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# Critical thinking is a 21st-century essential — here's how to help kids learn it

Apr 24, 2019 / Mary Halton

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If we want children to thrive in our complicated world, we need to teach them how to think, says educator Brian Oshiro. And we can do it with 4 simple questions.

*This post is part of TED's "How to Be a Better Human" series, each of which contains a piece of helpful advice from someone in the TED community; [browse through all the posts here](#).*

We all want the young people in our lives to thrive, but there's no clear consensus about what will best put them on the path to future success. Should every child be taught to code? Attain fluency in Mandarin, Spanish, Hindi and English?

Those are great, but they're not enough, says educator and teacher trainer [Brian Oshiro](#). If we want our children to have flexible minds that can readily absorb new information and respond to complex problems, he says, we need to develop their critical thinking skills.

In adult life, "we all have to deal with questions that are a lot more complicated than those found on a multiple-choice test," [he says](#) in a TEDxXiguan talk. "We need to give students an opportunity to grapple with questions that don't necessarily have one correct answer. This is more realistic of the types of situations that they're likely to face when they get outside the classroom."

How can we encourage kids to think critically from an early age? Through an activity

that every child is already an expert at — asking questions.

## **1. Go beyond “what?” — and ask “how?” and “why?”**

Let’s say your child is learning about climate change in school. Their teacher may ask them a question like “What are the main causes of climate change?” Oshiro says there are two problems with this question — it can be answered with a quick web search, and being able to answer it gives people a false sense of security; it makes them feel like they know a topic, but their knowledge is superficial.

At home, prompt your kid to answer questions such as “**How** exactly does X cause climate change?” and “**Why** should we worry about it?” To answer, they’ll need to go beyond the bare facts and really think about a subject.

Other great questions: “**How** will climate change affect where we live?” or “**Why** should our town in particular worry about climate change?” Localizing questions gives kids, says Oshiro, “an opportunity to connect whatever knowledge they have to something personal in their lives.”

## **2. Follow it up with “How do you know this?”**

Oshiro says, “They have to provide some sort of evidence and be able to defend their answer against some logical attack.” Answering this question requires kids to reflect on their previous statements and assess where they’re getting their information from.

## **3. Prompt them to think about how their perspective may differ from other people’s.**

Ask a question like “How will climate change affect people living in X country or X city?” or “Why should people living in X country or X city worry about it?” Kids will be pushed to think about the priorities and concerns of others, says Oshiro, and to try to understand their perspectives — essential elements of creative problem-solving.

## **4. Finally, ask them how to solve this problem.**

But be sure to focus the question. For example, rather than ask “How can we solve climate change?” — which is too big for anyone to wrap their mind around — ask “How

could we address and solve cause X of climate change?” Answering this question will require kids to synthesize their knowledge. Nudge them to come up with a variety of approaches: What scientific solution could address cause X? What’s a financial solution? Political solution?

You can start this project any time on any topic; you don’t have to be an expert on what your kids are studying. This is about teaching them to think for themselves. Your role is to direct their questions, listen and respond. Meanwhile, your kids “have to think about how they’re going to put this into digestible pieces for you to understand it,” says Oshiro. “It’s a great way to consolidate learning.”

Critical thinking isn’t just for the young, of course. He says, “If you’re a lifelong learner, ask yourself these types of questions in order to test your assumptions about what you think you already know.” As he adds, “We can all improve and support critical thinking by asking a few extra questions each day.”

*Watch his [TEDxXiguan](#) talk now:*

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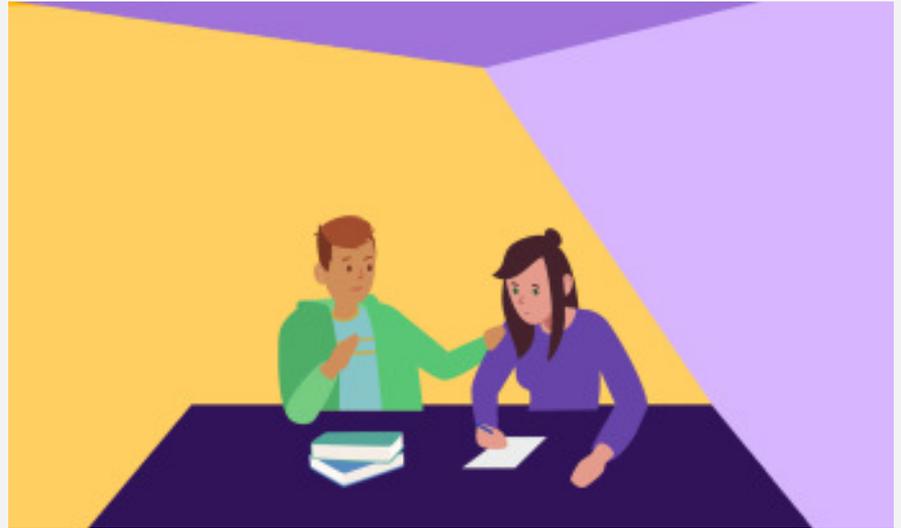


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