

Proactive Parenting October 2016
Learning from Within

"Wonder is the beginning of wisdom", one of Socrates simple and profound quotes, reminds us of what matters in education at all levels and in every setting. Young children are full of wonder, but keeping a sense of wonder alive is fundamental if we are to continue learning and growing throughout life. Key research findings regarding optimal learning conditions for children of all ages, confirm the importance of tapping into a child's (and adult's) sense of wonder. Neuroscientists have determined that children learn best when the material presented is meaningful to them, peaks their curiosity, and when they are actively engaged in the learning process.. Rather than merely filling children with facts and content with a focus on answers and grades, it is important to take a step back and tune into children's interests and figure out what excites them, in order for learning to be accessible and meaningful enough to 'stick' in their brains. Additionally, our brains can only take in, store, and use new information if it is connected to some existing information. Adapting prescribed curriculum standards by crafting lessons based on the lives and loves of actual children and in accordance with a teacher's own passion, can personalize and breathe life into faceless standardized experiences.

Interestingly, there seems to be a common thread running through many of the currently 'trending' approaches to enriching educational practice. They range from: STEM & STEAM (engineering and re-engineering, design and re-design), building the emotional and social intelligence skills that create 'Grit' and resilience, 'Makerspace' (project-based, hands-on creating and building), teaching study skills that support executive functioning, and mindfulness curriculum (building attention and self-regulation with brain- based learning) . All of these approaches focus on 'learning from within'; namely the myriad of essential conditions and skill sets that enable children to be ready to learn, to be excited about learning, and to be active participants in the process. They are as much about the journey as the destination. The kind of learning happens when teachers pose lots of questions to spur imaginative and critical thinking, where the focus is on active discovery, when children build 'mental muscles,' as they test out ideas individually and

collaboratively, and when they work together to solve puzzles and problems. In early childhood education this is called 'developmentally appropriate practice', and in his book "The Power of Play, author and renown child psychologist Dave Elkind PhD., suggests that; "Although it seems counterintuitive, quality early childhood education should be the model for education at all levels. Quality early childhood education is effective because it integrates play, love, and work. There is little rote learning and memorization in quality programs. There are limits of course, but the child's needs, interests, and ability level help determine the curriculum. Certainly there is a place for rote learning and memorization in education, but such methods should never be the primary mode of instruction. When children have a say in their learning, they are much more excited and involved than when they do not, and under these circumstances children learn the skills and knowledge about the world in a way that is enjoyable and has a lasting impact."

Certainly there are activities that even very young children engage in that are close-ended; matching colors, completing inset puzzles, sorting and classifying animals by habitat, etc. However a great deal of time is spent in open-ended activities where there is no one right answer, where children are given a variety of materials with which they can; explore, experiment, create, and build. Classrooms become laboratories for children and teachers alike. Educators gain valuable insight by spending the time to build relationships with each student and by observing; the choices children make and don't make, how they approach a given task, how they experiment with materials, the level of thinking demonstrated as they work, the level of planning and creativity in their work, the quality of interaction with peers, the language expressed as they share, negotiate, invent, and problem solve, etc. As children engage in activities without predetermined outcomes, teachers use their knowledge of children and observations to pose questions that challenge them to go the next level in their learning. . Classrooms abound with; What else could you try? Can you show me or tell me how you did that? What if you did this...? What would happen if?

In our very competitive and a fast-paced culture we are often eager to focus on the destination, grades and test scores, when the real value of learning is embedded in what happens during the journey. A better balance between rote memorization and experiential learning, between the product and the process, can

get us all to a better place. The 'why' and 'how' in learning matters as much as the 'what', so it makes sense to embrace strategies that will enable children to become comfortable; exploring, experimenting, trusting and sharing their own ideas and perspectives, engineering and re-engineering projects, asking good questions, engaging in critical thinking, analyzing and pruning what works and what doesn't so there can be room for 'new growth', and organizing and connecting new information. If we start with our own and ignite each child's sense of wonder, at school and at home, and prioritize the time and space to revel in the journey, we may all arrive at a wisdom filled destination.