

PARENTS LEAGUE OF NEW YORK

Review 2013

Essential Articles on Parenting and Education

From Two to Five: The Preschool Journey

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Parents know it, and brain research confirms it: every child is born with significant capabilities and virtually unlimited potential, potential that cannot be realized unless it is provided the opportunity and medium for its expression. Thus, a respectful image of the child focuses on what the child can do, without neglecting what the child has yet to learn. It is this image that should inform how we parent, how we teach and how we think about what happens to children in the explosive growth period between birth and kindergarten. It should compel us to create opportunities for them to explore and expand their own potential in ways we can't always foresee.

The three years that children typically spend in preschool are densely formative ones in their development as seekers and communicators. Their inborn drive to know, to master, to process information and to connect with others provides the energy for this process. Their classrooms should support them in their growth, and in their pursuit of wisdom through knowledge of self and of others.

In our preschool, our teachers design their classrooms with a respectful conceptual image of the two- to five-year-old child in mind. The result is daily, real-life learning. Normal development is enhanced through opportunities for the child's expansive interaction within the classroom and with the larger school community. Not only is each individual child's potential allowed to emerge, but the child becomes part of the inclusive, collaborative community that evolves.

At Two: Initiation Into a Group

A tour of our classrooms will show the reader how each year brings its own unique community of engaged and courageous learners. We will start with the twos, an age when autonomy and dependency are at odds—at least until a child is able to sustain a mental representation of the parent he must leave behind. Holding that image close, the child can face school's first challenge—being part of a group without one's own adult. But the ability to visualize an absent mother is not enough. All aspects of parent and caregiver leave-takings are managed with respect for and consideration of the child, embodied in our simple rule that one never leaves without saying goodbye.

No matter how many people he lives with at home, school presents a two-year-old with many new challenges and opportunities. At school, that child is one of 10 in a group of equals, all with equal claim to the teachers' attention. Our teachers understand the need of every child to feel loved and recognized. As master storyteller and teacher Vivian Gussin Paley counsels:

You, one on one, can be kind to each child. You need no permission from anyone to look every child in the eye and make the child understand how you respect him and her, and how you want to carry on this conversation, and how much you love the child's play and talk and everything about the child. How necessary the child is to you. You will never do a more important thing in your life. . . . This is the great gift we give to each child every day. And if you come home and realized [sic], "I didn't talk to John the whole day," the next morning, John's the first one you talk to. Nothing replaces that, and any new teacher, or student teacher, can do it every single day. And you will

commit the greatest act of kindness that is possible in the profession of teaching.¹

And so the adults in our school show active and genuine affection for each child—and because there are enough teachers, any child can have one-on-one help when needed. The teaching teams know that the expertise that they bring to the classroom each day will mean little unless a child can transfer the trust he has in his family to gentle, caring and perceptive teachers at school.

As the parents and caregivers gradually leave the classroom, the twos form attachments to their teachers. Through parallel play, group stories, songs and exchanges enabled by their increasing language abilities, they get to know their classmates. They become familiar with each other's singular qualities. The class comes together as a community in which everyone is valued and heard. As their teachers model listening to whoever is speaking, children hear their classmates' thoughts and respond with their own. While they play and talk, they process new information and ideas that are different from theirs. They listen to books, ask questions, share observations, sing songs, use real tools, visit other classrooms, explore the building, experience new tastes, and celebrate their classmates' birthdays and holidays.

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They master consistent routines. They learn common rules based on mutual respect. They look at family pictures displayed in each other's cubbies, and become friends. Their play features favored themes and scenarios—cooking for babies, shopping at the grocery store, having picnics, putting out fires, going to the office. They build with blocks and tracks and trains. The class generates its own set of stories, using their individual and shared experiences and fantasies to create a repertoire and language that belongs to them.

By year's end, important foundations have been laid. A sensitively guided separation process has yielded a strong school connection, the prototype for a lifetime of separations. The children have found each other and discovered the challenges and pleasures of being part of a group. This initiation into group life is a big step into the larger community.

At Three: Part of a Community

When the twos move to the threes class, relationships from the previous year resume and new ones are soon added. The children's knowledge and interests have expanded. Their dramatic situations and adventures have grown more complex. They create hair salons, doctors' offices, shoe stores and police stations, and enact the ever

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popular fantasy-based scenarios. Their Duplo constructions and block buildings become taller and steadier, more differentiated, often related to each other. The threes are more likely to work on a structure together, integrating input

from several builders. They work at the manipulatives and art tables for longer periods. Their artwork begins to be representational and shows a growing control of the materials as well as awareness of pattern, symmetry, composition. They are still fascinated with exploring what the materials can do and what they can do with them.

Threes are also interested in identifying leaves, counting pumpkin seeds, figuring out how to make a spider web, telling jokes, doing spontaneous surveys of their classmates' likes and dislikes with ever-ready clipboards and survey forms. If they need help recording, a classmate or teacher can assist. Lots of small-group and partner play is observed; threes are more likely to prefer the company of other children over that of a teacher. For the inevitable conflicts, problem-solving skills have begun to emerge. If a teacher

intervenes, she is trusted to mediate according to known rules: “Someone can use something until they are finished with it”; “It’s not OK to take something away from someone who’s using it”; “Words, not hitting, are the tools we use.”

Class meetings are more frequent and extended. Threes are eager to participate in shared conversations about topics that are meaningful to them. Example: Frankie: “My dad’s cousin died. When someone dies they go into the ground.” Susie: “No, they don’t—they go up in the sky to heaven.” Teacher: “Does someone want to comment on what Frankie or Susie just said? Does anyone have a different idea?” Often there are no right or wrong answers, just different ideas.

Group discussions like these happen only in the school environment. When 15 children who are close in age take part, the content and the expression tend to be accessible to everyone’s level of understanding. The children like sharing their thoughts. Through their imaginations they can be exquisitely attuned to one another. If one relates a dream, another might announce “I know that monster! It came to my dream too!” This “getting into each other’s heads,” seeing what someone else is describing, can be seen as an early stage of abstract thinking.

Interactions and relationships with classmates are profoundly important to three-year-olds. They’ve been working on their “people skills” since birth, and now possess the social competence to participate in a classroom community. In the future they will know how to build community through understanding and respect.

At Four: Ready to Lead

The fours are the Big Kids, the oldest students in the school. The Big Kids are aware of their position, and are ready to make the most of this ascendant year. They’ve become quite self-directed and self-sufficient. As their glory year gets underway, however, their parents must apply to kindergarten for them. Regrettably, for many parents the process is fraught with anxiety. Some are concerned that their children are not learning fast enough, and try to cram in

“academics” at home. Others arrange for tutoring and coaching. A child can experience parental worries as her fault; if she feels she is disappointing her parents, it can affect her mood and behavior at school. This is unfortunate, because the child’s classroom is the very place where essential learning is happening.

There is so much going on in the fours room. The classroom is structured to ignite curiosity. There is the ongoing curriculum, the materials and equipment available to the children every day: blocks, dramatic play, manipulatives, books, a variety of art and sensory materials, science artifacts and other objects that invite examination and speculation. At the same time, there is the emergent curriculum: a variety of projects and activities emerge from teachers’ observation of children’s play and conversation; from teachers’ ideas and

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experiences; and sometimes from random events. Activities are planned and materials are sought for their relevance to a current interest or their potential to expand into a larger project or study.

The children follow and sketch a tree’s seasonal changes, they track the gestation of butterflies, they compare the eggs and nests of different bird species. The bird study prompts a series of experiments about how things fly.

Outside resources are welcomed; parents and friends with special talents or access to interesting sites share them with the class. Research is done—reading, asking experts, hypothesizing, forming theories, making learning visible through drawings and other visual representations. Teachers are the lead investigators, facilitating the children’s use of some or all of these methods.

The children study themselves and each other (they are, after all, their most interesting subjects). The class does a daily “count-off.” When they’re all able to provide their number in turn, they want to do it in another language. Their French-speaking teacher

teaches them to count in French, their Swedish-speaking classmate helps them do it in Swedish. In the spring they have 26 days of “homework.” They write the letter of the day, a word starting with that letter and draw a picture of what the word represents. They share these at meeting time the next morning.

Throughout the day, they do math: counting (students), measuring (with inch cubes or number lines), dividing (into groups), multiplying (crackers), subtracting (absent classmates), doing verbal math problems in their heads or on their fingers. The children are encouraged to write—their names on their art work, signs for their block buildings, the date on the calendar, messages to their families and each other. Writing can be done at the writing center with pencils or at the art table with markers, paintbrushes or Q-tips. Literacy skills are incorporated into daily routines: a teacher will send the children one at a time to get their coats by the first letter of their name, or a word that rhymes with it. Using immediate experience makes lessons relevant.

As threes, they enjoyed participating in discussions; as fours they might lead the discussion. When the children were restive during meeting time one morning, their teacher admonished them, “You know it’s not easy to run a meeting. You should try it sometime.” A few children responded, “Okay—we will!” The teacher agreed and it was decided that the leader would choose the topic, provide some information and then take questions. The first child led a discussion about “how to make new friends.” After his courageous example, most of the class took a turn to run morning meeting, starting with the calendar and job chart, and concluding with discussion of a topic of their choosing. Topics included “clouds” and “the difference between Israel and New York.” Not only were interesting subjects explored, surprisingly developed skills were revealed.

Exploring From a Safe Harbor

We began with the observation that children have skills from their earliest days. Because social abilities appear shortly after birth

and are in constant use thereafter, it is these skills which rightfully receive the most attention in preschool. These “people skills” (empathy, communication, cooperation, playfulness) promote relationships and community. Along with creativity and problem-solving, they are the cornerstones of a child’s perpetual construction of a meaningful world.

In their preschool years, children continually master skills and tackle new ones. Skills give them control of their world. Reading the day’s schedule helps them predict their day. Decoding the names on a sign-in chart tells them if a friend has arrived at school. Being able to write gives them another way to communicate. In our classes, we make this kind of learning available without requiring it, giving children a chance to want to learn something before they *have* to learn it. This aligns teaching with readiness, which may come now or next year.

Children need a safe harbor to begin their individual journeys of self-discovery. When adults protect and nurture a child’s world-in-progress, that child can question, explore, collaborate, take risks and discover his own potential through successes as well as mistakes. These experiences become the building blocks of inspired learning that will endure through the school years and beyond. Habits of learning developed during these early years allow children to strike out beyond the threshold of their deceptively undeveloped state into the vast unknown future with the enthusiasm of a well-provisioned explorer.

When children can “Pretend we’re explorers!” every day in their classroom community, they acquire the power and confidence to envision themselves in whatever future role they wish to play.

Note

Keynote address, 2008 92Y Wonderplay™ Early Childhood Learning Conference.

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