

# The Philosophers' Club - A Guide for Educators

by Christopher Phillips from [www.philosopher.org](http://www.philosopher.org)

Picture a group of children gathered for a regular meeting to talk about their thoughts and concepts of the world. They follow a method of questioning inspired by the philosopher Socrates. You've just imagined a Philosophers' Club.

In a nutshell, the Socratic method of discourse is a way for children to seek and find insights and truths by their own lights. Socrates believed that we only discover what we truly think about something by engaging in constructive and empathetic discourse with others.

Philosophers' Clubs invariably help members nurture their ability in "the fourth R"—the ability to reason—in breathtakingly imaginative and constructive ways. As a result, children are more highly motivated to develop their abilities in the traditional three Rs. In this form of creative and critical inquiry, children are required to back up their viewpoints with compelling evidence presented in well-structured arguments. Sloppy or lazy thinking is taboo. So every step of the way, the teacher or volunteer educator is helping a child develop reasoning and logical thinking skills.

What's more, Philosophers' Clubs will enable members to ponder in a meaningful way those three questions of questions:

Who am I?

What am I capable of?

Who can I become?

As children develop clear and more thoughtful answers to these questions, they become better able throughout their lives to chart courses for realizing their loftier hopes and dreams.

## Getting Started

It's best to have at least three members and to limit the club to about thirty members. This ensures that each child has a chance to have his or her say.

Meetings should last from thirty minutes to one hour, ideally at least once a week.

While you may choose to start with the first chapter of the book, any chapter will do. For the purposes of this guide, the "Why Are We Here?" section is the working example.

It would be a good idea to write all the various responses on a chalkboard or large piece of poster paper, so the children can read and reflect on them all in more depth.

## **Questions, Questions, Questions**

It might take at least two or three meetings to complete each section of the book and the accompanying “Questions, Questions, Questions” before moving on to another chapter. And because these clubs are established to empower children to become expert questioners, it’s critical for the adult educator not to be overly directive. Let the children themselves propose the questions. Have each member take turns raising something that they’re the most curious about on that day.

### **The Socratic Method**

**Exploring Concepts and Assumptions** One of the key maxims in philosophical inquiry the Philosophers’ Club way is this: The unexamined concept is not worth using. In our sample question “Why are we here?” there lie some hidden concepts: What is why? What is we? What is here? And even, What is are?

If you say we “are,” you are assuming we “exist.” Someone needs to explain what it means to exist. By isolating each concept, members can probe them individually. Later in the discourse, the facilitator will bring the concepts back together. You can follow up with questions like “Where else are we?” And you might get responses like “We’re here in these chairs, in this neighborhood, in this city, state, country, continent, planet, galaxy, universe.” Then you might ask:

What do all these places have in common?

Why are we in these places?

How do we know we’re in these places?

You ask questions like this not because you think you know all the possible answers, but because you think you don’t know. Those with a Socratic sensibility hope that other members may provide previously unfamiliar answers and broaden members’ perspectives.

Our sample question “Why are we here?” also contains assumptions that need to be challenged and examined. The word why assumes that there is a reason we’re here. So you will want to explore:

What is a reason?

What are different types of reasons?

What makes a reason a good reason for explaining why we are here?

Is there such a thing as here?

What is it and how do we determine where it is?

The word we suggests that there are many I's discussing the question, and that these I's exist, and that we can call all of these I's "we." Which may lead members to ask:

How do we know "I" when we see it?

Or is "I" something we don't see, but detect by other means?

Is "I" even a substance—an it—or is it something else altogether?

The sample question also assumes there is such a thing as "here" and that it can be located. So you could ask: Is it always possible to locate ourselves in a "here" and determine where we are? If so, how precisely do we go about doing this? Can we do it on our own or do we always need the help of others? Or is it that only others can determine where we are?

### **Exploring Differences of Kind and Degree**

To further explore the question, seek out differences of kind and differences of degree in each concept embedded in the question. For instance, in the question "Why are we here?", ask participants whether there are different types of heres (e.g., school, galaxy, state, state of mind), different types of wes (students, children, human beings, Philosophers' Club members, boys, girls), and of whys (many different types of explanations to answer the question).

By comparing and contrasting each kind of we, here, and why—exploring to what degree each kind differs from the other—members will come closer to identifying what they think. Ask them, "How are all these kinds of wes or heres alike? How are they different?"

Do the same with the different kinds of whys. "What do all the different reasons offered to answer our sample question have in common? How are they different?"

Answering the following questions will help the group determine whether they feel some reasons are better than others, and why: If I am here in this room, is that the only place where I am?

Is it possible to ever be in only one place,  
or am I always in more than one place at the same time?

Am I absolutely, positively here in this room?

How do I know for sure?

The facilitator may then ask, "Is this absolutely, positively the only reason we are here? Or are there other reasons too? And can the answer to 'Why are we here?' change over time?" In other words, say that ten years pass and the children are now adults: Would they answer "Why are we here?" differently than when they were children?

## DOs and DON'Ts

**Do** encourage participants to offer specific examples. Challenge them to articulate their perspectives and propose solid evidence that supports them. Members should aim to help one another discover, articulate, and refine their unique points of view. It should be clear that the facilitator is also a co-inquirer. As such, the facilitator along with each Philosophers' Club member, has unique experiences and perspectives to offer and add to the group but who at the same time should not monopolize the discussion and should not in any way lead anyone to think that his or her views are somehow better than those of the other club members.

**Do** nudge the dialogue along in a spontaneous way. As a rule of thumb, when a child offers a response, ask the rest of the group if they agree or differ, and why. Remember: This is a community of philosophical inquirers. So at every turn include as fully as possible all participants.

**Do** let participants use the chalkboard or poster paper to share, back up, or further explain and elaborate on their examples or "map out" the path of the dialogue.

**Do** allow members to eventually facilitate some dialogues once they are ready. In fact, one long-term goal can be to give children the tools not only to engage in Socratic discourse, but also to facilitate such discourse themselves.

**Don't** feel as if you must strive for consensus. It doesn't matter if everyone begins and ends a dialogue with somewhat or even wildly disparate perspectives. Differences in perspective typically are all to the good.

**Don't** try to bring the discussion to any sort of artificial closure. Leave it open-ended. A Philosophers' Club can be considered a success when children leave a discussion with many more questions than they had at the beginning. Philosophical inquiry the Socratic way is a springboard for further and deeper thinking and discourse.

**Do** be ever prepared for the Wow Factor. No matter how many times you discuss the same question, children without fail will come up with new answers, insights, and possibilities. And when guided and nudged, they will combine their reasoning skills with their unlimited imaginative capacity to develop a more acute sense of who they are, who they can be, and of what they are capable.

Welcome to the Club!

You can find the book from any bookstore, or, you can support our efforts by joining the Society for Philosophical inquiry with a donation of \$25. We would send you your pick of Christopher Phillips' books, to find out more, visit [www.philosopher.org](http://www.philosopher.org).