

Teaching vs. Indoctrinating Your Children

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What is the difference between teaching and indoctrinating?

It's a question that we don't often think too deeply about, because the answer feels pretty obvious. It's something bad that other people do to teach children falsehood before they know any better. Teaching is concerned with truth, and indoctrination is concerned with ridiculous dogma.

But from an objective perspective, it's hard to tell who is doing the indoctrinating and who isn't. Some feel like schools are indoctrinating children with Darwinian Evolution and atheism, while others feel that parents are indoctrinating their children with religious creationism. Perhaps the Patels are indoctrinating their children to Hinduism, or perhaps the Smiths are indoctrinating their children into Christianity. Perhaps both. One family's children are being indoctrinated with liberal talking points, and another with conservative rhetoric.

With all these opportunities for indoctrination, it's likely every family is doing it to some degree. Everyone *wants* to teach their kids the truth, but we'll inevitably teach our children to believe things that are actually wrong. This thought has terrified me (in a vague, back-of-the-mind kind of way) for years. And I don't think I'm the only one, either. I want my kids to be smarter than me, not saddled down with the same beliefs I'm too biased to critically analyze.

Is it Possible to Teach without Indoctrinating?

To get that answer, let's figure out what the exact definition of indoctrination is. I looked around to see what various dictionaries said. Once upon a time, the words "education" and "indoctrination" were synonymous. But that's not the way the word is generally used today. Here are a few of the more standard definitions:

- to teach (someone) to fully accept the ideas, opinions, and beliefs of a particular group and to not consider other ideas, opinions, and beliefs (Merriam-Webster)
- to instruct in a doctrine, principle, ideology, etc., especially to imbue with a specific partisan or biased belief or point of view. (Dictionary.com)
- teach doctrines to; teach uncritically (Vocabulary.com)
- to often repeat an idea or belief to someone in order to persuade them to accept it (Cambridge)
- teach (a person or group) to accept a set of beliefs uncritically (Oxford)

Almost all of these definitions include teaching, but with some extra caveats. It's to

teach to accept an idea *uncritically*, from a *biased* point of view. The Merriam-Webster definition includes being *sheltered* from other perspectives – only sources which support belief are used. So if we want to teach without indoctrinating, we should avoid or counteract these tendencies as we teach.

How to Avoid Indoctrination

The rest of this article will focus on how to avoid indoctrinating your children. If you are among those who is all for it, the following techniques will greatly undermine your efforts. However, it will also help immunize your children to others who would indoctrinate your children, so perhaps you'll still come out ahead.

Teaching Uncritically

Teaching “uncritically” means to avoid and/or discourage the questioning of certain ideas. *The best way to prevent this is to teach critical thinking.* To me, critical thinking means two things:

1. Learning to recognize and eliminate fallacies and bias from your own thought, and
2. Believing something to the degree that evidence supports it.

To quote from another article, “It is a way of thinking in which you don’t simply accept all arguments and conclusions you are exposed to but rather have an attitude involving questioning such arguments and conclusions.” This is the kind of thing a lot of people don’t learn much about until college (if then), so how do we teach it to our kids?

The article linked above lists three core skills that you can help your children develop: Encourage and help your children develop *curiosity*, *skepticism*, and *humility*. Here are some specific things you can do.

- Tell your children silly things, but assert them as if they’re true. Support them with bad logic, and have the child figure out how/why it’s wrong.
- When you realize you were wrong about something, use the opportunity to show your kids that it’s OK to be wrong and everyone should keep learning.
- Critically analyze advertising, politics, and other forms of deceptive media with your children.
- Don’t tell your children that there’s anything they’re not allowed to question critically.
- Teach about specific types of fallacies, perhaps with the *Illustrated Book of Bad Arguments*.
- Every so often, use the Socratic Method with your children. The goal should be to teach them to think critically about their own beliefs and reveal complexity and nuance even with seemingly clear issues. It should not be used to simply disprove or intellectually

intimidate your child.

“Sheltered” Teaching

Avoiding this aspect of indoctrination is perhaps the most straightforward of all. Rather than teaching about only one religion, one political philosophy, or one side of an ethical issue, seek out information, people, and experiences that will expose your children to other viewpoints. If you’re Democrats, watch a Republican debate or watch The O’Reilly Factor. Every so often, attend worship services for other religions. Take public transportation and talk with people you meet. Read books and watch good movies together that help children empathize with people in other cultures, with different beliefs.

Biased Teaching

Indoctrination involves teaching in a biased way. Unfortunately, there is no way to teach without bias. Everyone is biased, and most people aren’t aware of it. However, it’s possible to limit your bias by learning more about common biases.

Of particular importance is *Confirmation Bias*, which is the tendency to seek out information that supports our pre-existing beliefs (because it makes us feel good), while feeling very uncomfortable with and avoiding information that contradicts those beliefs. This is what drives people to get news from sources biased toward their political beliefs, spend time on Facebook groups that reinforce their particular stance on an issue, and stops people from deeply investigating other religions.

Limiting bias in teaching doesn’t mean you should withhold opinions on what is right and wrong. It does mean you should try to acknowledge those biases with your children and try harder to present opposing viewpoints in a fair manner.

Conclusion

A lot can be said on this subject. In fact, books have been written on it! If you are interested in more, I recommend the book *Raising Freethinkers*. While it is primarily written with a nonreligious audience in mind, its main focus is how to teach your children to be immune to indoctrination, and instead form their own well-supported beliefs. It’s full of practical advice.

I’ll leave you with this fantastic quote:

“Ideally, what should be said to every child, repeatedly, throughout

his or her school life is something like this: 'You are in the process of being indoctrinated. We have not yet evolved a system of education that is not a system of indoctrination. We are sorry, but it is the best we can do. What you are being taught here is an amalgam of current prejudice and the choices of this particular culture. The slightest look at history will show how impermanent these must be. You are being taught by people who have been able to accommodate themselves to a regime of thought laid down by their predecessors. It is a self-perpetuating system. Those of you who are more robust and individual than others will be encouraged to leave and find ways of educating yourself — educating your own judgments. Those that stay must remember, always, and all the time, that they are being moulded and patterned to fit into the narrow and particular needs of this particular society.' – from *The Golden Notebook* by Doris Lessing, Nobel Laureate in Literature

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