

Fairness

Age Range: 4 years +

Subjects: PSHE/Personal Development, Citizenship, Humanities/social studies, Health & PE

Stage One: Identify the concept

Fairness is an essential concept for moral and political thinking. That said learners, particularly younger ones, will probably find it easier to say what is unfair rather than what is fair. I find that conversations about fairness usually start with the idea that 'equality' is a pretty good synonym for fairness. But that is hard to sustain when scrutinised. What then is fairness? Conversations about fairness in relation to competitive games may raise questions about what people deserve for their talents or efforts ie, to win.

Potential for challenge

- Would it be fair for everyone to be treated the same?
- Is there a (moral) obligation for us to be fair?
- Is it possible or even desirable to be fair?

Stage Two: Problematising the concept

The following dialogue is used to illustrate how we might begin to challenge students' understanding of fairness.

Introduction: give a sweet to just 5 pupils, leaving the others empty-handed

CHILDREN: That's not fair!

TEACHER: Why not

CHILDREN: Because we didn't all get sweets

TEACHER: Why should I give sweets to everyone?

CHILDREN: It's not fair if you don't

TEACHER: But they're my sweets so surely I can give them to whom I like?

PATRICK: But why did you pick those five?

TEACHER: They're my favourite students; what's wrong with that?

CATHERINE: As a teacher you shouldn't have favourites

TEACHER: So it's alright for you to have favourites but not for me? Why not?

CHILDREN: But teachers are supposed to make sure everything's fair

TEACHER: Does that mean I should treat all of you exactly the same?

CHILDREN: Yes, of course.

TEACHER: So, should I give everyone an 'A' for effort no matter how much effort they put into their studies?

CHILDREN: No but ...

TEACHER: Or what about adults and children; should they all be treated the same?

CHILDREN: Yes

TEACHER: So children, even young ones, should be required to work should they?

CHILDREN: No

TEACHER: But why not; it's only fair!

CHILDREN: But children shouldn't have to work; that's what their parents are supposed to do

TEACHER: Does that mean it would be unfair of me to ask you to help tidy the classroom? Should we expect someone else to tidy up after us?

CHILDREN: No, but ...

Deepening the learning pit

Activities/questions for young children (3 – 7)

Pick two children. Give one of them one sweet and the other two sweets, and ask if that's OK. Swap them around, such that the first child now has two sweets and the other one has one. Is that fair? Now take the sweets away from both of them and give them to other children. Ask whether it's fair now. Also ask: 'Is it fair that I should be able to give my sweets to whoever I want to?' And: 'Is it fair to take something away from someone, once it has been given? Why or why not?'

- Does fair mean being the same as someone?
- Or does it mean everyone having the same things?
- How do you know if something's fair or not?
- Why should people try to be fair?
- What is unfair?
- If Lucy nips Amy, is it fair for Amy to nip Lucy?

Additional activities/questions for juniors (7 – 11)

Ask pupils to help you set up an imaginary running race and change the variables that make up the teams, asking each time whether the race would be fair. For example, draw attention to:

- Different length legs
- Newest trainers versus oldest trainers
- Boys versus girls
- Oldest versus youngest

- What would be the fairest way to set up the teams? Give reasons.
- Would a draw be the fairest possible result? Give reasons.
- Could handicapping the best runners (by, for example, giving them heavy rucksacks, staggered starts, or obstacles) make the race fairer or would that be unfair to the best runners? Give reasons.
- If a runner is unlucky to get knocked over by accident, is that unfair?
- If a team wins the race by cheating, is that unfair? Why?

Then look at how a race could be made fairer by, for example giving the fastest runner a heavy rucksack, staggered starts, or obstacles

Additional questions (7 – 11 year olds)

- What does it mean to be fair?
- If you feel something is unfair, does that mean it is unfair?
- Does fairness mean everyone being equal?
- Does fairness mean everyone being treated the same?
- Is it fair to have a party and not invite everyone?
- If I've got a bag of sweets, would it be fair to keep them all to myself? Explain
- Is it fair that some people have more money than others?
- If one child was being bullied in our class, would it be fair if I bullied everyone else so that we were all equal?
- If 28 out of 30 children in our class wanted us to get a pet hamster but one child was allergic to furry animals and one was scared of hamsters then what would be the fair thing to do?
- When might it be fair to treat people differently?

Additional questions for adolescents (11 – 14)

- Would it be fair to share out all the food in the world equally? If so, would it be fair for me to take food from your house and send it to children that have very little food?
- Would it be 'fair' for everyone to earn the same wage?
- Is it fair to have rich people and poor people?
- Is fairness possible within a family?
- Is fairness possible within school?
- Is it fair when bad things happen to good people?
- Is it fair when good things happen to bad people?
- Would it be fair for someone who's desperate to jump to the front of the toilet queue?

Additional questions for older students (14 – 18)

- Is it fair to always go with what the majority want?
- Is it fair to put on school trips that not everyone can afford to go on?
- Is it fair that 18 year olds have a lower minimum wage to 21 year olds?
- Would it be fair to torture the torturer, terrorise the terrorist, or murder the murderers?
- Is fairness possible (or even desirable) in society?
- Are queues fair?
- How could fairness be achieved?
- Is 'survival of the fittest' fair?
- Is it possible to construct a fair test in science?

Stage Three: Construct understanding

The following exercise may help your students to piece together a characterisation of fairness.

Are these examples fair or unfair?	Fair	Unfair	?	Reason
1. Everyone in the school is given the same amount of homework				
2. Doctors are paid more than teachers				
3. Men are paid more than women for doing the same job				
4. Everyone is given a prize on Sports Day				
5. Children in some countries can't afford to go to school				
6. Some people live in very big houses				
7. A starving woman steals a loaf of bread to feed her family				
8. A student steals a CD from a shop				
9. Children are not allowed to drive a car				
10. Disabled people are allowed to park for free				
11. Someone breaks the law so is sent to prison				
12. A granny can't pay her council tax so is sent to prison				

Stage Four: Reviewing the learning journey

Possible metacognition questions

- Is fairness the same as being equal?
- When is it right to treat people 'unfairly'?
- Is it fair that some people have more than others?
- Is it fair that people who work are paid more than people who can't work?
- Is fairness possible or even desirable?
- How does your idea of fairness differ from the beginning of the lesson?
- What questions about fairness are you left with?

Notes