

# Beginnings Workshop



## "Meeting Children's Needs"

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*Photograph by Roger Neugebauer*

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# Friendship — Loving: What Early Childhood Education Is All About

by Ashley Montagu

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Love is the supreme form of human communication. In the hierarchy of needs, love stands as the supreme developing agent of the humanity of the person. As such, the teaching of love should be the central core of all early childhood curriculum — with all other subjects growing naturally out of such teaching.

## Why is love so important?

To appreciate the significance of love, we only need to look at what happens when love is withheld.

As late as the second decade of the 20th century, the death rate for infants under one year in various foundling institutions throughout the United States was nearly 100%, and no one had the least idea why. The mystery was solved, almost accidentally, by Dr. Fritz Talbot of Boston when he was visiting the Children's Clinic in Dusseldorf, Germany. All the wards shown to Dr. Talbot were very neat and tidy, but what piqued his curiosity was the sight of a fat old woman carrying a baby on her hip. "Oh, that is Old Anna," Dr. Talbot was told. "When we have done everything medically we can for a baby, and it is still not doing well, we turn it over to Old Anna. She is always successful."

As hospitals began introducing a regular regimen of mothering in their wards, mortality rates for infants dropped dramatically. At Bellevue hospital in New York, for example, following the institution of *mothering*, the mortality rates for infants fell from 55% to less than 10% by 1938. In short, it was discovered that infants need something more than the satisfaction of their basic physical needs if they are to survive and grow and develop in physical and mental health. That *something* came to be recognized as *tender, loving care*.

The physical, mental, and social price an unloved child pays is devastating. Not only can one detect the impact of lacklove in the arrested social development of children, but also in their bone structure. (We can actually detect the lack of love with x-rays.) When we see a child who is not being loved, we see a child who is undeveloped as a human being behaviorally. But we also see a child who is shorter than average for his age, whose skin is pallid and wrinkled, whose immune system is deficient, and whose entire biochemistry is different from that of a loved child.

The impact of lacklove can most dramatically be observed in some children thought to be suffering from a condition diagnosed as idiopathic hypopituitarism, or dwarfism. These children are stunted in their physical growth, appear to be mentally retarded, and are very incompetent socially. This condition was formerly attributed to some physical or genetic deficiency. However, it has been observed that when these individuals are placed in a loving environment their height shoots up, their mental retardation disappears, and they become virtually normal human beings. Once again, we see that the critical missing ingredient is love.

In a very profound sense, love is the most basic of all human needs, for love is the nutriment from which both physical and mental health draw their strength. Never has this been better said than by George Chapman, the tudor poet and playwright, who in his play, "All Fools," acted in 1599, writes:

*I tell thee, Love is Nature's second sun  
Causing a spring of virtues where he shines;  
And as without the Sun, the World's great eye,*



*All colours, beauties, both of art and Nature,  
Are given in vain to men; so without love  
All beauties bred in women are in vain,  
All virtues born in men lie buried;  
For love informs them as the Sun doth colours;  
And as the Sun, reflecting his warm beams  
Against the earth, begets all fruits and flowers;  
So love, fair shining in the inward man,  
Brings forth in him the honourable fruits  
Of valour, wit, virtue, and haughty thoughts,  
Brave resolution, and divine discourse.  
Oh, 'Tis the Paradise, the Heaven of Earth.*

Love will always remain a matter of such fundamental importance, and will have such far-reaching consequences for humanity and society, that we are urgently called upon to consider what we can best do to restore its birthright to humanity. To bring about the desired changes, we must first understand more fully what love is, and how it is fostered.

### **What is love?**

Love can be defined as the act of communicating to others one's profound involvement in their welfare, one's devotion to the optimum fulfillment of their potentialities, by giving them all the sustenance, stimulation, support, and encouragement they require for growth and development. Love is the communication that one will never commit the supreme treason of letting others down when they stand in need of you.

Love is not based on self-interest, but on the interest of the other. In loving another, you show with feeling carried by demonstrative acts that you are truly involved in their welfare.

Every baby is born with this profound capacity to love, and an equally profound need to be loved. The infant's need for love is not adequately satisfied unless it receives the necessary stimulations for the development of its capacity to love. It may, indeed, be said that the child's need for love from others is important principally because that love is the most significant developer of its own capacity to love others. The child learns to love others by being loved.

It is now clear that the only way in which one ever learns to love is by being loved. The only way one learns to relate to other people is to be warmly related to during one's infancy and early childhood.

### **How can early childhood programs foster friendship?**

If we are to promote the development of mentally, socially, and physically healthy adults, we need to be certain that they, as children, are raised in loving, stimulating environments. The family, of course, must be the principal locus of attention. But many families do not provide loving environments. Many children lead very unhappy lives, because their parents do not realize how important it is to satisfy their children's need for love, for friendship, and for stimulation. Therefore, schools should be reconstituted as agencies, second only to the home — and sometimes superior to it — for the teaching of love.

The principal qualification for an early childhood teacher should be the ability to love. This requirement should stand above all others. A teacher of young children, more than anything else, must be able to love children unconditionally, to be able to communicate to them, without any patronizing and without any strings attached, that she is their friend — for friendship, it must be understood, is just another word for love.

Early childhood educators are the unacknowledged legislators of the world. By befriending children they care for, they teach children how to be friends, how to be deeply involved in the welfare of others. By sharing their commitment to friendship with parents — in a non-threatening, non-patronizing manner — they can help parents see the value of providing a loving environment in the home.

It is literally what the child absorbs from its teachers, as well as from its parents, that constitutes the most important influence in the making of a personality, in the acquisition of all those skills one requires for functioning well as a member of one's society and of fulfilling to the optimum one's uniquenesses, one's potentialities, for being what one has it in one creatively to be. An early childhood program with friendship as its core curriculum can enable children in its care to reach their full potential.

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Reprinted from *Connecting: Friendship In the Lives of Young Children and Their Teachers* (edited by Dennie Palmer Wolf), Exchange Press, 1986, pages 7-10.



# Children Need Stimulation

by Diane Trister Dodge

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*Four year old Natalya wanders into the block corner where three other children are building. She takes an armful of blocks off the shelf and dumps them on the floor. She starts to pile them, one on top of the other, until the structure gets too high and falls. Natalya leaves the block area and ignores Tommy when he says, "Hey, you didn't put the blocks away and they're in our way!" She wanders into the house corner where she sits on a small rocking chair and looks around. When Dwayne returns the doll carriage, Natalya takes it and pushes the carriage around the room. She then wanders over to the table toy shelf, selects a puzzle, and dumps the pieces out on the rug. Unable to make the pieces fit, she pushes the unfinished puzzle under the table and gets up. Natalya's next stop is the art area. She picks up a paint brush loaded with paint at the easel and makes a series of dots on the clean newsprint. Natalya fills up the paper quickly, then leaves the area. Running into the teacher, she complains, "I'm bored. There's nothing to do."*

In some classrooms, children are busy and involved. Lively chatter can be heard as children work intently with materials in different areas of the room. In contrast, children in other classrooms often appear to be wandering around aimlessly only interacting superficially with materials and other children. What makes the difference between a classroom in which children are appropriately stimulated and one that leaves them feeling bored?

In order to make the classroom a place that engages children intellectually and socially, teachers use three strategies:

- they ensure that the materials and the environment itself are appropriately stimulating;
- they systematically teach children how to use materi-

als; and

- they intervene in children's play in order to support and extend their interactions with materials and with other children.

This article will describe how teachers might use these strategies to provide appropriate stimulation for children in two interest areas. The strategies can be applied to all interest areas in the classroom and outdoors.

## The Block Area

An appropriate location for block building is in a corner enclosed by shelves and two walls so that children can focus their attention on building and their structures will be protected. In the beginning of the year, put out a small number of shapes (three to five). Label the place for each one so children know where and how to replace them. Select props that will be relevant to children's experiences: small cars, people figures, and street signs are generally appropriate for beginning builders. Place a picture label for each type of prop on the shelf where it belongs so children know where to find and return what they want.

Children who have never built with blocks may have a limited repertoire of actions and ideas to use in the block area. Without teacher intervention, even the most exciting block area will fail to stimulate children's involvement. Therefore, the next step is to introduce these materials to children in a systematic way.

During circle time, bring a small selection of blocks to the meeting area. Place the blocks where everyone can see them and ask a series of questions such as the follow-



ing:

- “Has anyone used these before? Tell us what you did?”
- “What else can you do with blocks? Please show us.”
- “Who has another idea?” (Allow several children to demonstrate their ideas for using blocks and make/invite comments.) “There are certainly lots of different ways you can build with blocks. These are just a few.”
- “What are some rules we need to make sure the blocks are used carefully? Let’s make a list.”
- “Did anyone notice how the blocks are put on the shelf? Why do you think each shape and size has a place?”

Introduction of materials helps children to be aware of their qualities and gives them a place to start. Once a child chooses the area and begins to take out the blocks, you can encourage building by:

- **Describing what the child is doing:** “I notice that all the blocks in your road are the same size.”
- **Helping a child who is frustrated:** “Let’s see if we can find another way to make those blocks stand up on the rug.”
- **Asking questions** that encourage the child to expand on a building: “Where will people park their cars when they come to visit your zoo?”
- **Promoting interactions with other children:** “Lakita is making a gas station, and Toby is building a grocery store. Who’s going to build the road so people can go from one place to another in this city?”

There are a number of ways teachers can extend children’s interest in the block corner. Take children on neighborhood walks and point out different kinds of buildings and roads. Display pictures of buildings and roads to inspire children. Keep markers, paper, and tape in the block area so children can make signs for their buildings. Add “beautiful junk” such as carpet squares, rubber tubing, popsicle sticks, pulleys and string, as well as traditional props to inspire creative building. Taking photographs of the children’s buildings to display in the block area effectively demonstrates how much you value their work. And, if you can leave block structures up for several days, children will continue to expand on their

ideas and even use blocks for dramatic play.

## The House Corner

A well-designed house corner is like a stage set for a play. It has sufficient furniture and materials that suggest a home environment, and perhaps some decorative touches — curtains, a tablecloth, pictures on the walls, and flowers. Hanging up props such as cooking utensils and dress-up clothes makes them more appealing to children and suggests possible play themes. Labeling the place for all props makes it easier for children to return materials when they are finished. Attention to these details will help to capture children’s interest in this area.

Even in an attractive and well-stocked house corner, however, some children will simply “mess around” with the materials and never become engaged in pretend play. The most likely reason is that they do not have the skills to do so. Given the importance of dramatic play for promoting children’s cognitive, social, and emotional development, teacher intervention is essential.

There are six skills children need to engage effectively in socio-dramatic play (Smilansky and Shefatya, 1990). Teachers who are familiar with these different skills can teach them to children during circle time or by intervening in their play. The levels of ability in socio-dramatic play are defined in the following chart (Dodge and Colker, 1992).

Instruction related to dramatic play skills can take place during circle time. Here are two examples.

*To help children learn how to use **make-believe with objects**, Ms. Beech brings a toy steering wheel and a paper plate to the meeting area. She asks the children, “Who would like to pretend to be a truck driver?” Taneka comes to the center of the circle and selects the toy steering wheel. She then pretends to “drive” around the circle. Ms. Beech asks, “Who else wants to drive a truck?” Travis raises his hand and stands up. He reaches for the steering wheel. “You can use this paper plate,” the teacher explains, showing how to drive with the plate. Travis imitates her actions using the paper plate. Ms. Beech asks, “What if we didn’t have anything? How could we drive a truck?”*

*To help children think of a **variety of actions associated with a role**, Mr. Lon brings a doll baby to the meeting area. Rocking the doll in his arms, he says, “I’m pretending I’m the baby’s uncle. This baby is asleep now because I’ve been rocking her gently. Who would like to show us some other ways you can take care of a baby?” As each child takes a turn and acts out a behavior, Mr. Lon invites the other children to guess*



what their classmate is doing. After several children have demonstrated their ideas, he summarizes: "So, there are lots of things you can do to take care of a baby. You can rock the baby, feed her, take her on a walk, read her a book. I'll be interested in seeing what other ideas you have when you play in the house corner."

Teaching dramatic play skills in this way helps children learn that there are many ways to play in the house corner. During choice time, teachers can individualize their intervention by participating in children's play. Here is an example of how you might intervene to support and extend a child's interactions with materials and other children.

*Keisha is holding and rocking a doll (beginning level of role play). Ms. Beech says, "How is your baby today? Is she sick? Let's call the doctor." Keisha looks around but doesn't see a phone so she continues rocking in the chair (beginning level in use of props). Ms. Beech says, "Here's a telephone. I'll dial the number and you can find out if the doctor can see your baby today." She pretends to hand Keisha the receiver of a phone and encourages her to tell the doctor what's wrong. To help Keisha relate to others in play (interaction and verbal communication), Ms. Beech involves other children in the situation. "Oh, here's a taxi driver. Mr. Driver, this baby is very sick. Keisha, tell the driver where you need to go."*

Once children have acquired the six skills to engage in dramatic play on a higher level, you can extend and enhance their learning through play by providing first-hand experiences (e.g., trips to neighborhood stores, visits to clinics or a fire station). Adding prop boxes (e.g., supermarket, office, camping, clinic) to the house corner will encourage children to reenact real experiences and role play with others.

## Conclusion

Children need stimulation. When the classroom environment is well organized and the materials are inviting and appropriate, children will be drawn to different activity areas. In order for children to become meaningfully involved in play, they must have a repertoire of skills to use materials well and interact with others. It is the teacher's job to ensure that all children acquire these skills.

**NOTE:** This article is based on *The Creative Curriculum for Early Childhood*, 3rd Edition. Call Teaching Strategies, Inc. at (800) 637-3652 for permission to reprint or a catalog of curriculum and training resources.

## References

Dodge, Diane Trister, and Laura J. Colker. *The Creative Curriculum for Early Childhood*, 3rd Edition. Washington, DC: Teaching Strategies, Inc., 1992.

Smilansky, Sara, and Leah Shefatya. *Facilitating Play: A Medium for Promoting Cognitive, Socio-Emotional and Academic Development in Young Children*. Gaithersburg, MD: Psychosocial and Educational Publication, 1990.

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## Levels of Ability in Socio-Dramatic Play

Criteria	Beginning Level	Advanced Level
<b>ROLE PLAY</b> <i>Role chosen</i>	Role relates to child's attempts to understand the familiar world (e.g., mommy, daddy, baby, animals).	Role relates to child's attempts to understand the outside world (e.g., firefighter, police officer, doctor).
<i>How child plays role</i>	Child imitates one or two aspects of role (e.g., child announces, "I'm the mommy," rocks the baby, and then leaves the house corner).	Child expands concepts of role e.g., child announces, "I'm the mommy," feeds the baby, goes to a meeting, prepares dinner, reads the newspaper, goes to work, talks on the phone, etc.).
<b>USE OF PROPS</b> <i>Type of prop needed</i>	Child uses real object or replica of object (e.g., real or toy phone).	Child uses any object as prop (e.g., blocks for phone) or a pretend prop (e.g., holds hands to ears and pretends to telephone).
<i>How child uses prop</i>	Child enjoys physically playing with objects (e.g., banging receiver of phone, dialing).	Prop is used as part of play episode (e.g., child calls a doctor on phone because baby is sick).
<b>MAKE-BELIEVE</b>	Child imitates simple actions of adult (e.g., child moves iron back and forth on ironing board, holds phone receiver to ear).	Child's actions are part of a play episode of make-believe (e.g., "I'm ironing this dress now so I can wear it for the party tonight").
<b>TIME</b>	Fleeting involvement (e.g., child enters area, plays with doll, puts on hat, and leaves area).	Child stays in area more than 10 minutes (e.g., child is really involved in play episode and carries through on theme).
<b>INTERACTION</b>	Solitary play (e.g., child acts out role alone with no apparent awareness of others).	Functional cooperation (e.g., child interacts with others at various times when the need arises to share props or have a partner in play).
<b>VERBAL COMMUNICATION</b>	Verbalization centers around the use of toys (e.g., "Bring me that phone" or "I had the carriage first").	Dialogue about play theme — constant chatter about roles children are playing (e.g., restaurant scene: "What do you want to eat?" "Do you have hamburgers?" "Yup. We have hamburgers, french fries, and cokes.").

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# Joy in Early Childhood Programs

by Bev Bos

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Children are egocentric — all of you know that. They do not have to be told they are wonderful because they are born knowing they are. They are born with an inherent self that is intellectual, complete, an inherent self that can dance, sing, write poetry, and tell stories, and has a sense of delight and joy in all things. Inherently, children are born to take risks and grow to their optimum. Inherently, children have a sense of joy about learning, growing, and doing.

The word joy will probably not show up in a curriculum guide. And I don't hear many politicians using that word when they talk about schools and money and accountability. But those of us working hard to ensure a childhood for so many children know that if we did not hear laughter, giggling, hoopla, shouting, and cheering in our centers we couldn't go on. It is the joy of each child that keeps us doing what we do.

Pete Seeger talked about how a thoughtless remark to children while they are singing can make them believe then cannot sing. He said: "THE HEART HAS A LONG MEMORY FOR PAIN." That statement gives me a lump in my throat. And because the heart has a very long memory for pain, we must take care, when we are making plans for programs, writing curriculum, when we are deciding what songs to sing, what books to read, what art to do that the element of joy exists. Because learning always involves feelings, we must protect the right of all children to have a hallelujah kind of childhood.

Every August, we have a conference at our school and teachers come from all over to be with us. After the workshop was over this year, I was sitting on our porch talking to Zachary Bos, who is four and a half. I talked about the conference and all the people who came, and I

said: "Zac, what do you think they thought?" He said: "I think they thought I was pretty amazing." What joy Zac finds in what he does. He was not impressed with how hard I worked, just how hard he played.

Katie and Gus were swinging in the swings side by side when Katie said to Gus: "Isn't it great to be my friend, Gus?" What joy children find in themselves and in each moment.

Children are so *present*. It is this moment that is important to a child. Adults think about tomorrow, next week, and vacations next summer. Children can find joy in each moment and in little things that adults throw away or overlook.

Today at school, on one of the tables, I put out 12 white plastic mixing bowls. I also put out salt (we buy 25 pound bags), flour (purchased in 50 pound bags), and warm water. You have never seen so many different mixtures called play dough. Of course, the children added food coloring in varied amounts and I witnessed colors I have never seen before. Elena spent 65 minutes mixing and stirring. Hers was a kind of quiet joy. Matthew mixed and stirred and added and decided to leave his until tomorrow to see if it would be "okay" after resting. His was kind of a resigned joy — he liked doing it but it didn't exactly turn out the way he expected.

A sense of joy in a children's center can be quiet, loud, gentle, and fun. A sense of joy can be heard, smelled, and tasted when children make the food. It can be muddy and dirty when children work in the garden and when they dig holes. It can be wet and slippery when the hose is out. It can be blue, red, yellow, purple,



brown, black, and orange when children do art. A sense of joy can be found in the aching tiredness at the end of the day for children, teachers, and parents who have spent their day together.

*Bev Bos has been teacher and director at the Roseville Community Preschool in Roseville, California, for over 29 years. She is also the author of three books on creativity for young children — **Don't Move the Muffin Tins**, **Before the Basics**, and **Together We're Better**. Bev lectures around the country and internationally on creative art, music, and language; self-esteem; and helping kids to learn how to socialize in a natural way.*



# Children Need to Live in the Real World

by Jim Greenman

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*"He not busy being born is busy dying"*  
— Bob Dylan, *It's Alright Ma (I'm Only Bleeding)*

Being born is a messy thing, the first time and every time. There's always a lot of screaming and crying and bodily fluids. But there are also hoots of laughter and tears of pure pleasure. It doesn't take long to get cleaned up and there are lots of smiles and touching. But we are never too far away from the screaming and the crying and the bodily fluids.

At what point did caution become dominant? When did we surrender our children's lives to tabloid induced fear and the sacred order of risk managers? "The purpose of life, after all, is to live it, to taste experience to the utmost, to reach out eagerly and without fear for newer richer experience," said Eleanor Roosevelt, who overcame crippling shyness and a love-starved childhood.

At what point did childhood become so driven? Children have a lot to learn. We can fill them up, busy their days, keep them occupied and industrious in all manner of ways. There can be singing and dancing, books, and computers. It can all look good — it can even be good. But unless we can connect them to the real world of nature and people outside the walls of our children's world, unless within our walls we can give them time and place to simply *be* and find themselves, it is not enough.

There are melodies in the waves and poetry in the wind that blows the leaves off trees. There is art in the anthills and the strands of seaweed on the beach. Thoughts lay dormant without stillness and solitude. Reality is difficult. It is messy and loud and profane. There are people with warts and frowns, and decidedly mixed virtues.

But childhood is a time when we help children begin to live in the world and *love the world*, and we can't do that fenced off from it in a world of two dimensional glowing screens and plastic balls and slides.

Nature was there before the Nature Company, before playgrounds, before parks. An infinite laboratory, a stage and concert hall, the natural world is a school for young children.

**Nature is unpredictable.** It is the uneven, the changing and evolving, the glorious untidiness of it all that provides such contrast with life inside. The ground under our feet may slope or buckle. The air may be heavy and weigh us down or be so light that time has fallen asleep in the sunshine. Nothing falls from the sky inside — but outside there are leaves and snowflakes, rain and hail. Inside, nothing flies (except flies) or burrows or leaps from tree to tree. Many of us age and forget the joy of the small, unstaged event — the sudden dark cloud, the bird at the feeder, the toad in the garden.

**Nature is bountiful.** There are shapes and sizes, colors and textures, smells and tastes — an enormous variety of substances. In a world of catalogues and consumable objects, designed spaces, and programmed areas, sometimes it helps to remember that the natural world is full of multi-dimensional, unassailingly educational experiences for children. Nature is hard, soft, fragile, heavy, light, smooth, and rough. Armed with our five senses, we explore the world and call the adventure science — or, if you prefer, cognitive development, classification, sensory development, or perceptual-motor learning.

**Nature is beautiful.** The rainbow in the oily water or the rainbow in the sky, the dandelion or the apple blos-



some; there is so much loveliness we grow slack and leave the awe to artists. But **look** at those towering cliffs of clouds and the light streaking through the pine needles. **See** the silvery birch leaves and the swirls in the bark, the rain dripping from the roof, and delicate, lace-like etchings in the leaf.

**Nature is alive with sounds.** It is not only Maxwell House coffee makers that make music, so do the wind and rain, and, of course, birds and crickets; even dogs make music. The world is full of natural and man-made rhythms that children experience and imitate.

**Nature creates a multitude of places.** Lie out in the open on that hill, or under that willow. Sit on that rock or in that high grass. Squeeze under the hedge or march through that puddle. A small strand of trees makes a forest if you are small.

**Nature is real.** Everything dies — the ant, the baby bird that fell from the nest, the flower, the leaf. Thistles have stickers, and roots trip unsuspecting feet. It is our world, not Gilligan's Island.

**Nature lives inside and out.** Any room is enlivened by plants and animals, birds and reptiles, flowers and dried plants, stone and wood. Open a window, turn off a light.

**Let them be — sometimes.**

*Anne was having a long conversation with her best friend Kassie, trying to find a time to get together for a "play date." The two six year olds kept running into conflicts of swim/gym, soccer, music lessons, and other play dates as they checked the calendars kept by their mothers. Listening to them, I fully expected the conversation to end with: "Well, Kassie, I'll have my people call your people and we'll take lunch real soon." I wonder if there are any six year olds with beepers or their own cellular phones?*

It's not just that most children don't have the lives of Tom Sawyer or Opie in Mayberry anymore, they don't even have the freedom of the Brady Bunch. Many lead scheduled week-at-a-glance lives, managed by parents and punctuated by television. The neighborhood, the park, even the yard plays less of a role in the lives of many children.

Children need time to mess around, literally, without direction of any kind; and with *stuff* of their choosing, in places of their making, making their weird sounds and faces. Between idleness and industry lie other states — of experimentation (alias play), reflection, or joy.



**It's not just what you do, it's who you are.**

*"What's that yucky stuff on the water?"*  
I don't know. Don't touch it.

*"What is that flower?"*  
I don't know. But don't eat it.

*"Why doesn't the vacuum work?"*  
I don't know, it's broken, said the teacher.

There are few things more depressing than to be in the classroom of the incurious (except the classroom of the uncaring) — rooms staffed with people who fail to ask "why" and "how," not to stimulate the children's thinking and answer their questions, but to answer their own. Not knowing is certainly no sin in the classroom. Not being interested, not having questions, not seeking answers, not showing an enthusiasm for discovery is a sin, because intellectual lethargy is contagious. The *failure to wonder* shrinks the universe and begins to dampen the child's marvelous spirit of inquiry.

One does not have to be interested in everything, or in a constant state of childlike awe. However, a passionate interest in something, as well as delight and appreciation for a child's sense of wonder, brings a classroom to life.

**Just do it!**

*"It's all right, dad, I'm only crying."*  
— Emma Greenman, age 4  
(when life was a little too real)

The drive to protect our children is profound and easily can extend to scotchguarding their lives. Scrubbing and polishing every raw experience in the name of health and safety or protecting innocence scapes away from the natural luster of childhood. Some of the wonders and joys of childhood that fuel the best in our adult selves are unavoidably birthed in bumps and bruises and tears.

*Jim Greenman is vice president of Resources for Child Care Management and author of **Caring Spaces, Learning Places: Children's Environments That Work** (Exchange Press).*



## Smell My Fingers

— for Jessica

David B. Axelrod

Smell my fingers my daughter  
says and thrusts them  
at my nose. I back dive off  
my chair as if the air were  
poisoned. Where have they been  
those sweaty things with six  
years of sticky places  
scenting their past? She laughs  
and chases me around the room  
with germicidal weapons,  
insists on my surrender.  
Caught, I find a pine cone  
in her fist. She tells me  
it is spring and that means perfume.

(in *Strings: A Gathering of Family Poems* by Paul B. Janeczko, editor. Scarsdale, NY: Bradbury Press, 1984.)

## Nature

There is a pleasure in the pathless woods,  
There is rapture on the lonely shore,  
There is a society where none intrudes,  
By the deep sea, and music in its roar;  
I love not man the less, but Nature more,  
From these our interviews, in which I steal  
From all I may be, or have been before,  
To mingle with the Universe and feel  
What can ne'er express, yet cannot all conceal.

— Lord Byron, from *Childe Harold*

## Ain't Life Grand

It was about 5:00 in the morning by my watch,  
but 8:00 a.m. to my eastern standard time body.  
I was walking in Stanley Park in Vancouver,  
British Columbia, in the earliest light of dawn.  
The mist was both magical and ominous, but so  
beautiful. Rounding a corner on the path, a  
huge man suddenly emerged from the shadowy  
grove of pines and shrubs on the water's edge.  
Dressed in shabby clothes with a blanket  
wrapped around his shoulders, I almost ran into  
him — and, startled, I took two steps back. At  
least six foot six, black, with long dreadlocks —  
every latent (and not so latent) stereotype and  
prejudice struck me with full force.

"Hey, mon, come take a look, mon," he said  
with a big gap-toothed smile, and beckoned me  
to look behind a bush. Oh \_ \_ \_ \_ (censored), I  
thought. Minnesota nice meets homeless reality.  
Can I out run him(not a chance) or will I have to  
rely on my charm and wit (yeah, right)?  
Surrender seemed inevitable and I took the few  
steps toward the bush, fully expecting to see or  
become something horrible.

Instead, there were three newly hatched ducks  
and two more breaking out of their shell under  
the wary eyes of an alarmed duck mother.  
"Ain't life grand, mon," he laughed, and all I  
could do was smile. Together we watched the  
two ducks break out of their shells and the  
world was quite a wonderful place.

And, yes, he did ask for money (and I gave him  
some), but he offered to share both his wine and  
his joint (I'm not telling).

## Murder Most Foul

What do you say to a child who has just witnessed a murder? "Slimy murdered Peepy," she sobbed. She was right. Apparently, Slimy the snake had escaped and found a way to make Peepy the chick his dinner. Jessica had witnessed Peepy's last moments. Life is not always pretty; in fact, sometimes it is perniciously icky. I'm not sure that Peepy's unfortunate demise was appropriate for Jessica, but life does happen.



# Children Need Rich Language Experiences

by Elizabeth Jones

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Human beings are the animals that talk. Everywhere, they have invented languages with which to remember experiences, plan ahead, and communicate with each other. A child's learning to talk — and, later, to recognize print as talk written down — is a major milestone in her relationships with her family and community; she becomes a "member of the club" of people who use words with each other. If she goes to child care, the adults there will determine, in large part, the language experiences she has during her day, even though they won't be participants in all of those experiences.

**Adults greet children.** Friendly words are an important welcome to each child, each day; children need to hear their names spoken warmly. They need to see their names written, as well; children learn to recognize the shape of their name, and thus to read it, long before they know the sounds of the letters it's made of.

**Adults engage children in conversation.** Genuine questions (to which the child knows the answer and the adult doesn't) about family events spark conversation just as they do among adults: "Is your grandma visiting you?" "Is your baby better today?" "Is that a new jacket?" When the child takes the initiative — "My birthday's tomorrow!" — the adult responds with shared pleasure.

**Adults give children information** they want or need — "The red paper is on the bottom shelf." "It's time to wash your hands now." "Mama will come back; she always comes back."

**Adults provide experiences worth talking about,** and many opportunities for children to talk spontaneously with each other. These experiences include both the daily — things to play with, food to eat — and the

special — celebrations and field trips and attention to street repairs and thunderstorms and things that break down and have to be fixed. Planned or unexpected, all such things are potential language curriculum.

## **Adults model useful language while mediating conflicts.**

*"Marcos, what do you want to tell Dulcie?" the teacher asks.*

*"I don't like her. She's a dumb-dumb," sobs Marcos.*

*"You're mad at Dulcie. Can you tell her what she did to make you mad?"*

*"Hit me," says Marcos, sadly.*

*"You hit me first," says Dulcie, reasonably.*

*"Marcos, did you hit Dulcie?"*

*He nods.*

*"Why?"*

*"My hole!" he wails. "She messed my hole!" He tries to hit Dulcie again.*

*"What hole?" asks Dulcie, genuinely puzzled. "I didn't mess no hole."*

*"Can you show Dulcie your hole, Marcos?"*

*"Here!" he shouts. "It was right here, and I digged it and digged it. . . ." (Jones and Reynolds, 1992, p. 27)*



**Adults read stories from books.** Books are a source of delight, wisdom, and useful information. Children being read to and looking at books themselves discover that literacy is a skill worth mastering.

**Adults share songs, chants, and poems,** play games with words, and respond appreciatively to children's word play. Language is a set of sound patterns as well as of meanings, and spontaneous play with its rhymes and rhythms is one of the many ways children begin to learn the phonics useful in reading.

**Adults re-tell to children the stories of their lives together,** letting them know that *their* actions and words are the stuff of stories too.

*"Once upon a time," said Joan to her small class of three year olds, whom she had called into a snug circle as their going camping play was coming to an end, "there were one, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight children who went camping together." "Me!" said Charlie excitedly. "Me, too!" said Alicia. . . . (Jones and Reynolds, 1992, p. 125)*

**Adults set the stage for children's own storytelling,** keeping in mind that young children are not at their most competent when they're expected to talk in teacher-directed settings like show-and-tell or recall. Children's language is liveliest when their bodies are in action and they haven't been waiting for a turn. Nor are all their stories told in words; *The Hundred Languages of Children* (Edwards et al., 1993) includes dramatic play, block construction, drawing and painting, and many more. In all these modes, children represent their understandings of how the world works and where they belong in it:

*"Here's the driving place. These go with the car. No, get off, I have to drive. We have to get our cars fixed. I have to drive, this is 'mergency."*

*"Hey, help do this, fireman. This is gonna be a hook and ladder to catch people. This goes on the fire truck 'cause that's the water."*

**Adults respect the importance of private speech** in early development. Young children talk to themselves as they go about their daily activities, using language as a means of directing their own attention and behavior. (Berk and Winsler, 1995) It's important that children not be shushed very often; they need to think out loud.

**Adults respect children's home language.** The child whose family speaks a language not spoken by the child

care staff isn't language-deprived, he's potentially bilingual; and bilingualism is an asset in a diverse and changing world. Staff need to learn basic vocabulary in the other language, just as children do, and staff hiring policies should take the community's languages into account.

**Adults stay alert to naturally occurring opportunities to teach concepts** and vocabulary to children, rather than *playing teacher* in developmentally inappropriate group lessons like this one:

*There were 19 four year olds sitting in square formation around the edge of the rug.*

*Teacher (showing tray): "What do you think is in this?"*

*Some children: "Lemons."*

*Teacher: "How do you think lemons taste?"*

*Some children: "Sour."*

*Teacher passes tray. The first few children don't want a lemon.*

*Teacher (somewhat impatiently): "Oh taste it. It's fun to taste; you just need to lick it."*

*Teacher (tastes lemon): "Mmm, it is sour. What else is something that tastes sour?"*

*A child: "Apples."*

*Teacher: "Sometimes, but not all the time. Green ones can taste sour. What else?"*

*A child (echoed by others): "Grapes."*

*Teacher: "Grapes really aren't sour, although sometimes they aren't real sweet. How about pickles?" (Daniels, 1988, p. 137)*

Here the teacher, continually fishing for the answers she wanted while denying the validity of the children's ideas, got much more language practice than they did. If the taste of things is important to discuss with children, why not do so at the lunch table, a natural setting for conversations about food as a topic of mutual interest?

**Adults acknowledge that face-to-face talk provides better language experience than TV.** Children get enough of TV and videos at home, where adults are busy with other tasks or may want to watch themselves. Further, videos turned on in child care are often arbitrarily turned



off when it's time for something else; they're used as a time filler rather than as a story to be paid attention to from beginning to end. Looking at books would be more appropriate, because children do it at their own pace; however, if book-looking happens only at brief transactions and is never given time as a serious activity, children get the message that it isn't very important.

**Adults use transitions as teachable moments** both smoothed and enriched by interesting activities. Songs, chants, finger plays, and movement games all focus children's attention and add to their language. Classification games stretch children's thinking as well: If you played in the sand today, raise your hand. If you played in the playhouse, raise your hand. If you played in the blocks, raise your hand. How many boys played in the blocks? How many girls played in the blocks? How come there weren't any girls in the blocks? (With this question, you may well get genuine language experience — lively conversation about a significant issue. If that happens, there goes your smooth transition.)

Games can be designed to move the children to the next activity: "If you're wearing red, stand up and go sit at the table." "If you're wearing stripes, stand up. . . ."

**Adults reflect** on all the things they do, examining their potential for enriching children's language. They need to remember that play time is the most important language opportunity in the day, and provision for it thoughtfully. Children's language will draw on all their family and community experiences *and* on their experiences in child

care: What's here to talk about, who's here to talk with, and what are the interesting events in our shared past and our anticipated future?

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## *Children Need to Feel Safe and Secure*

by Diane E. Levin and Nancy Carlsson-Paige

**CHILDREN NEED a caring, consistent relationship with a significant adult.**

**SO, WE NEED** to provide an educational system with **low teacher-to-child ratios**, especially in urban and low income areas.

**CHILDREN NEED to be treated with respect by adults.**

**SO, WE NEED** to provide **more anti-bias and cultural awareness training** for adults so they can learn to better listen to the voices and understand the needs of children affected by violence.

**CHILDREN NEED to see and learn non-violent ways to solve their conflicts.**

**SO, WE NEED** to provide **training in peacemaking skills** for children, teachers, parents, and community leaders through schools, churches, community programs, and media.

**CHILDREN NEED meaningful, worthwhile ways to spend their time.**

**SO, WE NEED** to provide **year-round school, after school, and community programs** which enhance all aspects of their development.

**CHILDREN NEED to believe in themselves and know that they have a future.**

**SO, WE NEED** to provide **opportunities for them to develop positive self-esteem** so they learn to see themselves as **self-sufficient and able to function in the mainstream of American society**.

**YOUNG PEOPLE WHO HAVE EXPERIENCED VIOLENCE TELL US THEY WANT to get out of the cycle of violence.**

**SO, WE NEED** to provide **supportive communities** which nurture children and youths' efforts to turn away from violence.

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