

Helping kids stay thinkers in the age of generative AI

Practicing the skills that make learning stick

Tips for parents



Did you know?

“Cognitive offloading” is when we let technology do the thinking for us. Research shows that when kids frequently use AI tools to do their work for them, their critical thinking skills weaken or fail to develop.*

Critical thinking must be exercised. Critical thinking, one of the key skills that helps us resolve conflicts, manage money, and develop creative solutions, isn't innate. It develops through practice and guidance.

Kids are natural thinkers. Kids' brains are wired for curiosity. They love puzzles, questions, and figuring things out for themselves.

True learning isn't just about completing tasks; it's about the process. Kids learn by practicing. When your kid is assigned an essay, the goal is to practice brainstorming, synthesizing information, building arguments, and revising ideas. If AI does the work for them, they are losing out on learning.

*AI Tools in Society: Impacts on Cognitive Offloading and the Future of Critical Thinking, by Michael Gerlich, 2025.

What to notice

If your kids are doing work faster but thinking less. When kids finish assignments quickly and can't explain their answers, they may be using AI instead of exercising critical thinking.

If your kids are having trouble getting started. When kids struggle to begin homework assignments or organize their thoughts without AI's help, they may be too dependent on AI for thinking and learning.

Whether your kids' teachers assign AI workarounds. Some educators are trying to encourage kids to do assignments without AI by requiring handwritten outlines or oral reflections. Look for those signs that your kid's school is reinforcing independent thought and the learning process.

What you can do: Conversations to strengthen critical thinking

With your kids:

We recommend these activities for kids ages 10-14. But you know your kid best! If these are relevant to you, use them!

- **Conversation starter:** When people use AI for a writing assignment, how might it improve their work? How might it hurt their learning?
- **Model critical thinking:** One way to help your kids build critical thinking skills is to model them yourself. Parents who regularly share with their kids a problem they faced and the thought process they went through to deal with it are helping their kids learn how think through things. Any problem, small or big, will work. But this won't work if you just do it once. Try modeling critical thinking regularly (e.g. a couple times a month).
- **Activity:** Parents can also weave critical thinking questions into everyday conversations. Try pointing to any object, like a specific food or piece of furniture in

your home, and ask your kids: "How did this get here?" Together you can talk through all the steps you think might have been needed to bring the item into your home. You don't have to know the answer: it's the process of exploring the question together that builds critical thinking skills. You can even use AI to check the ideas you came up with (just be sure to confirm the AI answers are right).**

- **A useful saying:** Remind your kid that thinking for themselves first helps their brains grow—just like practicing a sport or instrument makes you better over time.

**The Disengaged Teen by Jenny Anderson and Rebecca Winthrop

In your school or community:

- Ask your kids' teachers what classroom routines or activities they use to help students think first, before or without turning to AI.



Find more in our Parent Tip Sheet Library! For more detailed information, including data sources, check out the full report: A new direction for students in an AI world: Prosper, Prepare, Protect.