Critical Thinking

Building Healthy Decision-Making Skills

Lessons for lower elementary students

aged 5-8

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Critical Thinking – Teacher/Parent Guide

Learning Objectives

By the end of these lessons, students will be able to:

1. Understand what critical thinking is — and why it matters in everyday life.
2. Practice making smart choices — both individually and with others.
3. Use problem-solving steps to approach puzzles, challenges, and conflicts.
4. Recognize simple logic and patterns as a way to make sense of the world.
5. Think about their own thinking by reflecting on their strategies, mistakes, and successes.

Learning Rationale

Children between ages 5 and 8 are in a unique stage of development:

They're curious explorers who love to ask "why?" and "what if?"

They're learning independence, making small but important choices each day (what to eat, how to play, how to treat friends).

They're building social skills, and critical thinking helps them understand fairness, kindness, and collaboration.

They're ready for reflection — even in simple ways like explaining, "I thought it was the right answer because…"

Starting early means these thinking habits become natural and automatic — like muscles that grow stronger the more they are used.

Critical Thinking – Teacher/Parent Guide

Introduction for the Teacher/Parent

Critical thinking is simply how the brain organizes the world. It helps children ask questions, make sense of information, solve problems, and make thoughtful choices. While it might sound like a "big kid" skill, the truth is that children as young as five are already natural thinkers. They are curious, they notice patterns, and they test out decisions every day.

Teaching critical thinking in the early years gives students the tools to:

- Pause and think before acting.
- Make smarter everyday choices (instead of just reacting).
- Find creative solutions to problems.
- Understand fairness and kindness when working with others.
- Reflect on their own thinking ("How do I know this is right?").

You do not need to be a critical thinking expert to use this pack. **Simply read the "A teacher, parent, or older sibling should read this" sections aloud**, guide the discussions, and support the activities. The icon (like the one to the left) will show you what to read out loud.

These are the very skills that build the foundation for academic success, positive relationships, and independent learning later on.

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Critical Thinking Pre-Assessment Teacher/Parent Lesson Plan

Learning Objectives

By the end of the pre-assessment activity, students will:

1. Share what they already know (or think they know) about “thinking” and “making choices.”
2. Demonstrate their current ability to ask questions, notice patterns, and solve small problems.
3. Reflect on how they make decisions in everyday life.

Learning Rationale

The pre-assessment is not a test — it’s a way to understand what children already know and how they currently think about choices, problem-solving, and patterns.

This starting point will:

- Guide instruction – Teachers/parents can adjust explanations and examples based on student understanding.
- Highlight misconceptions early – Many young learners think the “first answer that pops into their head” is always right, or that problems only have one solution.
- Encourage student voice – Students get to share their own thinking and experiences, which makes the lessons more meaningful and connected to real life.
- Track growth – Comparing pre- and post-assessments will show how their thinking has developed across the lessons.

Because “thinking about thinking” can feel abstract to children, the activities in this pre-assessment use stories, choices, and simple picture patterns to help them express their ideas without the pressure of being “right” or “wrong.”

Critical Thinking Pre-Assessment Teacher/Parent Lesson Plan

Lesson Plan

1. Read each statement aloud slowly and point to the response icons (smiley, thinking face, and confused/upset face).
    - Make sure students understand that they are showing how much they agree or know about the statement.
    - Encourage honesty—there are no “correct” answers at this stage.

2. Clarify the format: Students can circle or color the box that matches their answer. If doing in a group, you can have them point to a face on the page or a large visual in the room.

3. Optional discussion:
    - After each statement, you may ask for brief examples (“Can anyone tell me about a time you had to make a choice?”) but avoid correcting them yet—just listen and note answers.
    - Keep it light and exploratory. The goal is to learn what they think, not to teach in this step.

4. Record insights: Consider jotting down brief notes of their responses so you can look back during the post-assessment to see changes in understanding.

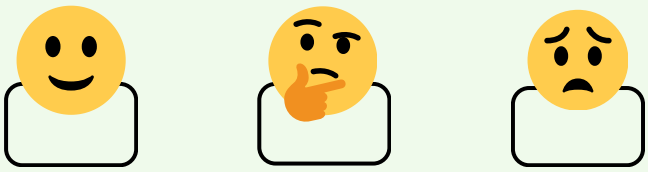
5. Set the tone: Let children know that by the end of the lessons, they’ll have learned new things about thinking, and it’s perfectly fine if their answers change later.

Critical Thinking Pre-Assessment

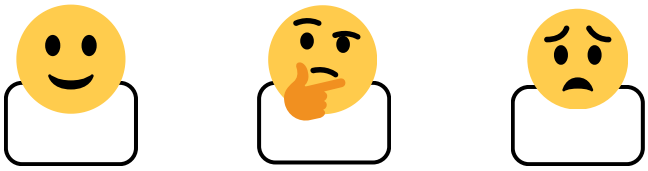
For each statement below, rate how well you understand the idea by choosing one of the following:

- I understand this well 🙂
- I am not sure if I understand this 🤔
- I don't understand this well 😟

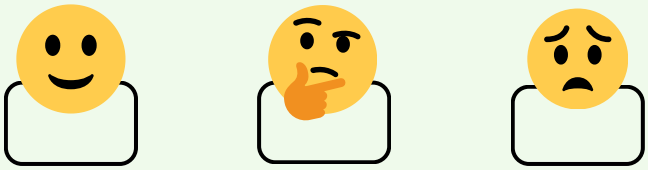
I can explain what "thinking" means.



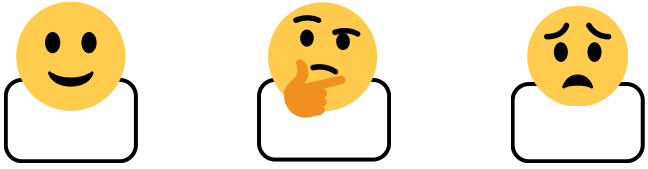
I can ask questions to learn more information.



I can stop and think before I make a choice.

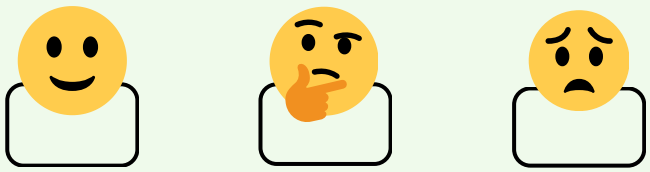


I know that every choice can have consequences (something that happens after).

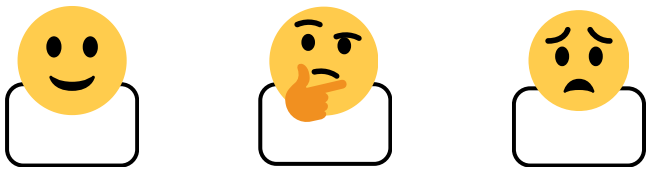


Critical Thinking Pre-Assessment

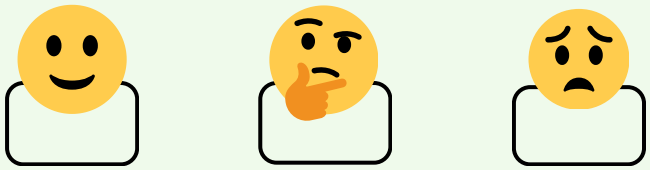
I can find more than one way to solve a problem.



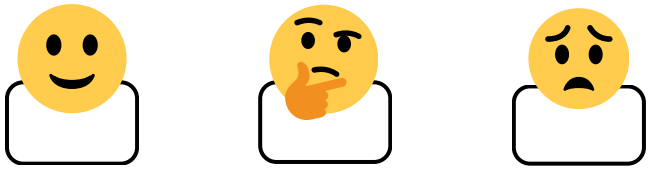
I can find patterns, like what comes next in a sequence.



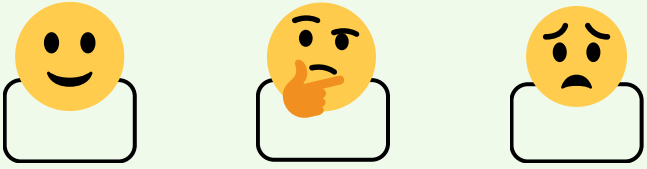
I can explain why I made a choice or solved something a certain way.



I can make fair choices when I am with friends.



I can reflect and change my mind when I learn something new.



What is Critical Thinking? Teacher/Parent Lesson Plan

Learning Objectives

By the end of this lesson, students will be able to:

1. Understand that critical thinking means using our brains to be curious and ask questions about the world.
2. Identify an "I wonder…" question as a type of question that helps us explore and discover.
3. Practice asking their own wonder questions about pictures, objects, or the story I Wonder.
4. Recognize that wondering is part of learning — not every question has an easy answer, and that's okay.

Learning Rationale

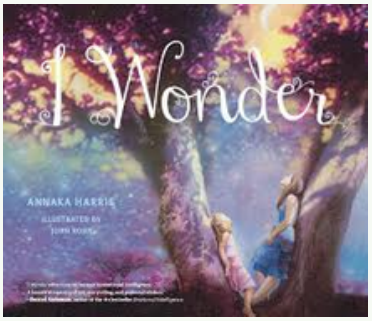
This lesson introduces students to the idea that critical thinking begins with curiosity. Instead of focusing on technical differences between statements and questions, it invites children to see themselves as thinkers and wonderers.

Why this matters:

- **Age-appropriate entry point** – Young children are naturally curious. Centering the lesson on "wonder questions" taps into that strength without making the concept feel too abstract.
- **Sets the tone** – By starting with the message "your questions matter", students gain confidence that they already use critical thinking in everyday life.
- **Encourages open-ended thinking** – Wonder questions spark imagination and deeper thought, laying the groundwork for later lessons on choices, problem-solving, and reflection.
- **Normalizes not knowing** – Students see that it's okay to ask questions we don't have answers for — wondering itself is valuable.

What is Critical Thinking?
Teacher/Parent Lesson Plan

Materials Needed:



- The picture book ***I Wonder*** **by Annaka Harris**
  - If you don't have a copy, you can use a free YouTube reading of this book. Here is one example: https://youtu.be/59DSEIWsZCw
- Crayons, colored pencils, or markers

Lesson Plan

1. Read the Introduction Out Loud to your Students
   - Emphasize that we use critical thinking all the time without even knowing it. In this lesson we are going to learn how to be better at asking questions and wondering which are important parts of critical thinking.

2. Activity 1: Your Brain
   - Give students time to draw their own picture about what their brain helped them do.
   - If students are struggling, you can give them some examples such as: what to put in their backpack before school, who to play with at recess, solving a math problem, etc.

3. Activity 2: Book Club Discussion
   - After reading the book *I Wonder* by Annaka Harris, discuss the book. Encourage students to ask their own "I wonder" questions.

4. Activity 3: Wonder Walk
   - You can do your walk inside (down a school hallway, around the living room) or outside (in a park, nature trail, your backyard).
   - Encourage students to draw about things they wonder about and share their questions with you.

5. Activity 4: Curious Explorers
   - This imaginary play activity gets students pretending to be Explorers and "discovering" things by using critical thinking questions. *If you are working with one child, play the game with your child/student and explore together!*
   - Let students take turns being the Explorer.

What is Critical Thinking?

A teacher, parent, or older sibling should read this:

Your brain is amazing! Every day, it helps you notice things, make choices, and solve problems. Critical thinking simply means using your brain carefully.

When you use critical thinking, you:

- Look closely at what's happening.
- Ask questions to understand more.
- Think before acting so you can make the best choice.

Sometimes our brains want to go really fast, like a race car. But critical thinking helps us slow down and check: Does this make sense? What else could I do?

Critical thinking is like being a detective — you gather clues, ask questions, and figure things out. It helps you in school, with friends, and even when playing games.

Activity 1: Your Brain!

Draw a picture below of things that your brain helped you do today.

What is Critical Thinking?

A teacher, parent, or older sibling should read this:

Your brain has helped you do amazing things today. Your brain is like a helper that works all the time – remembering, making choices, solving problems, and being kind to others.

One very important way our brains help us is by asking questions. When we wonder about things, it's our brain's way of saying, I want to learn more!

Today we're going to read a story about wondering. It's called *I Wonder* by Annaka Harris. In this book, a girl asks lots of big, curious questions about the world around her. Some of the questions have answers, and some are mysteries we're still exploring.

As we read, I want you to listen for the questions she asks — and think about your own wonder questions too. After the story, you'll get to practice asking your own questions.

Teacher/Parent Note: Read *I Wonder* by Annaka Harris out loud to your students/child. Use this book for the next series of activities.

What is Critical Thinking?

Activity 2: Book Club Discussion

With your class (or parent and siblings), answer the following quesitons,

Why do you think the girl is asking so many questions?

At the beginning of the book, when the girl looks at the stars she asked, 'Where did the stars come from?' Is that a Yes/No Question or a Wonder Question? Can you think of another wonder question about the stars?

What is something you wonder about when you look at the world?

If you could ask one question about space/animals/nature, what would it be?

Why are wonder questions important?