

If...then

Critical Thinking Tutorials Student 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 PDF is designed to be used by students aged about 14 upwards. Whether or not you're doing a course in Critical Thinking, you can use this material (and others like it) to improve your skills in this area.

Asking questions about evidence 2

This is another exercise (like the one on zero-tolerance of drinking) in which we look at some evidence that has been reported. In this one, we look at some evidence used in a 2012 UK report on children and 'nature'.



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.

Natural Childhood

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 National Trust is looking for 'practical, workable and effective solutions to connect Britain's children with the natural world'. It 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'. (Although that sounds very much like the 1950s...)

* The National Trust – as their website explains - owns and looks after 'historic houses, gardens, mills, coastline, forests, farmland, moorland, islands, castles, nature reserves, villages... and pubs.' It was founded in 1895 and has thousands of members.

One of the familiar ways of evaluating evidence is to consider whether the way in which it's used is the only way it can be used. In other words, we need to consider whether the significance (or meaning) of the evidence is as the author claims.†

† For an explanation of this point about looking for significance, see pages 1-10 of 'Critical Thinking for Students' by Roy van den Brink-Budgen.



In this material we'll look at some of the evidence that the report uses to argue that children should be better 'connected with nature'.

In the longer term, continued regular contact with nature brings an increased level of satisfaction with life in general. A recent National Trust survey revealed that 80% of the happiest people in the UK said that they have a strong connection with the natural world, compared with less than 40% of the unhappiest.

You can see that the report sees the cause and effect relationship only in one way: 'continued regular contact with nature *brings* an increased level of satisfaction with life in general'. In other words, spending time in the countryside *causes* an increase in happiness, and not doing so is a *cause* of unhappiness.

This might, of course, be the case. But, importantly, it might not be.

Though being in 'continued regular contact with nature' and happiness are correlated, it doesn't follow that the first causes the second. Similarly, though not having 'continued regular contact with nature' and unhappiness are correlated, it again doesn't follow that the first causes the second.



What else could be going on?

- As with many correlations, we could turn the cause and effect relationship round. In this way, perhaps it is the case that happy people want to have ‘continued regular contact with nature’. Similarly, perhaps it’s the case that unhappy people don’t want to. (For example, perhaps some unhappy people don’t want to go out much, so they stay at home rather than going out anywhere.)
- Perhaps the causal relationship between happiness and ‘continued regular contact with nature’ goes both ways. Thus happy people want to go into the countryside, and doing so increases their already high level of happiness. (And unhappy people don’t want to go into the countryside, and not doing so makes them more unhappy.)
- Of course, the correlations could be no more than correlations. In other words, perhaps there’s no causal relationship at all. For example, perhaps it is the case that people who have little money are more likely to be unhappy, and not having money means that they can’t escape from the town or city into the countryside. In this way, it isn’t the lack of contact with nature that causes the unhappiness: it’s that the cause of the unhappiness is also the cause of not being in the countryside.

You could do some research yourself. Do an internet search for ‘depression and rural living’ and have a look at what comes up. If you do one for ‘unhappiness and rural living’, you’ll also find some interesting items (including a report by UNICEF – a United Nations organisation – that showed that ‘children from rural backgrounds generally feel more unhappy than children living in urban settings’).

In the National Trust report, we have another correlation given.

We can observe strong evidence that even the lightest contact with nature makes for stronger communities; studies have shown that even in cases where the only variable is the view of green space from a window, incidences of crime are reduced by as much as 50%.



So what's the significance of this evidence? Could it really be that having a 'view of green space from a window' will reduce the likelihood that people will commit crime?

Think critically about this one. Here's a suggestion.

- Housing that is close to the countryside tends to be higher-priced than that in inner-cities. Such higher-priced housing would be lived in by people with adequately-paid jobs who themselves will have lower crime rates. Thus, it is not the 'view of green space from a window' in itself that reduces crime, but a third factor that explains both.

Can you think of other possible explanations for this evidence?

We'll be asking further questions about evidence in other resources. Watch out for them.

Look out for more of these Critical Thinking PDFs for students. In addition, have a look at the books and other resources featured on the if...then ltd website: www.ifthen.co.uk.

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