in the heat of the moment.

### **Decision Making**

13. Ask him to reflect on the causes and consequences of his actions. Teach to foresee consequences and to face consequences.
14. Ask "what" and "why" as well as "how" and "when" about things he wants to do.
15. Often you can request an adolescent to make his own decisions, having first helped him to consider whether he has the correct information, and whether he has considered the various options and consequences for himself and others. Point out to him the options which you cannot allow him to choose because they would involve physical or moral danger.
16. Consult your teenager in your decisions which will affect him. This at least means that you will better understand his position when you make a decision and it will teach him to take others' viewpoints into account in his decisionmaking.

### **Building character in adolescence**

17. Help him discover that development of character involves three stages:
  1. Know yourself.
  2. Possess yourself.
  3. Give of yourself.
18. Help him to know himself; to think about himself and what he can contribute in life with objectivity. Help him to understand emotions; that in themselves they are good, but can be fickle and destructive if they are not guided by our intelligence. It is less important to "feel good about oneself" (such a common phrase these days) than to "think" good about oneself.
19. Help him to possess himself. Once a person knows himself and his possibilities, he can set attainable goals, act effectively, and strive to become better.
20. Help him give of himself to be people-centred not thing-centred. This attitude of self-giving is an expression of love.
21. Teach that love is the key to real happiness, but that in this life love is interwoven inescapably with suffering.