

Family Development

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College of Education, Center for Family and Community Partnerships



Straight to the Heart of Learning Inspired by the Guiding Themes of *Mind in the Making*

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The Dance of Synchrony

by Dorothy L. Kerwin

"You are the baby's first teacher and the baby's favorite plaything. They need nothing else other than the bright, animate face of a human being and the voices out of the human being's mouth."

Dr. Andrew N. Meltzoff

What is this dance that we do so naturally as parents and caregivers to engage our little ones with a sense of delight and wonder? Nature has designed the human brain to grow and respond to human nurturing. Babies prefer human touch, sounds, and smells over any other stimuli. Their eyes are drawn to human faces and they focus most clearly at about 12 inches. This is the distance between an adult's face while cradling an infant in her arms or nursing at her breast. When a baby engages adults by crying, smiling, or imitating, they usually cannot help but respond. Parents are instinctively led to nurture and protect their infants. Babies' brains are wired to learn through social interactions and adults' brains are wired to help them. It is our job, as parents and caregivers, to follow these instincts and listen to our babies' cues as we help them make sense of the unknown world that they have entered.

A newborn's brain is a work in progress. Babies are born with over 100 billion brain cells, more than they will ever need. What is missing at birth are many of the key connections between individual brain cells that are essential to growth and learning. Human relationships create these essential connections.

Crash! Hearing a sudden, loud noise produces an unpleasant sensation, and the baby begins to cry. When her caregiver picks her up and gently rocks her, she feels soothed and safe. As she becomes aware of these sensations, the infant begins to place an emotional value to them. She is beginning to organize and remember this information. Thus begins the development of cognitive learning through loving relationships.

This social interaction creates a foundation of learning that continues throughout life. As the baby develops, the interaction between parent and child becomes increasingly complex. What begins as simple back and forth imitation, gradually evolves to include a matching of sounds, expressions, and movements. The baby coos. A caregiver picks him up and coos with an exaggerated smile. Baby coos and smiles back and moves his hands and feet. They are in synchrony as they create a dance of joy and learning. The parent or caregiver is also in synch with the baby when she responds to him distressful cries by picking him up and whispering soothing, reassuring words



into his ear. In *The Interpersonal World of the Infant*, Daniel Stern refers to this give and take communication that reflects shared feelings, as affective attunement.

But just as the most skillful dancers will sometimes step on each other's feet, the relationship between a caregiver and child will move in and out of synch. To study the dance of synchrony, Edward Tronick of Harvard Medical School conducted experiments in the early 1990's to explore how infants and toddlers reacted when their mothers became totally disengaged. A mother was instructed not to respond to her infant's cues for attention while sitting with her child. The infant does her best to entice the mother to notice her. At first she reaches and smiles. As she becomes more upset, she waves her hands and begins to make distressing sounds. Eventually, she shuts down with an apparent sense of helplessness. In other experiments, toddlers and young children had similar responses. Yet regardless of the circumstances, it is amazing to watch as the child's delight returns moments after the mother becomes re-engaged. They quickly moved back into synchrony. It is through this reconnection that learning takes place. Connecting and reconnecting provides an opportunity to create new situations for the infant or child. These new situations are where growth and learning occur.

Through these experiments, Tronick discovered that caregivers and infants are only in perfect synchrony

between 20% and 30% of the time. Everyday circumstances often pull us away from our interactions with children. We break to answer the phone, to respond to another child, or to stir the pot of soup. These breaks are inevitable. What is most important is not that we never break the connection with a child, but that we intentionally reconnect. Just as life can pull us away from a child, it also offers us millions of magical opportunities to connect with him. We can talk and sing and laugh and share what we know. We can observe his interests and build upon them. We can notice his moods and respond accordingly with joy or comfort. These encounters create

a sense of trust and belonging that allow the child to feel understood. When a caregiver and child become attuned to each other's feelings, the dance of synchrony begins. ♥

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- Welcome parents! Retrieved August 29, 2006 from <http://www.zerotothree.org/brainwonders/parents.html>

Losing It!

by Jan Winslow

The early years are a busy time for children. When thinking of all the things they learn very quickly, from birth through preschool, one thing often overlooked is their increasing ability to manage all the stimulation they receive. Before this is learned adults may become frustrated at the young one's lack of control. But it's a huge undertaking, this learning to shut out what one considers unimportant and focusing on what is important. Researchers call this "composure" or "state regulation." A child needs to begin to master this in order to learn new things because it's very difficult to learn when overwhelmed with emotions, when distracted, or when behavior is out of control. Think of the temper tantrum. It's just about impossible to reason with (much less teach) a child in the throws of a temper tantrum! Yet we seldom mull over what's going on inside the child while he's in the middle of the fit. Dr. Alicia F. Lieberman, Professor of Medical Psychology at Johns Hopkins University said, "I think of the temper tantrum as a very eloquent, although seldom appreciated expression of a child's difficulty managing overwhelming negative emotions."

At times everyone has trouble focusing. Think of a time when the noise around you prevented you from understanding what you were reading. Or empathize with the young basketball player making his free throws. That takes a considerable amount of regulating. Most adults have learned many skills which enable them to regulate—often without even realizing it. Some techniques include breathing deeply, closing the eyes to concentrate, putting on soothing music, or removing oneself from the situation. But children don't have a list of strategies to rely on that have worked for them in the past. They must learn these techniques little by little, and having an

adult patiently guide them can make the going smoother. Helping young children learn to regulate their attention, behavior, and emotional states is a critical task, and thankfully, one which most children are able to learn with time and direction.

When we encounter the need to regulate ourselves we are reacting to stress. There are, of course, all different levels of stress. Some are manageable, and certainly a degree of stress is desirable—a childhood with no stress would leave a child unprepared for life. I, for one, would never get anything accomplished if I didn't have a healthy dose of stress to nudge me to get a move on. The human body, when functioning properly, is constantly in a growth and repair mode. Sort of like the way muscles respond to exercise by tearing when pushed, then becoming stronger when healing the next day, the brain stresses itself when learning—when learning how to handle emotions, how to socialize, how to react appropriately. Through this process of struggling, then learning through the emotional reactions, children become more successful at gaining coping skills.

But what about the child who lives, for whatever reason, in a very stressful environment? High levels of stress (physical or verbal abuse, homelessness, fighting in the home, divorce, violence, inadequate basic needs) can be crippling to a young child's development. When a child is overcome with stress, learning cannot take place. Some children live with high levels of stress everyday and the situations they live in are generally out of the child's control. Taxing situations like those listed above prevent this necessary cycle of growth and repair from happening. Since all his energy is spent managing the stress, he may

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have trouble learning in normal environments. The challenges he faces overwhelm his ability to manage them. It's no wonder the child doesn't thrive.

Understanding that it's unreasonable to expect a child suffering from this type of stress to manage the same way another child manages can make a huge difference to the child (and the caregiver, too). But regardless of the level of stress in which children live, they all need strategies to help them cope. They all can benefit from concrete techniques that help them regulate their states and deal with their stress. This attention from a dedicat-

ed caregiver will serve them throughout their lives and can make the difference between a child who succeeds and one who doesn't.

"Stress happens when there is a challenge that matters to you and you don't have the resources to manage it. With a secure relationship, you have your resources."

Dr. Megan Gunnar
University of Minnesota

What can you do?



Preparing for the "Pretzel"



The "Pretzel"

- ♥ Be in control yourself. An adult reacting to a stressful situation with yelling and hysterics is not a good model for anyone!
- ♥ Create a sense of community. A "home" where everyone in the class feels valued and important, where everyone engages in classroom songs and rituals gives a person a calming sense of belonging. The goal is to unite and connect everyone in the group.
- ♥ Be sure the child feels safe with you. Repeat regularly and often that you take your job of creating a safe

- place for everyone very seriously. Also create places where the child can wander off and still feel safe – a corner or special nook designed for this purpose.
- ♥ Build regular structure into the day. Knowing what to expect is very reassuring. Our brains naturally seek patterns, and routines create patterns that can be counted on, adding predictability and consistency to the day.
- ♥ Have play dough, sand, and other manual sensory activities available. This allows children the opportu-



The "Drain"



The "Quiver"

nity to release stress through physical manipulation of materials. Additionally, sensory activities tend to promote a calming effect in children.

- ♥ Make time for play inside and outside. Let children use their bodies through physical activity to release the energy stored up inside. Physical exercise is an excellent way to relieve stress.
- ♥ Encourage open-ended play. Play enables children to focus on what's inside them. Becoming totally absorbed in an activity builds their power of concentration. When they use their own ideas in play to build, explore, and solve problems they learn to trust their ability to make good decisions and to express themselves creatively.
- ♥ Regularly teach calming techniques. These can be done as a group and also alone when feeling overwhelmed. Through practice in a safe environment a child will have skills to fall back on when needed. These techniques help release emotional stress by moving energy from the survival centers of the brain to the reasoning centers.
- ♥ **The Pretzel** –(See photo at left.) While sitting or standing, cross at the leg or ankle. Cross the arms out in front of the body, and, with the palms facing each other, clasp hands together, lacing fingers. Bring hands down, up towards the chest, then hold. Close the eyes and breathe slowly, pushing the tongue flat against the

roof of the mouth while inhaling, relaxing the tongue while exhaling.

- ♥ **The Drain** – (See photo above.) Hold both arms out in front of the body, palms loosely facing the floor, arms straight. The body is the faucet, and as the hands are formed tightly into a fist, with arms and shoulders tightened, no water is able to escape. Hold the water in tightly, with eyes pressed closed, tightening and tightening all the muscles in the body. Then, mentally open the faucet and let the water rush out, relaxing the hands, arms, shoulders, entire body, with a whisssshhhhh! Let all that stress rush down the drain. Repeat several times.
- ♥ **The Quiver** – (See photo above.) Stand, and shake or vibrate the entire body, all at once, or body part by body part. Begin by shifting the knees back and forth in small movements faster and faster till it spreads to other parts of the body. ♥

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Powerful Teachers – Potent Learning

by Lois Vermilya

There was a young boy who was curious and bright; he had his own way of thinking about things, and his own pace for caring about them. School didn't hold much relevance for him because, well, he had other plans and he was always busy learning. For instance, he collected medallions from every place he visited. Each day, he wore a different one to school around his neck.

One day his teacher said, "Matthew, tomorrow we are going to conduct a science experiment with metals. I bet we could learn something interesting about one of your necklaces." He could hardly wait to tell his parents, and much of the evening was spent discussing which medallion to take to school the next day. Finally he picked one laced with silver, from a trip he had taken with his grandfather. In the morning he was in a hurry to get to school. Returning home that evening, he shared his new scientific knowledge with his parents: metals all transmit electricity differently, and the silver in his medallion made it highly conductive.

The boy is much older now, but he still remembers that day; and he remembers what he learned about electricity. He also remembers the feelings he had—of his personal passions being genuinely interesting to others, of helping others learn, of being seen. The teacher may not remember that particular lesson, but she remembers other times when she made a special connection—sometimes with a student, other times with a mentor, a parent, another educator—and came away changed.

Peter Senge, "The Remembered Moment"
Schools That Learn

Now take a moment to think about a teacher who made a lasting difference in your life...

I imagine that you will quickly remember a similar feeling of how this teacher made you feel known and understood. You might be able to recall the quality of the interaction and maybe, like Matthew, be able to even pull back exactly what it was that you learned by being this teacher's student.

Powerful teachers who have had a potent impact on our learning make a huge difference in our lives! Memories of teachers, whether they are positive or negative, last a lifetime in fact, and are able to jump right back into view when we think about them. If you sit musing for a while, you will have a whole line-up of teachers come to life

again in stories you can retell—some good, some bad. So as a teacher of young children: How do you want to be remembered? What can you do to be more powerful and to take responsibility for what will become a lifetime of learning for the children who have come into your care?

Intentional Teaching

Learn to pause.... or nothing worthwhile will catch up to you.

Doug King

While there is no formula for what makes a good teacher, Robert Slavin asserts that the one attribute that seems to be characteristic of outstanding teachers is *intentionality*. Slavin is the co-director of the Center for Research on the Education of Students Placed at Risk, Johns Hopkins University. He says, "Teachers who get better each year are the ones who are open to new ideas and who look at their own teaching critically." Intentional teaching simply means doing things thoughtfully and with a purpose. Intentional teachers are educators who maintain a "working knowledge of relevant research, are purposeful and think about *why* they do what they do... and combine knowledge of research with professional common sense."

Being intentional as a teacher is directly tied to having a very clear focus on learning. Intentional teaching requires us to make time to thoughtfully observe how children learn. Like in the opening story about Matthew, a great teacher watches to discover more about a child's unique interests and passions so that she can connect with this child in a meaningful way that will further his excitement about learning.

An intentional teacher values time that is spent pursuing what excites her about learning as well. Ellen Galinsky, of the Families and Work Institute writes, "Teachers who continue to learn about teaching, who see themselves as learners and who understand the learning process are best able to foster learning in others. This is called intentional teaching." Intentional teaching also requires reflective practice.

Reflective Practice

Reflection can be thought of as a mindset. It's a "way of being" in the classroom. John Dewey, one of the grandfathers of educational thought in this country, advises that teachers who strive to be reflective have three characteristics in common.



First, they are open-minded and willing to listen to many different sides of an issue. They give attention to alternate views as a way of sharpening their own thinking about teaching and learning.

Second, reflective teachers are responsible and take time to carefully consider the consequences of their actions.

Third, teachers who are reflective are wholeheartedly committed to seek every opportunity they can to learn.

Important educational theorists like John Dewey and Donald Schön have reminded us that the work of teachers is complex, requiring deep and foundational practices of reflection. Educators need to be careful to not get so comfortable with their usual way of teaching that they don't take time to question what they are doing or why. As Schön has warned: teachers can easily get caught up in the fast-paced world of habit – doing what they've always done without ever thinking about it. Teaching can become so automatic that teachers develop a narrowness and rigidity that affects their understanding of situations and leads to ineffectiveness.

In practical terms, we can grow as teachers by becoming more reflective about what really is going on in learning when we:

1. Build a practical knowledge base – continue to be learners about teaching
2. Develop an inquiry orientation – be curious, wonder, raise questions, experiment with new ideas
3. Be learner centered – focus on what children are learning
4. Learn with others – make time to give and get support

Adapted from "Growing Professionally
through Reflective Practice"

Learning Through Dialogue with Others

Steve Preskill, Regents Professor in UNM's College of Education pushes these ideas even further in his book *Stories of Teaching: A Foundation for Educational Renewal*. He reminds us that reflective people in Schön's words are willing to "experience surprise, puzzlement or confusion about situations that are both ambiguous and extraordinary." Reflective teachers will enter tough conversations where they don't have all the answers nor necessarily feel comfortable with the candor of what is being said. The opportunity to engage in dialogue can cross cultural and political boundaries that force us to seek ways to develop new understanding. The depth of these conversations can also lead to activism for educational reform and real change.

Preskill celebrates educators like kindergarten teacher Vivian Paley who encouraged teachers "to keep talking about it." In her teaching and writing, Paley sustains a commitment to think "profoundly about the quality of her interactions with children." One of Paley's greatest legacies as a teacher, says Preskill, is her ability to include everyone in dialogue about what they are learning through talking with children. Paley also recognized that regular conversations with colleagues, with parents, and with yourself as a teacher yield new insights that could not have been discovered in any other way. Preskill asserts that "keeping the conversation going" has to remain "one of the highest priorities in education." He also says that Vivian Paley's story as an extraordinary teacher reminds us that every interaction we have with a child makes a difference and that these experiences taken together are what shapes one's life—not only the child's, but the teacher's as well.

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Lifelong Learning

Education is a social process. Education is growth. Education is not preparation for life; education is life itself.

John Dewey

The responsibility of caring for our youngest children and providing them with creative, developmentally

appropriate opportunities to learn is an extremely special and powerful professional undertaking. Early childhood teachers are some of the first caring adults whom our little ones will ever have the joy to meet. Our work as teachers of young children represents potent relationships that extend the touch of what our children are learning already from their families. We can strengthen education in strong partnership with parents while also remembering that together, what we do today, will have a lifelong impact on our next generation. John Whitehead captures the power of this learning as he reminds us that...

Children are the living messages we send to a time we will not see.

Lifelong learning is, as Dewey tells us, at the very heart of education. Education is growth and life itself! It is a vital process of learning that is ongoing and constant.

In fact, the word “learning” is conveyed in the Chinese language through two symbols that illustrate this lifelong process. One character links the potential of a child to learn through study and the other is capacity for the young to take flight into adulthood through constant practice. Together the two characters mean “learning.”

學習

The Six “R’s” of Powerful Teachers

A wonderful framework that can help us become powerful teachers is outlined by Suzanne Standerford as “The Six R’s” for transformative teaching. This framework describes professional traits that when taken together can help us develop not only ourselves as teachers, but also learning communities within our programs and with other educators as we share what we are noticing and learning.

1. Respectful Attitude

Our ability to understand what it means to have a respectful attitude requires us to think deeply about the diversity of family heritage, home language, and culture that every child brings with herself to school. We are challenged to think about how we can transform our centers or home-learning environments to be places that welcome every child. Respect requires us to recognize that there is no “one right answer.” We have to learn lots of different strategies to be effective so that every child is known and understood.

2. Relationship Building

Relationship building grows out of respectful attitudes. “As teachers develop sincere respect for each child

within their care, they come to care for these children as human beings with real lives, real strengths, and real needs.” Building strong relationships is the center of learning, not only for the child but in our relations with parents and other teachers as well. Learning happens through relationships. The quality of our relationships will shape what and how we learn—it is that essential.

3. Responsive Teaching

“Responsive teachers are student-centered.” Learning experiences are guided by what young children are interested in. Teachers watch children as they play and extend their learning through books, new activities and other kinds of direct experience that celebrate what children are curious about to connect these interests with other skills and ideas.

4. Reflective Practice

Reflective practice provides the foundation for being responsive. Our ability to reflect while we are teaching requires us to adapt the lesson to respond to what children do. When we reflect, we cultivate deeper understanding about teaching and learning—which helps us grow.

5. Reconstructed Views

We can “reconstruct our views” about learning when we stay open to noticing what is happening with children we teach and then ask ourselves: what did I just learn? The ability to change our views about teaching and learning is part of the maturing process of becoming more experienced as teachers. We have to be willing to confront daily situations that puzzle us or that do not fit our views, and seek new ways to understand what makes teaching work for learners.

6. Renewal as a Professional

Our renewal as professionals comes from our ability to practice the first five “R’s” while also maintaining our hope and optimism about our vital role as teachers. We need to be able to take time for ourselves to recharge. As teachers, we can create safe professional communities and learning relationships with other educators where we question, discuss, reflect, and learn together. ♥

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The “WE” promotes open-ended, hands-on, play-based learning through the creative reuse of seconds and irregular materials. We offer a free play orientation that supports ways you can design creative experiences to enhance children’s learning styles.

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Keep in Mind: It's Not Just the Mind

by Paula Steele

The field of child psychology has for years been broken up into its own little fiefdoms; those who study cognitive development, those who study emotional development, social development and language development. What's unfortunate about that is that's not how the brain works. The brain works as a unified system.

Dr. Charles A. Nelson III

Child development is in the forefront of early education with the advent of publicly funded pre-school programs such as New Mexico PreK. When education is funded with tax dollars then legislators want to know if that money is being well spent. They want to know if the child is better off at the end of the year, academically, than he was at the beginning of the year. Notice that the focus is on academics—that recordable, manageable, countable stuff.

What gets forgotten in the whirlwind of budgetary oversight is that the child is more than a mind, more than her intellectual capacity. She is also composed of a web of social and emotional bonds that work together to support intellectual growth. A child who is capable of filling in ditto sheets, but not able to share and empathize is not being developed to her fullest and greatest potential.

In today's climate of testing, assessment, and specific measurable results the emphasis is on intellectual growth. The social-emotional component seems to have taken a back seat to the desire that children develop their intellectual capacities earlier and earlier. In fact, young children are developing intellectually. It just doesn't look like what the tests test. Or as Einstein said, "Not everything that can be counted counts; not everything that counts can be counted."



When one studies and writes about the development of social, emotional, and intellectual growth, it is often done separately. Each domain is looked at in terms of how a child develops. Each domain has its own set of benchmarks or milestones that we use to determine how a child is developing. In fact, what follows in the next three paragraphs is a description of each of these areas. That's how the human mind works. It categorizes to best make sense of diverse bits of information. Yet, we must remember that social, emotional, and intellectual learning go hand-in-hand, right from the get-go. It's not as though one or two develop and finally the third can move forward. No. Children are learning, developing intellectually, while they are also developing socially and emotionally. It's just that their intellectual capacity will be enhanced by strong social-emotional connections.

Social learning has to do with how we are connected with others. Relationships form the basis for healthy development in all areas. Children learn about the world through their attachments to the people in their world. Initially the child's closest relationships are with parents and other family members in the context of home. Gradually the circle widens as the years go by to include the homes of others in the extended family, in the neighborhood and then school. Children who have warm, positive attachments to their teachers are more likely to do well in school. It takes time to build a relationship and it takes time for teachers to respond to children in ways that help them grow into beings that understand how their actions affect others. Throughout the expanding world and world view of the child, secure attachments help children take their next steps.

This connectedness to others forms the basis of their emotional strengths. How do they *feel* about venturing out and exploring their world? If they have secure attachments, they know that they are loved and supported through the sensitive responses they receive along the way. When thunder booms on a dark day and the child jumps and cries, he is comforted by reassuring arms and soothing words that let him know, "I am safe. I am loved. People understand." He learns to feel trust in others. His positive emotional response to the people in his sphere, ricochet back and forth, the social connections reinforcing the emotional ones that support intellectual growth. "Our emotions help us to focus our reason and logic," says Jensen, author of *Brain-Based Learning*.

The intellect develops along with the social-emotional network of one's environment. This includes the educational setting as well as the home. Teachers play a cru-



cial role in creating an ambiance that supports children in all areas of development. When a child has the sense that the people in her surroundings are there for her, she feels she can venture out and test the wide wonderful world. She knows she can return to a safe haven when necessary. She will be able to attend to learning tasks such as gathering and organizing information and making connections. As she develops, tests theories, and matures she will be able to weigh evidence consciously, identify mistakes, and engage in a host of more complex thinking. Her ability to engage successfully in these higher order thinking skills rest on a secure foundation of social and emotional attachments.

If we want our children to perform well on assessments, we must ensure that their education accounts for the

whole child – heart and mind. Advocates for children must get involved by voicing their opinions to legislators and business leaders. Various action groups are working together collaboratively to develop a unified message. Others are planning strategies that will support and educate parents as well so that they also inform policy makers of their perspectives. An abundance of research has been done that supports the inter-relatedness of social, emotional, and intellectual development. Proponents of early education must continue to educate the public and those who care for our fiscal health that an education that encompasses all three developmental components is in the best interest of our children and our future.

School readiness and school success are dependent on intellectual competence and emotional and social health. They are not separate in any given child. The smartest kid who is in emotional turmoil will not be an effective learner in school.

Dr. Jack P. Shonkoff ♥

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If you'd like to learn more or get involved, here are some organizations to contact and websites to visit:

New Mexico Association for the Education of Young Children

P.O. Box 3555
Albuquerque, NM 87190
505-243-5437
<http://nmaeyc.org>

New Mexico Children, Youth & Families Department

P.O. Drawer 5160
Santa Fe, NM 87502-5160
Office of the Secretary – 505-827-7602
<http://www.cyfd.org/index.htm>

This website: <http://www.earlychildhoodnm.com/> is a repository for resources and materials linked to the New Mexico Early Childhood Action Agenda being developed by Lt. Governor Diane Denish.

The Office of Child Development

Home Office:

Mailing Address:
P.O. Drawer 5160
Santa Fe, NM
zip: 87502-5160
Monday-Friday
8am-5pm
Phone: 505-827-7946
Fax: 505-476-0490

Field Office:

Address:
760 Motel Blvd
Suite C
Las Cruces, NM 88005

Monday-Friday
8am-5pm
Phone(s):
505-524-6044 ext 107
505-524-6086

Parents Reaching Out

1920 B Columbia Dr. SE
Albuquerque, NM, 87106
800-524-5176, 505-247-0192
<http://www.parentsreachingout.org>

He Knows That She Knows That He Knows...

by Ellen Biderman

Two- year-old Jack's mom, Lisa and his grandpa, John are talking while barbequing hamburgers:

Lisa: Dad, I am so concerned about Jack! I know he's only two, but he can't seem to share his toys with my friends' kids. He says "no" all the time. I just want him to get along with others and be able to succeed in school. I wonder if I should sit with him and his friends? Or maybe he should watch more *Sesame Street*. They have a lot about sharing.

John: He's fine. Let him be. In my day, we just let kids grow up and they did just fine without all these experts helping us.

Lisa: You don't understand. And you are not being helpful. I just wish I had more information. You don't know what it is like to raise children these days.

In fact, the young mother and her father both have some wisdom to offer about young children and their development. Dad understands that children develop through a natural process that requires time; the young mother is correct in wanting to guide her son into prosocial behaviors. Though both want the best for Jack, right now these two seem not to be attuned to each other's way of thinking or, more importantly, to what is in Jack's mind. The ability to understand others' minds, their beliefs, desires, intentions and emotions, is an important developmental milestone that is a key to children's academic and social success. This is called Theory of Mind and means that children have a theory about how another's mind works. Ellen Galinsky, president of the Families and Work Institute, states that Theory of Mind is one of the most important building blocks in early learning and school readiness. It represents the ability for children to take the perspective of others — to learn that what they think and feel and what others think and feel can be different. And as children grow into teens and adults, it is Theory of Mind that allows them to productively interact in the wide variety of situations they will encounter.

Researcher Alison Gopnik describes children as "scientists in the crib" who are continually figuring out the physical and social world into which they were born. The developmental milestone of Theory of Mind is reached through a gradual process of maturation and experience beginning at birth. The newborn baby, already aware that faces and voices are special, can imitate facial expressions, demonstrating her recognition that "people are like me." By nine months, babies understand that people have feelings about things (such as



reacting when the baby throws something off the table). By 18 months they understand that people can want different things. For example, the child saying "no" is in fact demonstrating that she understands that what she wants is different from her mother's wishes. Frustrating as this may be for the parent at the moment it occurs, it demonstrates that the child is beginning to differentiate her thoughts from others and is actually cause for celebration. By two, children demonstrate their knowledge that objects can be used differently. For example a two-year-old might pretend a banana is a telephone. By age four or five children come to the conclusion that other people can perceive objects or situations differently from themselves.

Lisa wants Jack to get along with others, to give names to his feelings instead of having a tantrum, and to understand other's behavior. But these are very complex behaviors that require the ability to take another's perspective, and Jack, being just two, does not yet have the maturity to do this. To encourage the development of Theory of Mind, children need experience playing with physical objects and interacting with people in order to test and retest theories. When learning about the physical world, children move from the concrete to the abstract. By playing with blocks, for example, children first explore their properties by tasting them, perhaps throwing them, and then stacking them. Next they use combinations of blocks to abstractly represent roads, buildings, and even cars or people.

Similarly, to understand other people's minds, children need to play with theories by observing how people respond to their actions and react differently to the same situation. This also starts out concretely. Early on chil-

dren know that they can affect others' behaviors, such as inducing someone to pick them up by crying. They can distinguish how different people (like mom and grandpa) will respond to that cry. Next, children start to associate their behaviors with human needs and emotions such as hunger, anger, desire, etc. This involves an adult giving language to their behavior.

Young children, such as Jack, often assume everyone thinks as they do, such as believing that when another baby cries he must also want a blankie. However, with maturation and experience, children begin to understand that what others may be seeing, thinking, and feeling is often different from their own thoughts and feelings. This ability develops slowly through social experiences and interactions with the physical environment. Pointing out how different people use a ball, for example, or how different people cook are activities that help children see differences. It is this ability to understand others' thoughts, feelings, and perspectives and how one's own behavior affects others that is also crucial for the development of empathy.

So what is Lisa to do? She can just wait for Jack to grow up like her dad said. In fact, Jack's brain needs to naturally mature to a certain point to be able to understand others. She can also gently, in a developmentally appropriate manner, help Jack interpret his emotions, thoughts, and feelings while pointing out the thoughts and feelings of others. Just like we help children to observe the physical world, thus nurturing their curiosity and problem solving skills, so too can we nurture the development of Theory of Mind in young children by being attuned to their thoughts and feelings and helping them to interpret the actions of others. ♥



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Play: The Foundation for Learning

by Paula Steele

What was it like for you before you entered school? Chances are that kindergarten was your first encounter with a structured class time. Think back to those days before you went off to kindergarten. Prior to that, most of us were home. Call to mind your activities when time was your own—free and unstructured. What were you most likely doing? Playing. What were you playing with? Stuff that was around the house or the yard. Of course you had some toys too. But remember your favorite moments at play. I'll bet you were messing around. You were building forts in the kitchen or den made of blankets and books. You were seeing how high your house of cards would reach. Outside, you were lifting rocks to look for bugs or watching ants scurry around their ant hills. Maybe you introduced a red ant to a black ant colony to see what would happen.

And before that, before these clear memories that you have, you played. Whacking pots and pans with a wooden spoon was delightful! Smearing peas on the high chair serving tray was sensory heaven. You put a bean up your nose. Or, you placed a round peg into a round hole over and over again and sometimes tried it in the square hole.

These are all examples of play. These are all examples of learning experiences. Young children learn all the time. "But most importantly," says Dr. Michael K. Myerhoff, "they are 'learning how to learn'. As they indulge their natural inclinations to explore, investigate, and experiment... they acquire the fundamental concepts and capacities that allow them to effectively absorb from and adapt to the ever-changing environment."

Perhaps you had a theory about the size of book needed to hold the blanket edge of your tent. If it wasn't heavy enough, you found another one or you got more. Attempts to build card houses led to sturdier structures the more you experimented with placement, angle, and reinforcement. Banging on pots and pans taught you some rhythm and force—how hard shall I strike? A bean up the nose taught you something about volume.

The point is that you were engaged with the world and with things in it. You were exploring, experimenting, and controlling your own experience. You were learning like a scientist. You formed a hypothesis, a theory (even if you couldn't articulate it), you tested and succeeded, or failed and tried again. Or, one could say, you were a musician, orchestrating and conducting the symphony



of your own development. You had help too, with support from parents and maybe older siblings. They were there to respond when necessary. Or to ask a question that guided you toward a discovery that had meaning for you. Myerhoff says, "[teachers and parents] serve primarily as helpful 'partners' ... instead of intrusive and controlling 'instructors.'" The idea is to be available as a resource and to provide some necessary materials that contribute to an environment that supports inquisitive investigations.

Nowadays many kids don't have this freedom, this time to devote to sensory learning at their own pace. They may begin going to daycare as infants, then continue there through toddlerhood, preschool, and then into kindergarten. Or they may be overscheduled with play dates, lessons, and activities. This is why it is so important to create an environment (whether at home or in the childcare center) for tactile, un-timed, open-ended play experiences. Children must have kinds of experiences that are essential to the foundation of learning. "We must pause to remember that *childhood play is a very intellectual activity overflowing with opportunities for problem solving and creativity*," says Lisa Murphy, well-known speaker and early childhood educator.

Mary Dudley, previous Director of the Family Development Program and Walter Drew of the Institute

for Self Active Education have compiled some important points about play. Here they are in paraphrased form:

Play builds the foundation for success. It is the basis for all other skills—social, physical, and cognitive. It is essential to one's sense of self. When you are in control, you have the sense of being an expert. And that helps you to know your own worth.

Play makes you feel good about your own abilities. You get to make decisions and to express yourself creatively.

Play helps us to know ourselves and others. It's a safe way to try out different roles and to test different ideas—our own and those of others.

Play teaches us to value diversity. Differences arise naturally in play. We create different things from the same materials or use different words to describe things and feelings. We can see how diverse ideas and ways of doing things make life richer.

Play helps us concentrate. When you're totally engaged in something you enjoy, you are focused.

Play makes people smart. Curiosity is part of play and all babies and little ones are naturally curious. This helps us to find out about life. Playing helps to make connections and making connections means the brain is growing.

Play makes us feel more alive. When you're trying out new ideas, you're seeing things in a new way. When you can be playful with ideas and ways of being, you feel energized and alive.

There are multitudes of studies on play and its benefits to learning. We know that it fosters intellectual, social, emotional, physical, and language development. We just have to keep reminding ourselves and others of that basic truth.

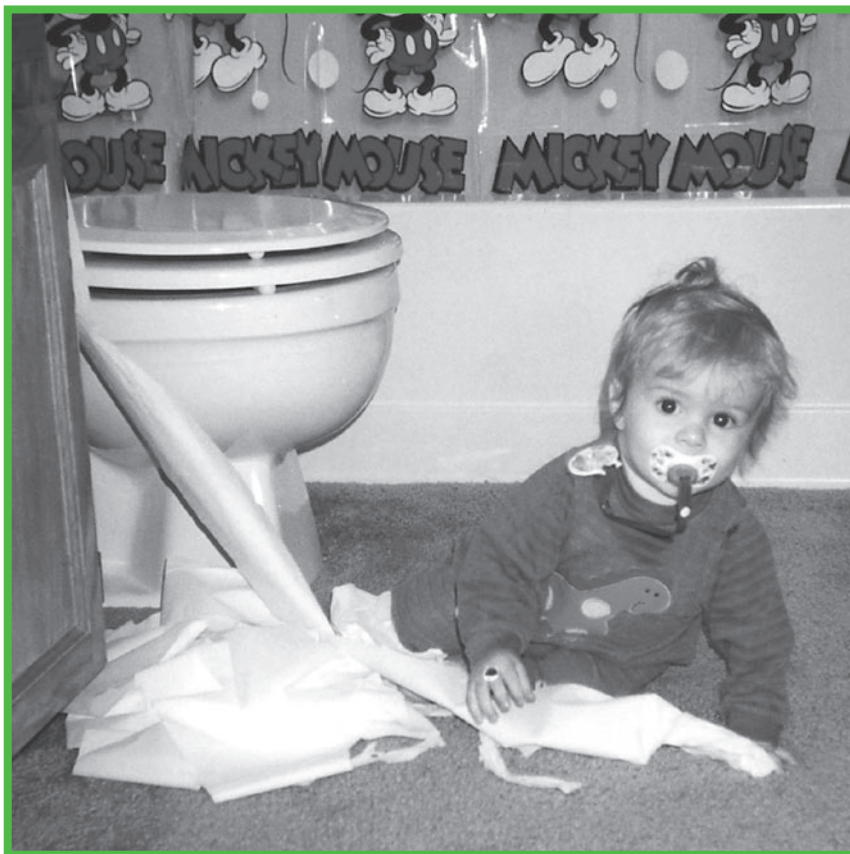
"Play is our brain's favorite way of learning."

Diane Ackerman ♥



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