

If...then

Critical Thinking Tutorials Teachers Series



Natural
Childhood?

if...then

If...then provides courses, products, and guidance that enable the development of skills in Critical Thinking.

How to use this PDF

This is one of a series of PDFs that are produced for teachers by the company if...then ltd. These might be teachers of Critical Thinking as a separate subject or teachers of any subject who want to develop and reinforce critical thinking skills with their students.

This PDF is especially suitable for students aged 8 upwards (thus including the full secondary range). The material has been successfully used by if...then trainers with students throughout this age range.



Critical Thinking?

Critical Thinking is concerned with the significance of claims that are made - it is a questioning way of thinking. By asking questions, we try to make things clearer. By making things clearer, we can make judgements as to the quality of claims that are made and any judgements that are made from them.

Looking for explanations I

Explanations are very important in critical thinking. This is because when evidence is used in arguments, explanations for this evidence are used to fit it with any argument that uses it. Crucially, if there might be other explanations for the evidence, then such arguments could be weakened.

We are going to look at the issue of explanations in this PDF by looking at some of the evidence used in a 2012 UK report on children and 'nature'.

A report ('Natural Childhood') published in April 2012 by the UK's National Trust expressed considerable concern about what it refers to as 'Nature Deficit Disorder'. This term describes the increasing lack of contact that UK children have with 'nature': they're less and less likely to be able to explore the countryside, especially without adult supervision. The report looks at both the causes and effects of this 'disorder'.

The report is looking for 'practical, workable and effective solutions to connect Britain's children with the natural world'. The National Trust claims that they're not looking backwards (to, say, the 1950s) but forwards: 'where the sight of children playing outdoors, without parental supervision, is the norm rather than the exception'.

In this material we'll look at one piece of the evidence that the report uses to argue for this aim.



The report refers to a much-quoted study that showed that three times as many children are taken to hospital each year after falling out of bed, rather than falling out of trees. This evidence is used (along with lots of other evidence) to support the report's inference that 'by far the most dangerous place for a child to be is at home'.

Does this evidence support the report's claim that children are being denied access to nature?

What we're looking at here is whether this evidence on children being injured falling out of bed is to be explained *only* in terms of children not being connected with 'the natural world'.

Three points need to be made before we look at this question.

- What the report doesn't explain is that a few years ago, the figures for the two sources of injury were the same.
- The report also doesn't mention that the evidence relates only to boys. We don't know whether the same applies to girls. Does this matter? (Though it might well matter, we're going to refer here only to 'children' in order to fit with the report.)
- The report also doesn't mention that the evidence was obtained from Accident and Emergency (A&E) departments.



How could we explain this evidence?

Students should try to come up with explanations for the evidence.

Three times as many children are taken to hospital each year after falling out of bed, rather than falling out of trees.

They should also consider whether their explanations fit with the report's claim that this evidence is relevant to showing that children have lost touch with 'nature'.



Here are some possible explanations.

- Beds these days are less strong than they used to be (especially with the increased use of self-assembly flatpack furniture).
- There are more bunk beds in use now (in part because many people might not be able to afford to move to a bigger house, as their family grows).
- The increased popularity of wooden floors rather than carpets would increase the likelihood of injury if a child fell out of bed.
- The increased use of A&E departments by parents for minor injuries with their children rather than just attending to the injury themselves (as used to be the case). To emphasise this point, perhaps injuries from falling out of trees would be/have been more serious than those from falling out of beds.

You can see that each of these explanations would have nothing to do with children being 'disconnected from nature'.

As a result, the significance of this evidence might be less than the report suggests.

Thinking of further explanations

Students will no doubt think of lots of other possible explanations. Some of these might be relevant to the report's concern about children being 'disconnected from nature', but not all will.

What about this one?

- There are fewer climbable trees for children to climb.

This refers to the point that a lot of trees in towns and cities are small (recently-planted and/or the sort that don't grow very big). Though this might help to explain why fewer children are injured falling out of trees than there used to be, it doesn't explain why more children are now injured falling out of bed.

Here's another one.

- Children spend more time in their bedrooms (playing with computers, watching TV, using their phones) than they used to.

As you can see, this one does fit with the report's argument. If children spend more time in their bedrooms than they used to, then they'll spend less time outside.

However, there is still a problem here. Even if children spend more time in their bedrooms than they used to, it doesn't mean that they used to spend this time 'connecting with nature'. Perhaps they'd be playing games in the street instead.

Try to get students to think of at least ten explanations (students have been known to produce as many as 30). With each one, get them to think about whether it fits with the report's concern that fewer children are now playing unsupervised in the countryside.

Looking at the evidence and the claim about the home being ‘the most dangerous place for a child’.

After the students have produced their explanations, they should be reminded that the report considers that this evidence helps to support the claim that ‘by far the most dangerous place for a child to be is at home’.

- An obvious area for students to consider is that of meaning or definition. What is meant by ‘dangerous’ here? In this context, it appears to mean only danger from accidents.
- Even if the evidence on children falling out of bed and trees is accurate, this does not mean that the home is the most dangerous place for a child. Students should consider what other sources of danger there might be (such as road accidents and accidents in playgrounds).
- Even if the claim that the home is ‘the most dangerous place for a child’ is accepted, it could be that the dangers are normally low-level dangers (such as a child bumping its head on a door). This point takes us back to the meaning of the word ‘dangerous’.
- The evidence can be seen in conjunction with the often-quoted claim that children are much more at risk from members of their own family than they are from strangers. It is not clear how this claim fits with the report’s one about danger in the home (which seems to restrict danger to accidents).

We’ll look at other aspects of this report in other PDFs. Watch out for them.

This PDF is supplied by if...then ltd. This company has many years of experience in providing training, consultancy, and resources in critical thinking for a wide range of organisations. Their main trainer is Roy van den Brink-Budgen who has twenty-five years experience in critical thinking. He has worked extensively with teachers and students (from primary to postgraduate) in various countries, including the UK, Singapore, Malaysia, India, France, and Spain. Our website www.ifthen.co.uk provides information on our services together with contact details.

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