

Viewpoint

Local schools have their say

Caroline Chaffé, Head of Pre-Prep at Russell House, explains her passion for early years education and describes how to help children remain curious and think critically



Like most people working in education, I am passionate about the importance of reading and how we help children to become readers who understand. I am passionate about numbers and the importance of children knowing how they work. I am passionate about children treating each other with respect and consideration. The linking factor between all these aspects, and any area of educating little ones, is the importance of teaching children to think!

We are all born curious. Children use that curiosity to try and make sense of the world. To watch the two year olds in our Russell Robins class is a joy as they rush to investigate every area they can, using all their senses to feed their curiosity. In the right environment, children's curiosity will take them on journeys they will never forget and, without realising it, they will carry those first experiences with them through their education and into the workplace.

As a reception teacher and Head of the Pre-Prep at Russell House, I am in the privileged position of working with colleagues who have a shared vision of helping children to think. How many times have you used a sat nav only to find the route is blocked and you have no sense of where you are or how to get where you want to go? We make it our mission to educate our children to free themselves from the 'sat-nav' mentality.

For example, when children change for PE it can be easy to pass them their clothes. However, it is far better to let them have a go at organising themselves. They might put on trainers before joggers but then realise it is more efficient to do the reverse, just as they learn it's almost impossible to do up coat buttons if wearing gloves. These everyday skills can be carried through to so many different learning situations.

The ability to think through something before acting to solve problems is a skill that can be taught and is known as Critical Thinking. So how can we help children remain curious and think critically? As educators, we take their hand and experience with them, not for them. We ask questions such as, "I wonder how we can build this tower of bricks higher". We become part of their team. When they ask a question, we may ponder for a moment and then ask what *they* think. When they come up with ideas, we value their responses. Instead of correcting a child, you will hear us say, "That's an interesting idea – what made you think that?" Explaining their thought processes encourages logical thinking and gives us insight.

Logical thought processes inevitably lead to creative thinking. We have pondered what it would be like to really have eyes in the back of our heads, or what would happen if it did really rain 'cats and dogs'? By asking 'I wonder what would happen if...' questions, we are getting children to not only imagine but to think ahead to consider different paths to take when stuck.

Many a time I have found myself with a problem and will grab a learning opportunity to involve the children in my thinking. Last autumn, we noticed the tree in the school paddock was covered in apples. With no sign of windfalls, we put our thinking caps on to work out how to reach the apples in order to make a crumble. The children came up with lots of alternative ideas and their persistence in working out different solutions ultimately gave them success! Pride was obvious but most of all their self-esteem grew before my very eyes as they realised their ideas were valid, their ideas were used by a grown-up and their ideas worked!

As technology becomes ever more part of our lives, creativity, initiative and the ability to ask questions and identify new solutions are increasingly important. All these are built on the thinking skills we are developing throughout children's years at Russell House. Who wouldn't be passionate about them? As Einstein famously said "I have no special talents. I am only passionately curious", and I am sure if he was here today, he would have added the importance of helping children avoid the 'sat-nav' trap.