

How educators are introducing big issues to children

Conceptual learning is the key to helping students tackle issues like race, sexuality and climate change.

Iain Gillespie

How do you tell a young child whose mind is literally off with the fairies that racism and bigotry can create violence and hatred, or that their world is threatened by climate change?

The answer is, you don't, according to early learning experts.

They say "conceptual learning" is the key to introducing them to the world's biggest problems.

For example, four year-olds can't grasp the intricacies of sustainability, but they can see litter and teachers can explain why it's bad and wasteful – and it works.

The director of the early learning centre at Cornish College in Bangholme, Jeanette Russell, points to a recent conversation she had with a parent who was driving with her child when some rubbish blew across the windscreen.

"Her four year-old said, 'Look mum, there's rubbish out there, we've got to make sure we clean it up so it doesn't go into the waterways,'" Russell says.

"So by the child seeing and living something directly, they knew there was a land around us that needed looking after.

"We're not scaring them, we're not telling them they need to save the world, but they learn to pick up litter in the 100 acres of natural parkland we have here, and they learn [about] the rubbish and bin systems within the school and at home."

The same conceptual approach applies to other big issues, like accepting and respecting people of different races and cultural backgrounds.

The head of the junior school at Ruyton Girls' School in Kew, Catherine Samuel, says children learn from the diverse backgrounds of students in their own classrooms.

"They can learn to appreciate and respect individual differences through stories, games and discussions, fostering an inclusive and accepting environment from a young age," she says.

"Students learn about their own families and the families of other students in their class, and by sharing this with one another, they begin to learn about diversity and inclusion, recognising and respecting that we all have similarities and differences."

"We find opportunities to invite our parent community and guest speakers into classrooms. For instance we have a kitchen garden program, and our parents and grandparents come in to share their traditional food and talk about how communities can come together in different ways."

“We also celebrate different cultural events and different holidays; there’s storytelling and song and dance, and our children learn and build awareness through these opportunities.”

“It’s about creating safe spaces for children to discuss their thoughts and share with one another.”

The debates around sexual identity and LGBTQ issues are also challenging, with very young children potentially exposed to inappropriate adult material from television, the internet and social media.

Cornish College’s deputy principal and head of primary, Tim Edmonds, says early-learning teachers sometimes have to deal with such things, but when it happens, parents are called into the conversation.

“Of course kids do come in asking about things you wouldn’t want a young child to be exposed to,” he says, “but depending on what the issue is, we take an age-appropriate approach and it’s dealt with on an individual case-by-case basis.”

Edmonds says a conceptual lens is also incorporated into issues of sexual diversity.

“Children are sophisticated beings, so we have sophisticated approaches and we never really dumb it down for them,” he says.

“Rather than focus on absolute specifics, we may instead look at broader concepts such as diversity. So what does diversity look like in their family? What does it look like in their home? What does it look like in the schoolyard? We’re trying to make the connection with them first and build from there.”

Russell says early-learning teachers at Cornish don’t put across their own point of view.

“It’s about providing real life situations that enable discussions,” she says. “Families here might have two mums, two dads, or have grandparents bringing them up. It’s about giving them an understanding that there’s no right or wrong, that we are all diverse and that communities are diverse.”

Samuel says Ruyton Girls’ School has a carefully developed health and wellbeing program that supports students’ understanding and awareness, and gives them tools and strategies for what they can do if they are exposed to inappropriate material or behaviour at a young age.

“Positive connections and conversations with families play an essential role in this,” she says. “In the early years we begin to talk to the students about who their trusted people are, who they can go to if they are worried or upset, and that can be different for every child.”

“We also talk about little things like body clues. For example, if you get butterflies in your tummy or something makes you feel a bit sick and want to shiver or shake.”

“That might be a sign that something isn’t right, so then you go to one of your trusted people for help. They’re very gentle and nurturing conversations that are slowly increased to more direct conversation as students become more mature.”