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The Rhode Island Early Childhood Newsletter



Viewing a Child's Scribbling and Drawing as Intellectual Work



by Carol Garboden Murray



"Once I drew like Raphael, but it has taken me a whole lifetime to draw like children."

-Pablo Picasso



A great way to create an intellectually stimulating environment for young children is to allow ample opportunity to draw and write. We readily marvel at the child's first words and first steps, but it's all too common to miss the early stages of drawing unless we pay careful attention. Between the ages of 18 months and five years, a child who is allowed to scribble freely will go through a marvelous transformation. Just as we can plainly see the unfolding of symbolic thinking when we watch the child enter the world of pretend and social play, we can similarly observe the symbolic development on the page as we notice how the child's scribbles turn to carefully placed lines, circles, mock writing, tadpole people and lively representational figures.

In her classic text, *Analyzing Children's Art*, Rhoda Kellogg said, "The child's mind must develop through the impact of his own scribbling. (Kellogg, 1969)" Kellogg's work encourages us to look at the pure, authentic art that emerges from the child by considering the characteristics of line formation; the vertical marks, horizontal lines, circles, mandalas, suns and radials that evolve into self expressive drawings. Kellogg collected children's line formations from around the world and found similar (if not nearly exact) drawings emerging all over the globe. Children have an innate internal urge to make a mark. Line formations are particularly clear in scribbling and drawings, but we can also see the development of line formation in clay and children also use their fin-

gers to draw in sand and finger-paint.

Many early childhood teachers have moved away from cookie cutter craft projects and have incorporated open-ended art into their curriculums, but even as the understanding of developmentally appropriate art has improved in our field, we are often missing the authentic drawings of children in early childhood classrooms. Our lesson plans and resource books are full of creative art ideas. Process-oriented art activities include puffy paint, printing with objects, gluing, collaging and painting with rolling marbles to name a few. Although the experimentation with tools, color, shape, textures and design is very valuable in these experiences, they do not offer the same opportunity for artistic intent as we see when a child has a marker and a blank sheet of paper. Creative art projects offer a variety of expressions for young children as well as technical fine motor skills such as using scissors and glue, but in our planning we must seek a balance and not lose sight of the child's intentional line formation. It's just too easy to fill our days with 101 art activities and miss what the child brings from his or her original perspective and developmental stage.

If we value a child's drawing as intellectual work, we can make room for it in our classroom. It is essential for teachers to find time to sit with children in the writing center and at the art easel and observe what emerges from the child's hand and mind. As Arnold Gesell has taught us, the child is whole and there is no separation between motor skills and mind at this early age.

Children need opportunities to draw well before they are at the representational stage of making recognizable figures, but scribbles are most commonly overlooked in the early stage (18



Intentional line formation is evident in the drawings of preschool children displayed here in the classroom.

(Continued on page 4)

Letter from the Editor: "Luminous"

You don't have to go far to know this is an age of marketing and enticements. A time for entertainers and theatrical hooks, dramatic taglines and selling points. And people who know where the money is... in our children! Hook them with a tantalizing image of ultimate **power** (a laser-mounted Tyrannosaurus or those enormous green foam fists made to "Smash!"), or of **comfort** (as in a frenetic, giggling toy hamster running tirelessly through a maze of tubes), or even with the sight of a juicy mini-burger with cardboard fries (as long as it comes with some cheap plastic trinket), and the parents will follow. It's natural, in this age of children's choices and parental guilt... We want what's best for our kids, but sometimes it's too easy to wander into the borderlands, into that confusing thicket between love and license.

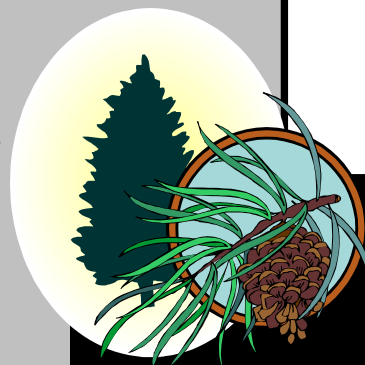
At the age of six, my daughter, like most children her age, is inquisitive, invested, always looking to see what's around the next corner or under the next rock. Recently I came home from work to find her watching an "educational" show on television. Naturally inquisitive myself, I settled down next to her to tap into her pulse, to step into the world she had decided to create around her (at least for the moment). It didn't take long for me to feel the dissonance there. I watched the screen, and I watched her. As googly-eyed creatures bounded across Crayola-colored backgrounds sharing tidbits of knowledge in goofy voices, I kept thinking to myself, "When did we begin walking down this road? At what moment did someone decide that gigantic eyes and Caribbean blue fur somehow conveyed safety or even interest to children?" The things being taught were in themselves intensely interesting... why dumb them down?

Is it a natural instinct to entertain as we teach, or is it merely a second-rate substitute for when we lack an integrated sensory experience? While it is certainly true that the best teaching styles involve all the senses, and laughter is a wonderful medicine to set the soul at ease, is it possible that, sometimes, we carry it too far? What do we say about a child's intellect when we anthropomorphize EVERYTHING? Candles that talk, giant red dogs, flying school buses, animation, animation, animation! Rich, imaginative experiences, yes... but at a time when children are still trying to get a grasp on reality!!! Being a fun-loving and imaginative person by nature, I had to take a long look in the mirror to force myself to examine the tools and resources I use to teach.

A year ago, that same little girl had walked with me beneath some pine trees... no brick reds, no garish yellow, no lime green, just the muted, wholesome colors of a world locked in late summer's embrace. Her entire being seemed luminous, her curiosity alive, probing with intense feelers everything that crossed her visual field. She found a wad of white sap and twirled it up on a stick, skipped down to the pond and then plopped it in. All at once... magic! Like a strange, propelled canoe, the twig began firing off a trail of waxy scum and dancing across the water!!! Her eyes couldn't open wide enough to contain the joy of this sudden discovery (surfactants, I later found out). And for a full hour after that, one question led to another, which prompted experiments and conversations, and more questions. No snugly bears, no slapstick tricks, no gimmicks... just a child fully aware and centered in her intellectual potential, with every possibility at her fingertips. A breath of fresh air! An escape from commercial fever!

Join me this issue in continuing to ask the hard questions. Some of the finest early childhood writers in RI have attempted to turn their eyes inward and outward to examine every aspect of our practice, and we hope you enjoy every word!

—Christopher D. Salaun, Editor csalaun@childspan.net



Upcoming Events

45th Annual RI Early Childhood Conference

**Friday and Saturday, May 7-8, 2010:
Bryant College**

Keynote speaker: Holly Elissa Bruno

Friday: Administrator's

pre-conference!

Scholarships are available!

**For registration information, contact
RIAEYC at 401-398-7605**



Critical Issues in Child Care Conference

**Theme: "Mending the Broken Links:
Connecting Educators to the
Resources They Need to Support a
Diverse Community of Learners"**

**April 10, 2010: Woonsocket High
School**

Register now! Just contact:

**Chris Salaun 721-6408 or Ligia Diaz
721-6403**



A Few Inspirational Books

submitted by Shannon Baer

Danks, Fiona and Schofield, Jo. (2007). **Nature's Playground: Activities, Crafts, and Games to Encourage Children to Get Outdoors.** Illinois: Chicago Review Press.

Louv, Richard. (2005). **Last Child in the Woods.** New York: Workman.

Lovejoy, Sharon. (1999). **Roots, Shoots, Bucket and Boots.** New York: Workman.

Lovejoy, Sharon. (1991). **Sunflower Houses: Garden Discoveries for Children of All Ages.** Colorado: Interweave Press.

Petrash, Carol. (1992). **Earthways: Simple Environmental Activities for Young Children.** Maryland: Gryphon House.

Ward, Jennifer. (2008). **I Love Dirt! 52 Activities to Help You and Your Kids Discover the Wonders of Nature.** Trumpeter.

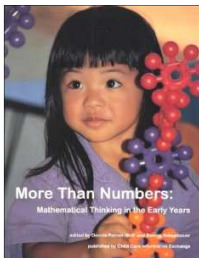
Ward, Jennifer. (2009) **Let's Go Outside: Outdoor Activities and Projects to Get You and Your Kids Closer to Nature.** Boston: Shambhala Publication.

Professional Resource Review: Intellect

by Jen Pederson

Palmer, Dennie, and Bonnie Neugebauer, eds. *More Than Numbers: Mathematical Thinking in the Early Years*. Redmond: Child Care Information Exchange, 1996.

Children are hearty thinkers, and nothing becomes more relevant to their experience as they get older than a deep understanding of number and mathematics. It surrounds them, orders their world, separates and divides them, gives and takes, shapes their environments. In *More Than Numbers*, Dennie Palmer and Bonnie Neugebauer have compiled and edited a series of compelling essays for teachers on mathematical thinking. Each essay in itself is an eyrie of brilliant nest eggs... new theory, reflection on practice, thoughts about the process of development, but what really makes these ideas soar is the way they tell a more dynamic story when read together. This is not a haphazard collection of "favorites," but an intentional selection of the most penetrating, thought-provoking ideas of the time.



For any teacher stuck in the five-year rut who's thinking, "I've learned everything I need to know"... this book is for you! By re-examining logic and a child's view of critical thinking, you can't help but feel re-awakened to new possibilities. Chock full of math milestones and idea sparkers, which add a certain practical element to the work, *More Than Numbers* truly can function as a handbook or a primer with a nouveau twist. This is the kind of book that sets your feet on a new path! I've

been working with children for well over twelve years, and now keep *More Than Numbers* close at hand, not just for its expert advice, but for its unapplauded gems, like the mathematical concepts chart or the comprehensive math bibliography. This book is certain to have a direct impact on your own approach to math, and is by far the sharpest tool on my shelf.

Children's Friend/ CHILDSPAN News

CHILDSPAN/ Children's Friend would like to congratulate and welcome the following new employees:

- Kelly Wishart: Administrator for Professional Development and Quality
- Stan Kuziel: Manager of CHILDSPAN and Professional Development

Attention please! The **Children's Friend Child and Adult Care Food Program** is always looking for new licensed Family Child Care providers to sign up for and reap the benefits of this federally-funded initiative that reimburses providers for serving healthy, nutritious meals to children in their care. To learn more about this and other benefits related to the Food Program (like free trainings), please contact Lucia Ramos at 401-721-6412 or via email at lramos@childspan.net.

CHILDSPAN is *always* willing to set up personalized trainings for you and your staff as well! Our **Pathways to Quality** initiative helps you craft what you need for the targeted development of your individual work teams. No topic is out of our realm... we even work with administrators and program coordinators! To find out more, please contact Chris Salaun at 401-721-6408 or email him at csalaun@childspan.net.

Save the date! Join friends on May 1st for the 8th Annual **Children's Friend Walk**. Don't miss out on this great event for the whole family. Over \$20,000 raised already, and still going! Visit childrensfriendwalk.org to find out more today.

Early Childhood Resources in Rhode Island

Aquidneck Island Directors' Association
Pam Griffiths, 683-0991

RIAEYC / BrightStars
Tammy Camillo, 398-7605

Children's Friend and Service
Aimee Mitchell, 752-7575

CHILDSPAN: Rhode Island's Child Development and Education Training System
Christopher D. Salaun, 721-6408

Family Child Care Homes of Rhode Island, Inc. (FCCRI)
Shannon Trow, 615-9722

Options for Working Families
Sandra Gaspar, 946-2300

Providence After School Alliance (PASA)
Elizabeth Devaney, 490-9599

Prevent Child Abuse Rhode Island (PCARI)
Katherine Begin, 728-7920

Ready to Learn Providence (R2LP)
Leslie Gell, 490-9960

Rhode Island Afterschool Plus Alliance
Sarah Cahill, 331-2869

Rhode Island Training and Technical Assistance Center
Sue Washburn, 398-7819

Rhode Island Child Care Directors' Association (RICEDA)
Kathie Sandberg, 334-0100 x238

Rhode Island KIDS COUNT
Elizabeth Burke Bryant, 351-9400

Rhode Island School-Age Child Care Association (RISACCA)
Charlotte Boudreau, 444-0750, x102

Rhode Island Head Start Association
Mary Nugent, 437-0018 x103

Rhode Island Head Start Collaboration Project
Lawrence Pucciarelli, 462-3071

Rhode Island Parent Information Network
Matthew Cox, 270-0101

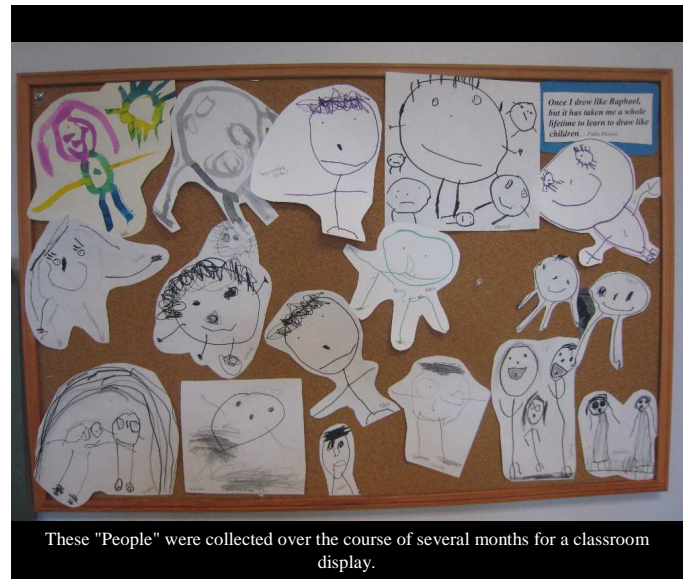
URI, CE, Children, Youth, and Family 4-H Program
Marilyn Martin, 277-5255



(Continued from page 1)

months – 32 months). Yes, toddlers will mouth markers and attempt drawing on self and others and furniture, it is true. But teachers who value the early scribbles will allow time to sit or stand at a writing surface with drawing tools and careful supervision. Lids of markers or pens will be tucked away out of reach (so not to be mouthed) and toddlers will get many reminders that markers are for paper. What a treat to observe the changes that occur over the course of only a few weeks as random scribbles turn to circular motions and then to concentric marks just before a discrete circle appears for the first time.

The best tools for encouraging line formation are the simplest ones. Recently a toddler teacher in our program noticed that while she made her daily classroom notes, the two year olds became very attracted to her “teacher pen.” She followed their interest and set up a little writing table with clip boards, small note books and “teacher pens.” The toddlers busied themselves making notes and the teacher was amazed at the eagerness with which they created lines, circles and pretended to “write” at such a young age. Preschool children will use just about any medium to create line, but the simpler the materials, the clearer it is to see intentional line formation. Black pens, thick pencils, pastels, chalk and of course colorful markers are all perfect media for early drawing.

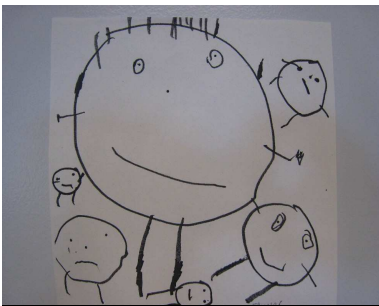


These “People” were collected over the course of several months for a classroom display.

in human development and our respect for childhood.

In one of my favorite books, *Reclaiming Childhood* by William Crain, he writes, “If we can just look at children’s spontaneous drawings in a fresh way, we will witness small miracles.” (Crain, 2003). It is my hope that early childhood educators will hold the earliest scribbles and line formations of children in awe and wonder. In doing so, we will learn a great deal about the children in our charges as well as gain valuable lessons in human development. The practice of allowing, observing, collecting, documenting and displaying children’s drawings in our programs will make us reflective practitioners and will uplift our classrooms to be the intellectual environments worthy of the children that scribble before us.

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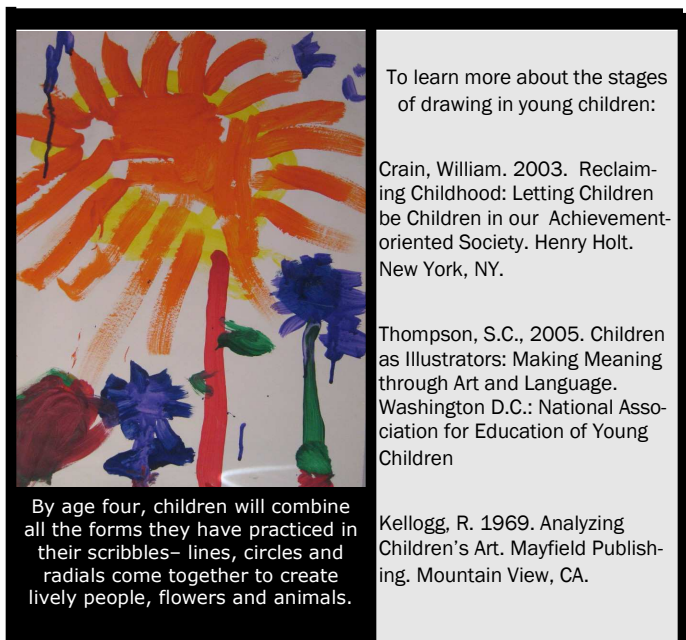


Around the age of 3 and 4, children begin drawing people. Arms and legs extend directly from the head. These elegant shapes are found in cultures all over the world and are commonly referred to as tadpole people.

Look around the displays in your classroom. Do you see a balance of art projects and child-generated intentional drawings? Can you find documentation of line formation? It is important to make places for the drawing and scribbling on our walls. Perhaps you can create a space near your writing center where children can hang their own marks. Preschool teachers will observe that when children are given opportunity to hang paper themselves, learning to use

tape and deciding where the work will be placed, their ownership and enthusiasm for the work increases tenfold. As a teacher you have the opportunity to make a study of the stages of drawing in your classroom. You can collect the early circular strokes, celebrate the first closed circle when it appears, and frame those fantastic tadpole people. When we are truly excited to see the marks; lines, circles and drawings emerge freely and make a place to celebrate them, the engagement within the classroom community grows.

Documentation of drawing offers opportunities to discuss child development with parents. When we save the random scribbles of toddlers and show the parent how the scribbles are taking form, parents can see in a tangible way the work of their child. When the parent asks us “Are you teaching my child to write his name?” we can say, “Yes, we are laying the foundation –look how he holds the marker, look at the marks, curly loops, circles and lines – these are all the shapes a child needs to form letters later on.” When we celebrate the spontaneous scribbles and drawings of children, which might otherwise be overlooked or dismissed, we are educating parents not only about their child’s stage of development, but also about our faith



By age four, children will combine all the forms they have practiced in their scribbles— lines, circles and radials come together to create lively people, flowers and animals.

To learn more about the stages of drawing in young children:

Crain, William. 2003. *Reclaiming Childhood: Letting Children be Children* in our Achievement-oriented Society. Henry Holt. New York, NY.

Thompson, S.C., 2005. *Children as Illustrators: Making Meaning through Art and Language*. Washington D.C.: National Association for Education of Young Children

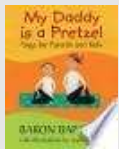
Kellogg, R. 1969. *Analyzing Children’s Art*. Mayfield Publishing. Mountain View, CA.

Children's Literature Reviews: Intellect

by Cynthia Roberts

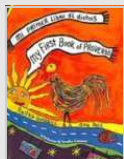
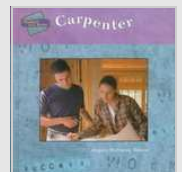
Like all preschool-aged children, my three and a half year old son has an active intellect and is interested in and capable of understanding things beyond our imagination. Among his curiosities are how and why we use tools, what do carpenters do from A to Z, where exactly do ocean-dwelling creatures live and what do they eat, how do we use language to convey ideas, how are other children and families different from my family and me, and pursuits related to the interests of the significant adults in his life such as gardening and yoga. I can attest, based on our direct experience with the following books, that each has engaged his –and our - intellect. Each time we read them together he asks new questions and makes new connections to things in which he is deeply interested; and we enjoy reading them too!

Albert, Richard E. **Allejandro's Gift**. Chronicle Books, 1994. Allejandro plants a desert watering hole for the local animals. While he thinks he is building it as a gift for the animals who live nearby, Allejandro realizes the gifts reaped from the experience are those *he* garners through observing and interacting with the animals who come to drink. Ages: 3-adult.



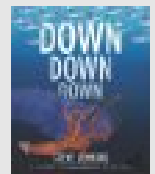
Baptiste, Baron. **My Daddy is a Pretzel: Yoga for Parents and Kids**. Barefoot Books, 2004. Yoga poses, and their health-promoting features, are described through everyday adult occupations, animals, and objects that are familiar to young children. Ages: 3-5 years

Brown, Angela M. **Carpenter**. Raintree Steck-Vaughn Publishers, 2000. This book goes through the steps of the planning and implementation process (including a description of the necessary materials, tools and skills) required for a master carpenter to build an addition on a house. An added bonus, in terms of portraying gender equity, is that the carpenter and architect featured in the book are both women! Ages: 3-8 years.



Gonzalez, Ralfka & Ruiz, Ana. **Mi Primer Libro de Dichos. My First Book of Proverbs**. Children's Book Press, 1995. With colorful and at times surreal artwork, this book introduces the reader to proverbs found in both the Spanish and English languages. Content is provided in both Spanish and English. Ages: 3-adult.

Jenkins, Steve. **Down Down Down: A Journey to the Bottom of the Sea**. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2009. This brilliant book takes the reader on a journey to the depths of the ocean showing which sea creatures would be found at which depths. The artwork – all paper collage – masterfully depicts the sea creatures' habitat and prey. Included is a guide that compares the sizes of the creatures to an average-sized adult human body and an adult sized human hand. Ages: 3- adult.



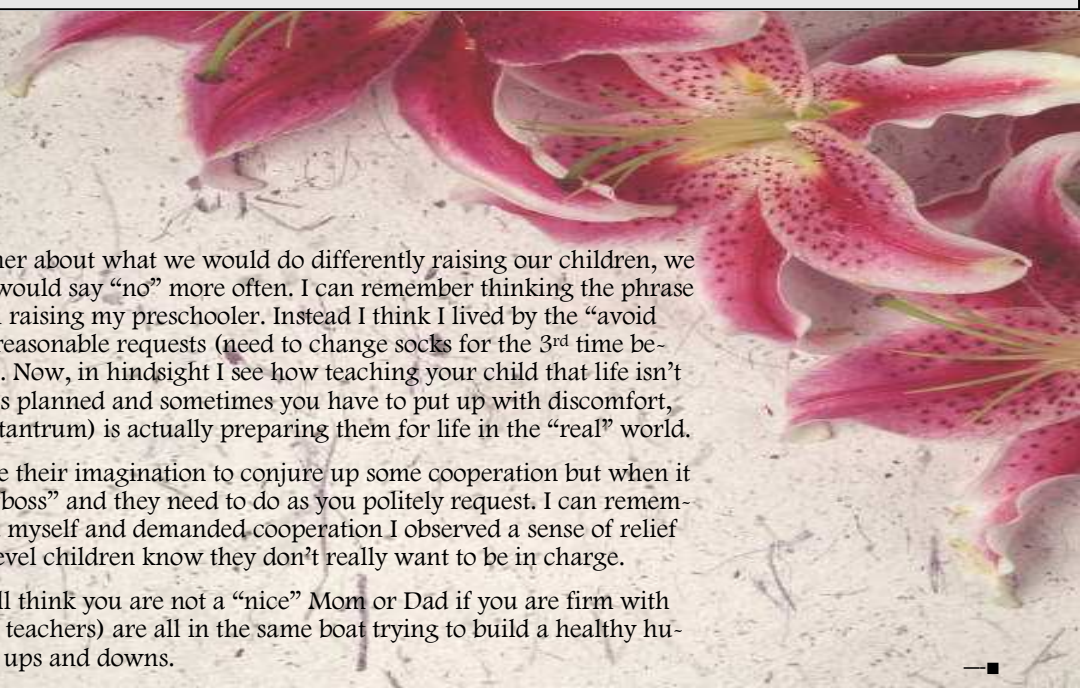
Just Say “No”

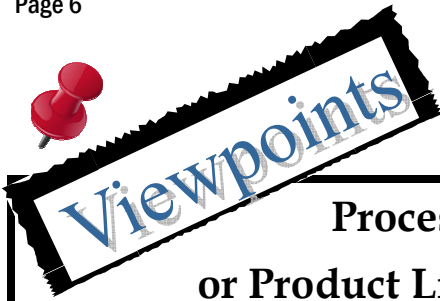
by Aimee Mack

After talking with another teacher about what we would do differently raising our children, we came to the conclusion that we would say “no” more often. I can remember thinking the phrase “choose your battles” a lot when raising my preschooler. Instead I think I lived by the “avoid most battles” by caving in to unreasonable requests (need to change socks for the 3rd time because they are not comfortable!). Now, in hindsight I see how teaching your child that life isn't perfect, things don't always go as planned and sometimes you have to put up with discomfort, (even if it means dealing with a tantrum) is actually preparing them for life in the “real” world.

Sure there are ways to cajole, use their imagination to conjure up some cooperation but when it comes down to it – you are the “boss” and they need to do as you politely request. I can remember times when I finally asserted myself and demanded cooperation I observed a sense of relief come over my child – on some level children know they don't really want to be in charge.

So don't be afraid that others will think you are not a “nice” Mom or Dad if you are firm with your children. We, (parents and teachers) are all in the same boat trying to build a healthy human being that can handle life's ups and downs.





Viewpoints

Process or Product Life?

by Pauline Gaucher

Offering process art experiences to children in their early years makes sense. It's considered best practice. Children don't need to be taught how to *do* process art. It's as natural as breathing. Sometimes they just need to be encouraged to experience something new.

Set up a space with interesting materials, without a predetermined goal in mind, and watch a group of children get busy. They immerse themselves in the possibilities. They learn what they like or don't like, what looks nice or aesthetically pleasing to their eye. We *want* to nurture this intrinsic motivation in children.

The process can be applied to many learning activities, as long as the outcome is neither right, or wrong, just satisfying to the creator. One child, who often explores our endless building materials, has discovered that it deeply pleases him to build really tall. He experiments with this everyday in the classroom, with many materials. Perhaps some day he will be an engineer who designs skyscrapers. Right now, he's simply a three year old doing what appeals to him. The process feeds his mind, body and spirit.

On a warming February day last year, I watched a child become intensely immersed in the process of handling mud and finding ways to catch water that was streaming down the snow covered hill. After pouring liquid over his mound of mud and realizing he had a spectator, he very sweetly offered me some calming cake with calming syrup. It was the most wonderful reference to a mud pie I'd ever heard.

Is process more important than product? If we were to sort our experiences and responsibilities into the two categories, certainly a lot of life would fall into the product category. The act of doing, for an end result or goal. If

we are baking a cake, we could say that the process of following steps exactly would be critical to the outcome. Learning and life, which hopefully is ongoing in all of us, is a mixture of the two.

What about you? Are you a process or product person? In the May and June of our lives, people tend to be more product oriented. It's probably where the cliché "Stop and smell the roses," came from. My mother-in-law always said, "Life is not a dress rehearsal." Or there's "Life is what happens to you while you're making plans."



One thing is for sure. Children always have something to teach us. Watching them enjoy the process of their play and art brings us back. It is not hurried or complicated - usually. Children instinctively seem to know how to live one hundred percent in their process, totally present. Yes. It's a luxury of childhood. Play *is* their work. It's also why we remember that they need warning for transitions.

When adult life gets too busy trying to achieve a product, maybe the answer is to think like a child. Put yourself completely in the moment and look at an ordinary task or piece of your day with new eyes. Instead of a dreaded task to check off the list, you may find some unexpected joy in the process. While you're at it, have a cup of tea and a big slice of calming cake. There are many things yet for children to learn, but they are often the most profound teachers.

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Internet Options

Kids Know It Network

Making Education Fun and Free

Free educational websites for the young and the young at heart! Quotes, facts, links, games, learning activities, educational movies, worksheets, classes Ages 4-adult.

www.kidsknowit.com



Inside Art

An Adventure in Art History

A creative exploration of famous pieces of artwork from the inside-out, which would be a delight to teachers and children alike.

www.eduweb.com/insideart/

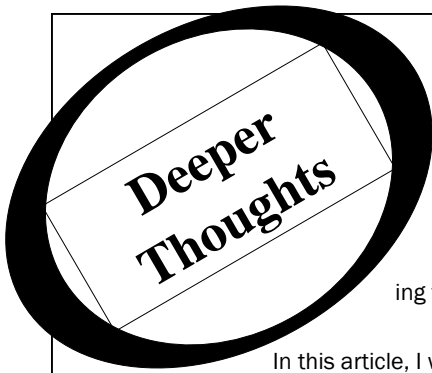


Kids Development

Developing Intellectual Skills in Young Children

Ask the experts or find articles and ideas on cognitive development for all ages, explore puzzles, try new activities, learn about relationships, attachment, social and emotional resiliency, and classic theorists

www.kidsdevelopment.co.uk/DevelopingIntellectualSkills.html



Learning Through Discovery

by Shannon Baer

Children are intrigued by the natural world and as teachers, parents and caregivers it is important to encourage them to explore, discover and question the world around them. Unstructured play in nature is one of the most fertile environments to nurture the growth of these innate qualities; and without exposure to nature play, children can become starved for nutrients, leading to mental, emotional, and physical problems.

In this article, I want to share the ways that I as a caregiver, mother, and teacher offer my children a rich curriculum of free outside play. I want to share what works for kids under six, why it's important for them and why it's important for me.

Children need fresh air, the experience of the wind, the warmth of sunlight, the unevenness of the ground, or the feeling of raindrops or snow on their faces. Use common sense, watch what babies put in their mouths, older children could fall out of trees or skid their knees, always have a first aid kit and cell phone on hand and it's best when two adults are present with large groups of kids. Dress for the weather, but if it's a warm rain, let the older children get totally drenched or muddy... just keep a change of clothes on hand!

There are so many ways to engage children with nature. I have compiled some examples to address children at different stages of development during the four seasons. I also suggest thinking back to your childhood and adding to or modifying this list to suit the children in your care. A dear friend of mine from England reminded me daily when my son was an infant to take him outside, let him sleep there; give him plenty of fresh air. Nature is for kids right from the start!

Age/ Stage	Spring	Summer	Fall	Winter
Infancy Birth to Walking (0-12 months) During this stage babies are strengthening their muscles and preparing to crawl then walk.	Allow the little ones to see and smell flowers or feel raindrops or the warmth of the sun.	At the beach or a swimming hole, put feet in the water, or to feel the earth/ sand.	Play with leaves on a blanket, watch the leaves fall, or experience the strength of the wind	Wrapped in a blanket, on a sled allow baby to feel the snowflakes, and experience very gentle sledding.
Toddler Walking (12 mo- 3 years) During this stage children are focused on gross motor development and curiosity.	Splash in puddles, take a walk in the rain, make mud pies, dig in the soil & plant seeds. Visit a farm to see newborn animals.	Play at the water's edge. Plant seeds, dig in the garden, go for hikes, or a canoe or boat ride. Watch monarch butterflies emerge.	Play in a leaf pile. Catch falling leaves. Play matching games with leaves of different shapes and colors. Make leaf prints.	Have the children sit on a sled and pull them through the snow. Make snow angels. Make snow men.
Preschooler Plus Very Mobile 3-6 years During this stage, young children are trying to understand the world around them through play.	Plan and plant a garden of their favorite vegetables. Make boats and put them to sail in streams, puddles. Visit a farm to see baby animals.	Overnight in a tent, observe the stars and draw pictures of the designs. Collect milkweed, watch monarch butterflies emerge. Collect seeds.	Rack a leaf pile, play with leaves, sort or match leaves, observe the different colors of leaves on trees look up the names of trees.	Catch snowflakes on dark colored material and look at the shapes. Collect treasures and freeze in containers filled with water. Watch them melt.

(In an effort to be simple I used broad age ranges... little children will be have less attention than older kids, but the activities can be the same!)

At each stage, the children engage with nature differently; a few weeks ago, a 6 month old in my care sat in a stroller for hours, talking to the wind, laughing when the birds sang, when she finally became hungry, she lost all interest in the world around her and cried till I provided her with food. The same day a toddler, 18 months old, collected leaves, placing them in a pile one by one; when the wind was strong and chilly, she came to me for comfort. The three year olds played in the sandbox, watched leaves fall and raced across the yard to catch them; they ran into the wind using scarves as wings and played like butterflies. At the end of playtime, they put the toys away and ran inside.

At my house we go on a hike at least once a week (except in extreme weather). We head out our backdoor and into the pine forest; the baby in a backpack, toddler strolling along, preschoolers running from one favorite tree to the next (all of which have special names). We watch as the seasons change, the animals come and go; for the littlest these are subconscious experiences but for the older children these are learning experiences- we talk about migration, different climates, different tree types, or why water freezes. I let them lead the conversation and I tag along for the ride.

There's a low point in our road where water pools after it rains, one day my son, then two and a half, noticed the water was gone and said, "the sun came up and now the water is all dried up." We have walked by this spot so many times that he had observed and then found an

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explanation for his experience. I never talked to him about evaporation; he "discovered" it for himself!

This time outside in the elements is very important for me as a parent and caregiver too. I often find myself outside quietly watching, peacefully engaged with nature or the children. Sometimes I work alongside little ones in my garden, or take a deeper look at the differences in the bark on trees, or spend time studying habitats for various animals. During this time, I have a little break from the hustle and bustle of activities; I can take a deep breath and relax. I can learn new things too. I don't have to have all the answers for the children, I can delve into new material, make new discoveries for myself, I can engage in their learning process, and all this does is make me a better teacher!

The benefits of nature play are endless. Children have the time and space to put their whole body into learning. When they play in dirt or sand they learn about soil textures because they feel so different. They learn that water added to sand makes a sand castle, while water added to dirt makes mud which can also be molded. They learn when it's warm outside, water is refreshing and cool, but in the winter when the weather is cold, water makes it feel even colder.

These seemingly little experiences are shaping and forming the way children see the world and the way they see themselves. When children see that the seasons change, they learn that change is natural. When animals run for cover at the sight of a hawk, they learn that protection is important. When they see mother animals lovingly caring for their young, they learn what love looks like. Children learn to use their bodies and to physically adjust to changing conditions.

Children today play outside less than children of yesteryear. Great scientists like Newton and Einstein learned to explain the physical world because of their experiences in nature. Our children today will understand science better because of real experience. They will discover, explore, and hone these skills by learning how fun it is to be outside, to play in the dirt, to get filthy, soaked and exhausted.

In some cultures, children are taught to find a special place in nature where they feel safe. They are encouraged to return to this special place for a "time-in". Everyone needs a safe place, to sit and think or listen or just look up at the sky and feel the vastness of the universe. Try it out, spend a few minutes each day outside with chil-

dren of all ages, watch the interactions of children with nature, and discover what works and what needs refining. Listen to nature, explore children's wonder, and discover the questions within your own heart. ■

Structured Play Activities

Hide and Seek- children can hide (or hide an object) then look for it.

Go Fetch the Ball- adult throws the ball and children take turns getting it!

Scavenger Hunt- look for things on nature walks, with older kids there can be multiple items on the list, but with little children pinecones and acorns are a great place to start.

Pass the Ball (thrown or kicked)- stand in a circle and "toss" the ball from one to another.

Obstacle Courses- find trees, small hills, logs, simple things from nature and place them strategically so that children are challenged (and having fun).

Great Backyard or School Yard Projects

Bird Feeding Station- fill a plate or pie dish with bird seed, then leave outside in a tree, or hang a bird feeder in a tree or on a window.

Weather Station- set up a "station" with rain gauge, small flag for wind direction

Hide Out, Fort, Tipi, or House - a simple structure or cluster of bushes can serve as a hide-a-way or house and encourages creativity.

Butterfly Garden- purchase or grow plants that attract both caterpillars and butterflies, watch as caterpillars transform!

Container Garden- if you cannot plant a full garden, use some flower pots and your own compost (supplement if needed) grow vegetables from seed. Great starter plants are: radish, chard, spinach, carrots; grow from seed or purchase seedlings such as tomatoes or peppers.

Nature Inside the Home or Classroom

Worm Composter- a small bin in which to put food scraps that can be added to the larger compost pile outside.

Nature Table/ "Treasure Table"- children can have "nature bags" to collect treasures from nature walks. Use these special items to decorate a table.

Sand and Water Table- use wash basins or plastic tubs to hold water or sand, put treasure in the sand and a little dish soap in the water- let them play! (It can get messy!)

Tree Branches cut into Blocks- fallen trees or branches can be cut up in to whatever size block, then brought inside as natural blocks!

Rock Garden- collect rocks for a special garden, guide children in observing the differences in the rocks.