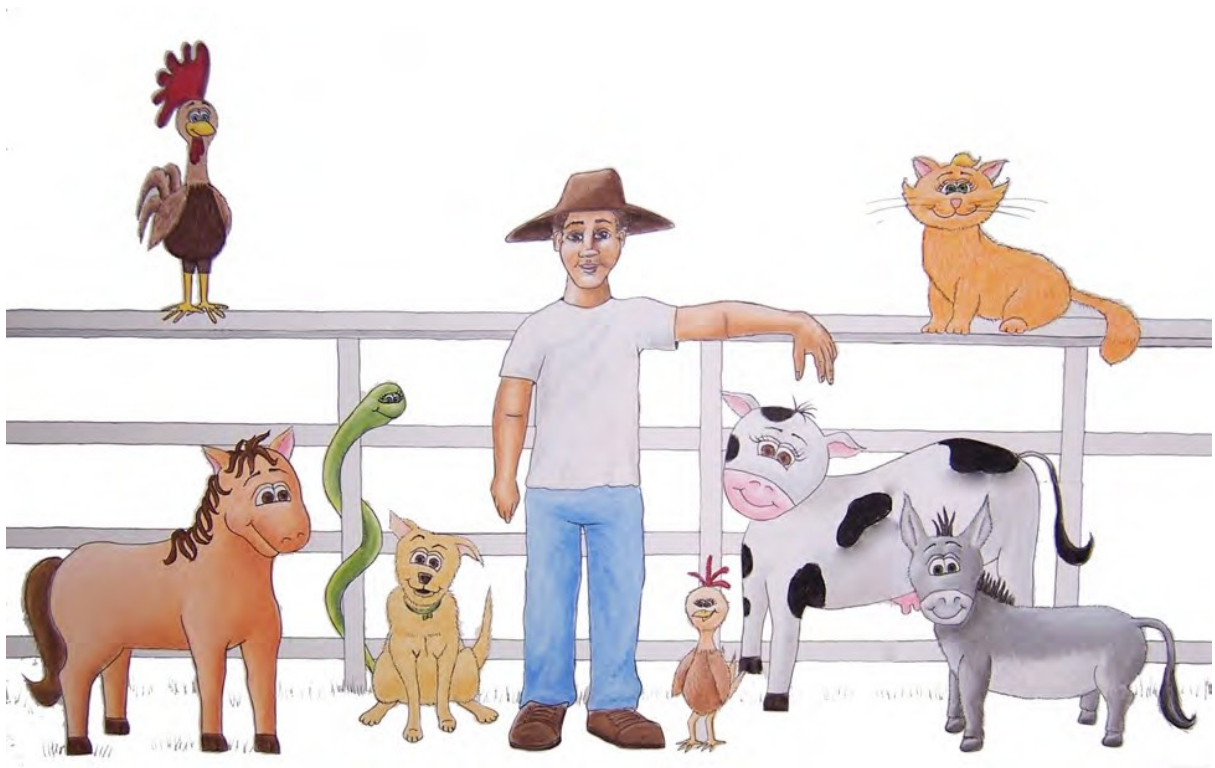


Thinking Friends®

A Teacher's and Parent's Guide for
Developing Thinking in Children



Developed by
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Thinking Friends®

A Guide for Developing Thinking in Young Children

Overview: Why Thinking Friends?

“...the brain changes in radical ways over the first few years of life, and it changes in response to experience. In other words, the brain learns.”

Gopnik, Meltzoff and Kuhl, *The Scientist in the Crib*

As teachers, researchers and parents with many years of experience working with young children on developing cognition and improving learning, we created the Thinking Friends to help developing young children become more purposeful and mindful thinkers. We understand that from birth, children are in constant and dynamic interaction with the world around them. From their experiences, they continually make and remake their world. They are literally and figuratively, works in progress—being in the moment and, at the same time, developing their brains and minds. As the authors of *The Scientist in the Crib* have written, “Babies are born with powerful programs already booted up and ready to run.” We know, too, that the significant people in their lives can interact with children in ways that have tremendous influence on how children apply the amazing organ we call the “brain” and use it to construct and reconstruct their understanding of the world around them.

Cognitive skills can be nurtured. As Art Costa wrote, “Although thinking is innate and spontaneous, skillful thinking must be cultivated.” The brain thinks—as the heart beats. But unlike the heart which is involuntary and out of our control, the mind is within our conscious control. We can start in childhood to teach children how to direct their minds and use them more purposefully by helping them first understand the thinking they are doing and when it is needed.



This process takes time. It is developmental and recursive. To truly engage children in metacognition so they can reflect upon their thinking in meaningful ways, they need repeated exposure to the types of thinking they are naturally inclined to use and will have reinforced through the Thinking Friends: Sequencing, Defining, Comparing and Contrasting, Classifying, Cause and Effect Reasoning, Examining Relationships through Analogies, Describing, and Examining Whole-to Part Relationships.

The young brain is developing at an incredible rate. The innate cognitive skills we focus on during early childhood development can last a lifetime as the patterns in the brain are formed. Creating mindful learners who are purposeful thinkers can lead to a lifetime of meaningful learning.

Who are the Thinking Friends?

Thinking Friends are eight animal characters and a farmer, living life on a farm, with each animal having the personality, respectively, of a single fundamental thinking/cognitive skill (sequencing, defining, describing, cause and effect, comparing/contrasting, classifying, examining parts of objects/spatial reasoning, and using analogies) and style. As children engage with the Thinking Friends, they learn to identify and think about their own thinking (metacognition) in early childhood. These explicit lessons about their thinking allow them to become more skillful thinkers and successful learners as their young brains mature. At the same time, children become more attuned to the different ways others approach thinking.

In this guide, young children are first introduced to each of the characters and his or her individual cognitive strength. As young children become more familiar with the characters, and more aware of their individual cognitive styles, the stories become more complex. The “thinking friends” begin to think and work together to improve and expand their own thinking, content learning, problem solving and social-emotional approaches to building relationships. Along with the characters, the children learn to appreciate the complexity of ideas, the different perspectives that can be taken, and the value of working cooperatively.

There are 8 stories in this guide that introduce each of the animal characters as it begins to interact with Farmer Framer. Preparing children to listen to and read the stories takes time. Introducing the concept, determining examples meaningful to the child, and reinforcing these examples are essential to the initial emotional engagement and connection. Emotional engagement is essential for long-term learning and memory. Asking questions before the reading supports children in searching their memories for meaningful connections.

During the reading of the stories, concepts can be reinforced through emphasis on key ideas as they are introduced. At the conclusion of the story, adults can guide children in continuing to build upon emotional connections and introduce meaningful practice with the type of thinking. This will help with retention of the idea—and ultimately transfer it for use in other settings.



At the end of the guide is an assessment tool and strategies for assessment to determine if children are retaining the ideas and transferring them to other important situations. For these thinking strategies, and the words we use to define them (in the names of the characters), to be easily remembered and used within developing young minds, we must continue to use them throughout the child’s day and point out examples. For example, teachers and parents might ask children such questions as: “What was the sequence you used to get ready to go to bed?” “How did we define this new word?” “How might we describe the character in this story?” “What do you think caused you to behave that way? What were the effects?” You may wish to embed the Thinking Friends characters in the questions itself to help children connect their developing understanding of the cognitive skill to a familiar context. You could ask, “How might Chicky Comparer compare these two ideas?”