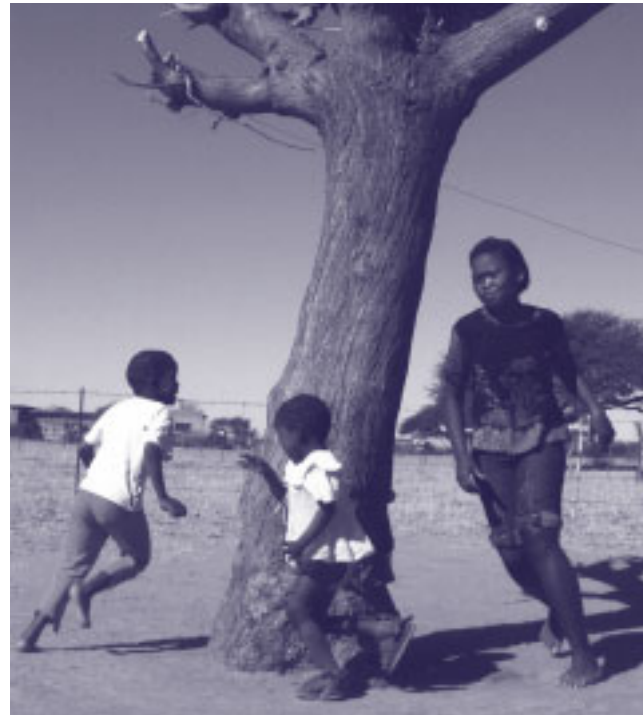


South Africa

The roots of critical thinking

The Children's Rights Centre is an NGO situated in Durban, South Africa. As its name suggests, the Centre is committed to children's rights and sees its work as establishing a child friendly society and a sustainable children's rights culture in South Africa. It works towards this goal by trying to have the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child entrenched in the laws of the country, in the fabric of South African society and in human relations at every level. Since its inception in 1988, it has evolved from activist roots to supporting projects, and advocating and lobbying for long term development. Never losing sight of the children at the heart of its work, the Centre also provides training for child-based organisations, develops materials, provides information, supports organisation building, facilitates children's participation, and raises awareness. While the Centre's office is situated in Durban, its work has national and international relevance. Critical thinking is an essential aspect of its work on children's rights, and it encourages critical thinking by all parties at all times. This feature is based on an interview with Cati Vawda, the Director. It explains her ideas of how adults can build on children's ability to think critically, starting at birth so that the foundations for continuous development are laid early.

The Children's Rights Centre believes that all children have the innate ability to think critically, but that this needs to be stimulated in order to emerge fully. It believes that children of different age groups need to be stimulated in ways appropriate to their



level of development and understanding. With very young children, such as those who are not yet verbal, adults need to be able to recognise and understand the signals that these children give in order to understand their capacity for thinking and the stage at which they are at. Children of all ages are naturally curious, and they have a thirst for learning when they are young. But their ability to think critically depends heavily on themselves as individuals, on their personalities, and characters, but also on other factors such as the society and environment in which they live. Underlying these are other influences that count too. For example, children need a strong bond with an adult and this must develop in their first months and years. Building on that, if their curiosity is stimulated from a very early age, this will bring out their critical thinking skills.

As babies grow into toddlers, they become more expressive, and move from the tactile (touch) to the verbal. Their thought processes can be stimulated by asking questions in different ways, preferably questions that rely on them observing their own behaviour in their current surroundings. For example, if adults see a child following something with his/her eyes, they can ask about that object of interest, or reinforce good answers, even perhaps supplying the answers to aid the learning process. They can do the same if a child reaches for something. In this way, the Centre believes that children learn about their surroundings and can have some of the questions that they might not yet be able to articulate, explained.



It is important for adults to stimulate children without 'taking over'

CRC, South Africa
Photo: Alex Fattal

As they get older, the different parts of their world start falling into place for the children. However, some children aged from about 18 months to four years do not have the natural ability to distinguish the real from the unreal. This may bring with it unsettling experiences. Cati Vawda gives the example of young children who are afraid of shadows. To them, shadows are real as they can be seen, they move, and therefore the children think that they are alive. Yet they cannot be touched, they are intangible. Children do not understand what they are and this can be frightening. If an adult does not understand the cognitive development processes of children, they may react to these fears in the wrong way. This might cause the child to shut down and the fear remain. The adult must help the children to analyse shadows and understand what they are. Recognising the fears of newly or non-verbal children, is extra difficult because we cannot really understand what they are saying. So we have to be very observant and pick up the non-verbal clues that they give us.

Later, children's powers of expression and rationalisation increase. Problem solving becomes an increasingly important basis for critical thinking. Children will try to solve the problem if they face a difficult situation. They start trying to analyse the world around them, or the situation they are in. All the questions that children might ask about a situation, or their repetitive behaviours, are their ways of trying to understand the situation and find a solution. One simple example of this, according to

the Children's Rights Centre, is when children are playing a game in which they have to fit a particular shaped object into a matching hole. They will often repeatedly try to fit the object into the wrong hole before eventually finding the right hole. This repetition of the action is their way of trying to work out the situation. It is up to the adults to stimulate the children without interfering or taking over the game. Letting children learn by themselves and to work things out for themselves is crucial in helping them to develop an ability to think critically.

To complement its work on critical thinking, the Centre builds questioning into everything that it does, whether it is seeing if a child feels comfortable while playing, or assessing the political situation in South Africa. The Centre regularly asks itself 'What difference do we make? What are we missing? What do we have to change?' It finds that people and organisations can be so busy working that they sometimes don't step back often enough and ask themselves these basic but crucial questions.

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