Teaching Elementary Children about Controversial Issues

From international terrorism to toxic waste, from AIDS to war—elementary-aged children are aware of these and many other societal conflicts, but often they are also aware of the unwritten rules against talking about or asking questions about such controversial issues. Teachers also have questions and qualms about discussing controversial issues with their students. They have concerns about frightening children, about propagandizing them, and about angering parents or administrators. But there comes the day when a teacher is having the daily show-and-tell or current events period and a child asks a question about a controversial issue. What should the teacher do?

There are, in fact, many ways elementary teachers can deal honestly and constructively with controversial issues, ways that help prepare children to become the decision-makers they are going to be. It might be through a simple discussion, or it might be a more structured approach. What follows are some guidelines for discussing controversial issues with elementary children, then two methodologies to help elementary teachers use controversial issues as vital and empowering pieces of their curriculum: the Ten Point Model for Teaching Controversial Issues by Susan Jones and the Constructive Controversy method by David and Roger Johnson.

These guidelines and models are excerpted from William Kreidler’s curriculum, Elementary Perspectives: Teaching Concepts of Peace and Conflict.

Guidelines for Discussing Controversial Issues

1. Make your classroom a safe place in which to ask questions and discuss ideas.

   Before children can ask questions or discuss controversial issues, they need to feel that the classroom is a safe place in which to ask questions or disagree with classmates without being put down for it. Guidelines for discussion should be established early in the year and reinforced on a daily basis—not just for discussions about controversial issues, but for all discussions. These guidelines should include:
   - No put-downs or making fun of other people’s contributions;
   - Let people finish—don’t interrupt them;
   - What gets said in the group stays in the group.

2. Listen to the concerns students have.

   The most basic job of the teacher is to listen to children’s concerns about controversial issues. Don’t rush in to correct misinformation or reassure children. First give them a chance to say what’s on their minds. As you listen to your students, show that you are interested and attentive. Try to understand what they are saying from their point of view, not just from yours.

   What children say may not be what they mean. Sometimes it takes a bit of gentle probing to find out what’s going on behind the initial question or statement. You might use such phrases as: “That’s interesting, can you tell me more about that?” or “What do you mean when you say ‘Killer Rays’?” or “Where did you hear that you can get AIDS by drinking
from the water fountain?"

If students seem to be struggling to make something clear, it can be particularly useful and reassuring to have you help them summarize and focus their concerns. "It sounds to me like you’ve heard some terrible stories about toxic waste and you want to know if they’re true."

Good listening also involves paying close attention to what children are not saying. Be aware of their nonverbal messages: facial expressions, fidgeting, gestures, tone of voice, or other signals of emotion. It’s reassuring to hear adults acknowledge these feelings. "It’s scary to talk about nuclear war" or "I get upset about endangered species when I hear about them."

3. Correct misinformation.

One important way to respond to children during a discussion of controversial issues is to gently correct misinformation. The burden of fear and concern children feel about a controversial issue is often due to misunderstanding and misinformation. Keep this information simple and to the point. For example, it’s more effective to say simply “There is no one bomb that can blow up the world” than to launch into a detailed summary of nuclear weapons. Follow the lead of children’s questions and give no more information than is asked for.

4. Reassure children.

The most reassuring thing we can do for children is to listen to their concerns and take them seriously. Correcting misinformation often alleviates the burden of fear this misinformation creates. It’s always reassuring to children to know that there is someone to whom they can talk, that they are not alone with their concerns and fears.

It is also often appropriate to point out to children that many adults are concerned about these issues and are working to solve whatever problem is under discussion. Children need to know that there are adults who are working to protect them from dangers in the world. If the issue is an environmental one, point out the actions of scientists, lawmakers, and citizen groups. If students ask why there is disagreement among adults about an issue, you can point out that people often disagree about the way something should be accomplished, but that no one wants to see the world hurt or destroyed.

5. Help them find answers to their questions.

The questions of younger children seldom require complicated, technical answers. Older children may well ask questions that stump you. This is the perfect opportunity to ask, “How could we find out the answer?” The process of figuring out where to go for information and going through the steps to get it—library research, consulting an “expert,” or whatever the appropriate action might be—can be a very powerful and reassuring
experience for children. In a small but significant way, this experience can demonstrate for young people that there are orderly ways to go about solving problems and that world problems are not beyond control or understanding.

If a child’s questions don’t lend themselves to this kind of research process, it is also effective to say something like “I don’t know the answer to that question and I’m not sure anyone does. But I know that many people are working hard to solve the problems related to ________.”

6. Don’t burden children with adult concerns.

In other words, children did not create the problems in the world today, and children should not be made to feel that they are solely responsible for solving these problems. While the temptation to share your own feelings is strong, consider before you do so how that will affect your students. Will it raise new questions and fears rather than help them deal with questions and fears they already have? Another danger is that we might cut off the expression of what’s on their minds as we get wrapped up in expressing what’s on ours. We might even miss hearing what our children want to tell us.

7. Emphasize that conflicts are opportunities.

Most controversial issues are conflicts, and a discussion about controversial issues is a good time to remind children that conflicts are opportunities for learning and growth. After you have heard and addressed children’s fears and questions, they may be interested in the problem-solving aspects of the issue. There is often action children can take that is appropriate both to their ages and to the school setting. Approaching controversial issues from a constructive, problem-solving perspective is one of the best ways to avoid needlessly frightening children, and to prepare them as future citizens.

Both of the models that follow suggest ways to explore many aspects of controversial issues in the elementary classroom using an action-oriented, problem-solving approach.

---

The Ten-Point Model for Teaching Controversial Issues
by Susan Jones

Summary

In this approach to teaching controversial issues, students begin by pooling what they know and what they think they know about an issue. They also develop a list of questions. This is followed by an information-gathering period during which students search for answers to the questions. Next, using information they have collected, they correct any misinformation previously listed and develop more questions. This process continues until some type of culminating activity emerges from the information.
1. Raise the initial question and have the children brainstorm all their initial responses. Write them down. Don't discuss them, and accept all contributions. Teacher asks only such questions as "What does that mean?" "Can you say any more about that?" "Does anyone else have anything to add to that information?" and (especially for erroneous or extremely one-sided information) "Where did you learn that?" or "Is that a fact or is it someone's opinion?"

2. As soon as undefined vocabulary words, vague concepts, and unanswered questions begin to emerge, begin a separate list of "Things to find out more about." These will serve as guidelines for the ongoing research, and some may even develop into separate topics to pursue later.

3. Information-gathering assignment (homework): Have children find out everything they can about the initial questions. Tell them to be prepared to share what you can in your own words. It is fine to read articles or watch the TV news, but the best source of information is interviewing parents, other relatives, or friends. Tell them not to copy down anyone else's words, but that it is a good idea to take notes.

4. Share again responses to the initial question in a brainstorming session. Again, children must share the information they gathered in their own words. Write down all responses. You can ask the same questions as in item 1, but offers no information and no "answers." Add to the list of "Things to find out more about" from item 2.

5. Continue the process of gathering information, identifying things to find out more about, and going out to gather still more information for as long as the topic seems interesting. Encourage the children to listen to and learn from each other. They can begin to ask each other to explain what a new word means, to elaborate on a concept, to consider a new question, and to state their source of information. The teacher's role is an active one, facilitating, clarifying, and questioning, but the teacher doesn't impose information.

6. If a concept emerges that sparks much interest or confusion, pose it as a new question about which to seek information. Share and question until a satisfactory base of information has been established. More than one line of questioning can go on at the same time.

7. Periodically, give the children an individual written assignment in class to summarize their thoughts about a particular question. The assignment can be worded as "What you know about X," "Things you don't understand about X," "Something X makes you think about," or any other way you can find to help crystallize children's individual thinking about the topic. Sharing these compositions aloud or posting them for all to read helps make all information public.

8. As individual or group projects emerge, follow up on them. The class may decided to write letters to public figure; one or two children may decide to pursue a challenging research topic to report on to the group; or an outside resource may unexpectedly appear. Be flexible.

9. Let others—parents, your colleagues, the media—know what you are doing. Invite their participation. Encourage dialogue.

10. Let your project end with something either public or permanent: a class presentation to the
rest of the school about what they have learned, an article for the school paper or the local newspaper, a class book, or individual books for the school library, or class participation in an event. It is important for children to feel that their learning is relevant and can lead to the ability to make a contribution to the larger world.

Advantages

The Ten-Point Model starts where students are and is very respectful of children's knowledge. The process of correcting misinformation is empowering, not punitive. Because students spend time going from whole group to small group and back again, the process encourages community building and lets all students participate at their own level.

Disadvantages

The Ten-Point Model requires that elementary students make use of some fairly sophisticated reference and study skills. There can also be an aimless quality to the procedure if the teacher doesn't present students with some boundaries to their explorations. Even though one purpose of the procedure is to demonstrate the open-ended nature of inquiry, the teacher often needs to structure a clear culminating activity, so that the process doesn't just drift off into an anticlimactic and unsatisfying ending.

Constructive Controversy
by David and Roger Johnson

Summary

In this highly structured, cooperative format for exploring controversial issues, students research and present a point of view on an issue, then switch sides and argue for the opposite point of view. Finally, the group tries to come to a consensus on the issues and writes a group report describing the issue and their combined thinking about it.

Implementing the Constructive Controversy Model

Before the lesson:

1. Choose a discussion topic for which there is no clear right or wrong answer, and for which at least two well-documented positions are available.

2. Prepare instructional material that will present facts and opinions on all sides of the issue, or will lead students to these facts.

3. Assign students to heterogeneous groups of four. (Heterogeneity maximizes resources and differences of opinion within the cooperating group, which is the goal of this approach.) Assign pairs within each group to opposite positions.
4. Assign each group the common goal of reaching a group consensus and presenting a group report after all differences of opinion have been thoroughly explored.

5. Review or teach the necessary collaborative skills: § active listening skills, particularly paraphrasing and summarizing another's position § being able to disagree with ideas while confirming the competence of those holding them § consensus-achieving skills, such as building on others' ideas, looking for the positive aspects of any idea, and identifying the needs underlying a stated position, etc.

Steps in Constructive Controversy

1. Pair Study: In groups of four, pairs each study a different side of a controversial issue, gathering facts and preparing arguments. (May consult with like pairs from other teams.)

2. Pairs Present: Each side presents its case; other listen, except for clarifying questions.

3. Pairs Challenge: Each side challenges the other side's arguments, insists on facts, exposes logical fallacies, etc.

4. Pairs Switch: Each side now prepares a new set of arguments and presents the strongest case it can for the opposite side of the argument.

5. Group Discussion: As a group, decide which arguments are most valid from both sides, and seek a statement, resolution, synthesis, etc. that incorporates the best thinking of the group as a whole.

6. Group report: As a group, prepare a report (may be written or oral) for presentation to the class as a whole, to the teacher, or to some other audience. All sign a written summary indicating agreement. If no agreement can be reached, prepare a minority report as well, and/or a report on areas of agreement and areas of continuing disagreement, including reasons why. All sign this report indicating that it incorporates their views.

After the Lesson:

§ Process or reflect on what was learned, in terms of both content and group skills. § Give special recognition to examples of creative synthesis of opposing positions. § Have participants set individual and/or group goals for improving their process next time. § The group report may be evaluated in terms of how well it incorporates and synthesizes a range of opinion. § Individual testing may follow, with debating groups being rewarded for the individual achievement of their members (bonus points, etc.)

Advantages

The highly structured nature of "Constructive Controversy" makes it useful for students who respond well to structured situations. The process requires students to make use of collaborative skills, and perspective taking and consensus are built into the procedure.
Disadvantages

Some teachers find that "Constructive Controversy" comes too close to the old debate model. Its major drawback is that issues must be carefully chosen so that there are at least two positions. That in itself is not a problem, but finding material that represents those positions and is appropriate for elementary children can be very difficult. The model requires a great deal of work on the part of the teacher. As with the "Ten-Point Model," students need solid backgrounds in study skills.


Educators for Social Responsibility, [http://www.esrnational.org](http://www.esrnational.org)