3.9.5 Debating for elementary students

Brief description, and rules of the implementation of the learning activity

Introducing debate in elementary school might seem challenging at first, but if we view it as a structured, controlled and coached exchange of opinions, it becomes one of the most effective tools for developing the ability and willingness to understand one another, to take each other's opinions into account, to appreciate each other's thoughts, and, through this, to value one another – in other words, the skill of valuing people. The regulated framework of debate gently but firmly shifts 6-10 year old child's out of this state.

Skill focus

- **Primary Skill Focus**
  - Valuing People and Nature
- **Complementary/Secondary Skill Focus**
  - Emotional awareness, regulation and communication
  - Critical thinking
  - Empathy

Age group	Student number	Duration
6-10 years old students	Whole class our in small groups	15-25 minutes

Proposed step by step implementation of the learning activity

This learning activity is debating through effective argumentation, but in a positive, educational sense: students learn to express different viewpoints using reasons and evidence, while listening respectfully. The topic is always chosen to address the actual lesson content directly. As a teaching technique it starts with a clear issue or question that has different perspectives. Students take on roles - proponent (presenting a viewpoint), opponent (questioning or countering), and audience (reflecting/evaluating) in the context of critical discussion. I this context, focus could be placed on respectful listening, and sometimes working toward shared solutions, using forms like critical discussion or persuasion to deepen thinking and communication rather than "win" an argument.

In this activity, in addition to listening to and understanding others' opinions, we rely on reasoning, because In this activity, in addition to listening to and understanding others' opinions, we rely on reasoning, because unfounded opinions can lead to choices and actions that may harm other people, communities, or the environment. In this way, we are also able to strengthen the "valuing people" skill. As part of being respecting and valuing others, the students have a responsibility to do our best to speak and decide using reasons and evidence, not just pride or "because I feel like it." In a safe classroom debate, students practice asking, "What makes this true?" and "Who could be affected?" so their ideas become more thoughtful, fair, and caring.

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Rules:

- We debate to understand and connect, not to hurt or “win at all costs.”
- Every claim must include a reason + evidence (a picture/story/data fact/example).
- Before responding, elementary students must first repeat what the other person said, and before presenting their own argument, they must briefly summarize the other person's point. (E.g.: "I heard you say that you like dogs better because you can run around with them, but I think cats...."). This forces students to pay deep, attentive attention.
- Use evidence, not pride: we can change our mind if someone shows stronger reasons/evidence.
- Use respectful language and turn-taking (token/timer).
- Every group must finish with a common-ground proposal and a small shared action that strengthens belonging/connection.

Running the activity – step-by-step implementation

Step 1 – The teacher chooses a debate question/statement address it to the actual lesson's content (teacher preparation): The teacher picks a clear, issue that taps content of the actual lesson. The room is set up in small triads with role cards: Speaker for one side, Speaker for the other side, and Listener/Audience. Materials include picture-based issue cards, simple evidence prompts (drawings, short stories, photos), sentence starters for making a point or asking a question, a “listening hat” or token, and a poster of respectful rules (“wait your turn,” “say it kindly,” “repeat what you heard before replying”).

Step 2 - Instructions to give the students: “Today your job is to talk, ask, and listen so we all understand each other better—not to win, but to learn to understand your mate ideas and way of thinking. Use your words, say what you think, and try to find something we can do together.”

Step 3 - Students prepare their ideas (Claim–Evidence–Reasoning):

- Claim: “We think…”
- Evidence: “Our evidence is…” (picture/story/fact/data)
- Reason: “This shows… because…”

Each child thinks or draws one reason for their side, using prompts.

Audience kids get a checklist of things to listen for (kind words, a reason, repeating the argument of the mate, respect, etc).

Step 4 - Share and question: The two “speakers” take turns sharing their idea, while they ask each other a polite question Use a simple structure with a timer and a talking token.

1. Opening statement (Proponent): claim + evidence + reason
2. Opening statement (Opponent): claim + evidence + reason
3. Question round: each side asks 1 respectful question: ("Can you tell me more?” or “Why do you think that ....?" or "Can you make it clear, please?”).
4. Repeat-back rule: before answering, students say: “I heard you say…” (accurate listening)
5. Audience feedback pause: Bridge Builders share one observation: “I/we noticed both sides care about…” (common values)

Step 5 - Find something in common / small joint idea: The triad talks briefly to find one small thing they all agree on or a small shared action. They draw or write that together.

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Step 6 - Rotate roles and repeat (optional): Children swap roles, so listeners become speakers and vice versa, trying the same question or a new but related one.

Step 7 - Whole-group wrap-up and small action: Pairs/triads share their common idea with the class. Teacher collects examples and helps the class pick one small thing to do together (e.g., a welcome card for new students, a shared story exchange with another class).

Indoor/Outdoor Classroom layout notes

Typically indoors, but not necessarily.

Indoor – Set up as a friendly debate circle:

- one side, opposite side, audience in the middle or around the circle
- norms poster visible
- evidence packs on tables
- timer + turn token

Outdoor (optional): Use clipboards and spaced circles for teams, especially if evidence comes from observing shared outdoor spaces.

How does this learning activity develop this particular skill?

During traditional conversations, children often don't listen to each other; they just wait for their turn to speak their mind. Debate breaks this pattern.

- Because they must briefly summarize the thought of the previous speaker, this forces students into deep, active listening.
- During a debate, children learn that a good question is a sign of attention.
- Fixed time limits and rules for passing the word (e.g., using a "talking object") physically and mentally slow down communication, teaching children quiet attention.
- Based on the separation the Person from the Idea, they experience that they can argue fiercely with someone about a topic while remaining friends. This is the foundation of respect and valuing people.
- During a structured debate, even quieter, more withdrawn children get their own guaranteed time when no one can interrupt them. Dominant, vocal children are forced to listen quietly and evaluate the arguments of their quieter peers.
- In more advanced classes (3rd-4th grade), you can introduce a rule where a student must argue for a position, they actually disagree with (step 6 – optional). When a child has to step into the other party's shoes and find logical arguments to defend the "other side," it radically increases understanding and acceptance of people who think differently.
- Children practice expressing different viewpoints, hearing others, and recognizing shared concerns – building empathy and sense of mutual belonging.
- Moves from recognition to responsibility – making connection actionable.

The activity also strengthens critical thinking by practicing claim–evidence–reasoning, evaluating which evidence fits a claim, and asking clarifying questions. It also strongly strengthens empathy and emotional awareness, regulation and respectful communication.

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What do we want to achieve regarding primary skill development (student understanding and/or behaviour)?

As a result of this activity, students will be:

- Understand that a good question is a sign of attention. When a peer presents an argument, the group's task is not (only) to contradict, but to ask clarifying questions
- Able to separate the person from the idea.
- Understand that "they disagree with my idea" does not equal "they don't like me".
- Want to understand others and be patient in listening to their opinions
- able to use kind language and include others when talking about community.
- able to listen and restate what others said before responding.
- show empathy by trying to understand the other person's idea.
- able to resolve a discussion and come up with a mutual win-win solution
- able to accept that the other person is right.

Suggested use, and practical subject-related examples

General curriculum connection examples

- Science: Students discuss a simple, age-appropriate question like "Should animals live in zoos?" or "Which material is best for keeping things warm?" using hands-on experiences and visuals to support their opinions with reasons.
- Math: Learners explain and compare their thinking on different ways to solve the same problem (e.g., "Is it better to use doubles or make ten for 8 + 7?"), using drawings, manipulatives, or number lines to back up their reasoning.
- Language Arts: Students take on roles to argue about a book-related prompt like "Was the character brave or not?" or "Which ending would be better?" using simple examples from the story and respectful turn-taking.
- History/Social Studies: Children explore questions like "Was it fair?" in scenarios from everyday life or classroom history topics (e.g., rules in the past vs. now), listening to each other and offering simple justifications and alternatives.
- Environmental Studies/Geography: Students argue everyday topics like "Should we have more trees at school?" or "What's the best way to save water?" while learning to listen, build on others' ideas, and suggest solutions

Materials and tools needed for implementation

- Debate question cards (picture-based for younger students)
- Role cards (Proponent, Opponent, Audience/Bridge Builders)
- Respectful debate norms poster
- Turn-taking token + timer
- Evidence packs (pictures, short texts, scenario cards, simple class data)
- Claim–Evidence–Reasoning templates (paper)
- Audience observation checklist
- Sticky notes for common ground + action planning
- Optional (advanced): simple research tools (survey sheet, interview prompts, observation notes).

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Guiding questions

- What is your claim? What is your evidence?
- Where did that evidence come from (pack, survey, observation)?
- Who is affected by this choice? Who might feel left out?
- Can you repeat what you heard before replying?
- What is one kind way to disagree?
- What do both sides care about?
- What is one small action we can do together this week?
- What evidence are you using (picture, story, data, observation)? How does it support your claim?
- Are you disagreeing because of evidence or because of pride/just wanting to win?

Tips and Tricks for dealing with challenges

- **Challenge:** Students debate to “win” and get upset.
  Tip: Make “evidence + repeat-back + common ground” required. Praise bridge-building and respectful listening.
- **Challenge:** Students give opinions without evidence.
  Tip: Use evidence packs for younger children and require them to physically point to the card/fact they’re using.
- **Challenge:** Some students dominate; others stay silent.
  Tip: Use timed turns, role rotation, and give quieter students the Bridge Builder role first (then switch).
- **Challenge:** Evidence is misunderstood or too difficult.
  Tip: Keep evidence age-appropriate (pictures, short stories, class data). For advanced groups, teacher curates 1–2 child-friendly sources.

Difficulty level tailoring

Teachers can tailor the Debating to three difficulty levels to meet students’ needs.

- **Beginner learners (6-7 years old):** Use very simple, familiar questions, give full support with role cards, sentence starters, modelling, and very short exchanges - focus on listening and finding one common thing. Create a safe space to express an opinion and practice taking turns. A great approach is a physical debate or a "this or that" scenario. The teacher can then pass a talking object around, asking each student to provide just one simple reason for their choice using a provided sentence starter. At this stage, there is no back-and-forth arguing; the goal is purely sharing and listening.
- **Advanced learners (8-9 years old):** Around eight to nine years old, the students are ready to respond directly to one another and build slightly more complex thoughts. Introduce slightly broader questions, have children switch roles once, ask them to restate each other’s ideas before replying, and guide them to a shared small plan. This is the perfect time to introduce the echo rule, where a student must summarize what the previous person said before making their own point.

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Students should be expected to provide a clear opinion with at least two supporting reasons and use transition phrases provided on the board, respectfully acknowledging the other side before stating their own case.

- **Expert learners (9-10 years old):** Introduce formal team debates with three members on each side, assigning specific roles like introducer, rebutter, and summarizer. Give them a few minutes of preparation time to brainstorm arguments as a team. To truly push their cognitive and empathy skills, you can assign them a stance they might personally disagree with. This role-reversal requires them to rely on logical examples rather than personal feelings, and they must actively take notes while the opposing team speaks so they can prepare thoughtful counter-arguments.

Debriefing and Reflection questions

- What did it feel like to repeat someone's idea before answering?
- How did evidence help you understand the issue better?
- How did you show respect when you disagreed?
- What shared solution did your group create, and how does it strengthen mutual respect?
- Did you change your mind about anything today? What evidence helped you?
- Why is it important to use reasons and evidence (not pride)?

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