



Volume II, No 7

OPEN FORUM

A READER SPEAKS

I have been following the Parenting for Excellence series with great interest. It has opened up gigantic areas of interest for me and my 4 1/2 month old daughter, Linda Marie. I'd like to say thank you and offer a suggestion your readers might like to try.

My mother gave me a birthday present of bird song records, and I have been playing them daily for my baby. They provide a nice background music, almost like a walk in the woods. Recently a crow started cawing in the tree outside our apartment. I was so pleased to see her reaction. Though she can't talk yet, I know she's already identified that sound as one she knows. When I saw that she had heard it, I simply repeated, "I hear the common crow." The announcer on the records has a good clear voice; he's helping her to learn to speak too.

Recently, she entered the shrieking stage, and to avoid finding it a monumental burden, I tried to think of something I could teach her that would tie in with her voice exercises. Since I enjoy singing, but specific songs are too hard for her to learn yet, I began singing the scale to her, just voicing it, not using words like "do re me." She's now trying to copy me when she shrieks, and it's an exercise she has a shooting chance of accomplishing.

Thank you again. Your series has been a real help, and I hope these ideas can be of aid to someone else.

Sincerely, Marilyn Klimcho Schwenksville, PA

During the past year, parents such as Marilyn have written to us at *Parenting for Excellence*, sharing experiences and asking for counsel. So many valuable questions have been asked that it is impassible to print them all. This "Open Forum" issue shares highlights of our correspondence with parents. Comments have been combined and paraphrased for convenience in responding within this limited space.

WHAT SPECIFIC TECHNIQUES MAY I USE IN TEACHING MY SON TO WRITE?

Children become ready for writing as they develop eye/hand coordination, and you can help your son develop coordination by providing opportunities for him to:

– practice activities which promote moving his "preferred" hand in a circular motion (such as when dusting and scrubbing tables)

- practice picking up tiny objects with his fingers or tweezers, stringing beads, even embroidering a line design such as an X

- swish lines, crosses, X's, and circles with a large paint brush

- scribble or draw with crayons on paper resting on a tray—the tray will protect your furniture when the scribbles go off the paper. (If he starts drawing on the walls, just teasingly say, "Walls are not for writing on—you want to write—I'll get some paper for you." Immediately supply paper if you find he's writing on anything unacceptable.

You may also:

- write your son's name, his spoken words (any words of interest) in your son's own book - so he'll want to read and write them

- "dot out" letters (J O E) and then words so your son can trace over them

- use workbooks on learning to write (may be purchased at large drug stores)

- try the following two activities described in PFE's "To Mother is to Teach," Vol. I, No. 4: "Print on a Palm," and "Writing in Corn Meal."

IS IT TOO LATE TO START USING THE SUGGESTIONS IN PFE TO TEACH MY THREE AND ONE-YEAR-OLDS?

No, it is not too late to start. Enriching experiences improve the quality of your child's life no matter what his age. Your son has had three and one-half years to develop his attitudes, though, and you are wise not to push him as you try new things. When a child does not want to learn something, it is usually a signal to try another approach. You may find that your son best enjoys reading exciting, big words in the "real world." Many children can spot the word STOP on a traffic sign, or read a logo sign such as TEXACO. A SALE sign in a store window or a neon sign for SEARS may also be familiar and easy to remember. Many

cans also have boldly printed labels which may be peeled off the cans to make a "word collage." (The following Parenting for Excellence articles offer- further suggestions: "Teaching Reading to Your Child Over Three," Vol. I, No. 10; "Flash Word Cards," Vol. I, No. 1; "Reading in Stages," Vol. I, No. 3.

COULD I GET SOME KIND OF LIST OF WHAT I SHOULD BE TEACHING MY CHILD?

The following resources will give you a simple overview of the kinds of things children do and learn about in the first years of life.

Do be sure, though, not to take seriously the ages used in these materials. Two- and three-year-olds who are joyfully taught from birth often do much of what the checklist cites as normal for four- to six-year-olds. And preschoolers who are taught happily and regularly at home can master a lot of the simple curriculum for the first few grades of school.

- The FERGUSON-FLORISSANT SCHOOLS EARLY EDUCATION PROGRAM (655 January Avenue, Ferguson, Missouri 63135) sells checklists developed for use with children from birth through age five. These inexpensive checklists deal with such areas of development as language, math, motor and social development, and can be purchased with supplementary materials on how to stimulate development in those areas.

- World Book - Childcraft International, Inc. (Merchandise Mart Plaza, Chicago, Illinois 60654) also publishes an outline of a "Typical Course of Study, Kindergarten through Grade 12." The booklet lists in simple language the things children learn about in their first twelve years of school. There are dozens of topics listed for each grade level.

You can use these to create your own learning activities. Imagine generating activities from topics such as "the meaning of holidays," or "observing animals." For instance, you can use books, the back yard, a zoo or a farm.

(continued on page 4)

Basic

Principles

THE RELATION BETWEEN *RELEVANCE* AND DEVELOPMENT

“One of the most widely stated educational truths, agreed upon by educators and psychologists alike, is that the key to providing successful learning experiences lies in providing an optimal match between the child’s skill level and the material presented.” from *The Gifted and the Talented: Their Education and Development*, AH. Passow (Ed.)

Designers of Simon Fraser University in Canada built the buildings, but didn’t, at first, put in any sidewalks connecting them. Students could go from one building to another in any way they chose. But then, one wonders, with so many students taking their own individual routes, did all the grass get worn down so that soon there was none? No. Instead, over several months a pattern of well-worn paths became evident. Then workmen made those paths permanent with a hard surface, and the university’s network of walkways was designed.

You guess that the students chose the shortest distance between two points if or their route from each building to the next; and that’s largely true. Yet there’s another factor involved. Once several people have made one route between buildings visible, there’s a tendency for others to follow that al-ready created path—thus making it still more pronounced, still easier to follow. This human tendency is somewhat analogous to the way our brains work.

As a child begins to understand a word, say, or a concept, electric currents pass through a certain part of the child’s cortex. Then each time that word or concept is thought, or passes through the child’s brain, the electric current tends to follow that same path, making the path more pronounced, so that later currents related to the word find it even easier to follow the same, now well-worn, route.

In other words, it is physically true that a child learns most easily anything already partly known—with an already established pathway in the brain.

Most effective teaching parents know this principle intuitively. They constantly relate what’s-next-to-be-learned to what the child knows.

“What’s archaeology? Well, do you remember when you and Susan were digging in the back yard and found some nuts? Those nuts were a clue to you. They told you that probably a squirrel had stored some food for the winter. You were being an archaeologist right then. You were finding things in the earth that were clues, and from those clues you were figuring out some things that had happened right here in our yard. Only, do you know what? Archaeologists sometimes get clues about what happened a very long time ago. They were the ones who found out about the dinosaurs?”

So the new words “archaeology” and “archaeologist” travel over the well-worn pathway for “digging in the back yard,” and also get connected to the familiar routes called “clues” and “dinosaurs,” which are now a bit more firmly etched in your child’s brain. To have told your three-year-old something like, “Archaeology? Oh, that’s the study of old things,” or, “Oh, that’s something you’ll study in college,” would have sent a lot fewer electrical currents through your child’s brain, and would have left “archaeology” very lightly attached to that brain, if attached at all.

Of course really effective teaching parents would use those connections to make more. They might:

- have children make footprints in the mud and ask what archaeologists would know if they found those prints;

- make handprints and leaf-prints in dough, then bake them hard and talk about fossils and how they get preserved;
- have chicken for dinner and clean some of the bones if or young archaeologists to find in the sandpile;
- when reading about dinosaurs next time, role play the archaeologists who first discovered their bones; wonder how they felt, what they did;
- look up the names of some famous archaeologists, find pictures, celebrate their birthdays, paraphrase their biographies.

The connections branching out from the “digging-in-the-back-yard” part of your child’s brain would be thick and complex by then, touching at least hundreds of other pathways in that brain.

And that brings us to another part of our relevance principle. As J. McVickar Hunt puts it in Intelligence and Experience:

... the more new things a child has seen and the more he has heard, the more things he is interested in seeing and in hearing. Moreover, the more variation in reality with which he has coped, the greater is his capacity for coping.

Or, it’s a lot easier to explain archaeology to a child who has done some backyard digging than to one who hasn’t. And that’s the other way parents can use the relevance principle. Not only can we relate the new to the familiar; we can make sure there’s plenty of the familiar to relate new things to.

Pushing children to learn something that has no relevance to their experience is pretty poor teaching. Spending hours every day not teaching children anything (because they’re, “not ready,”) is an abuse of our privilege as parents and of our children’s potential. Filling hours each day with new things for our children to see and hear, and more hours each day with experiences that lead them to cope with, “variations in reality,” is very good teaching and a big part of excellence in parenting and the way to create readiness instead of waiting for it.

Oh, there’s another part to that relevance principle, though. You can get too relevant. As D.O. Hebb says of children in The Organization of Behavior, “interest is likely to be preoccupied by whatever is new in the combination of familiar events.”

Perhaps you’ve read about some of the many experiments done with babies in the last few years—experiments showing that tiny babies can see; prefer pat-terns to plain surfaces; prefer patterns resembling human faces to other patterns; can suck at varying rates to show themselves moving pictures; can learn to turn their heads in various ways to show themselves other pictures; etc.

Perhaps you’ve, also noticed one assumption the experimenters make: when babies look away from something, or stop performing to get it, that means they have learned that item already; it’s too familiar and has nothing new to hold their interest. Children seek the kind of stress that consists of something new in a familiar context. So if your three-year-old shows interest in your explanation of archaeology and you want to enrich that pathway in the brain, when you bring up the subject again associate it with something new.

There’s more, of course. For example, something too new can either be frightening or go completely unnoticed. Balance is the secret—just enough familiarity, just enough newness, just relevant enough.

J.C.

TO MOTHER — OF FATHER — IS TO TEACH

by Joanna Carnahan

LEARNING TO JUMP ROPE — A MODEL FOR LEARNING ANYTHING

Washington D.C., 1981 — Most of the other girls in school jumped rope a lot during recess, but Annie hadn't learned how yet. So Jane was in the back yard trying to teach her.

Annie was six. She read well, wrote neatly, played the piano a bit, used her hands well, and had a charming manner with a subtle sense of humor. She was the oldest child, and Jane had spent a lot of time with her teaching painting and sewing and lots of crafts; but she'd largely left the more active physical exercise to chance. Didn't children get plenty of that naturally when they played?

Jane assumed she had, growing up with big yards, near her grandparents' farm, and without much television. Annie, though, had been a baby and toddler in a town-house with a gate at the top of the stairs, a play pen downstairs, and a tiny yard outside. Jane hadn't had the television on that much, but it had been a part of nearly every day.

Then came kindergarten, and Annie's class had taken a simple screening test. The teacher showed Jane how well Annie had done on the verbal and math and fine—motor skills, and how much catching up she had to do on large—muscle skills.

Once Jane knew what to do, she set about helping Annie learn to hop and skip and skate and swim, do somersaults and ride a bike, and, now, jump rope.

It wasn't going too well, though, and Annie was getting frustrated. Only visions of jumping rope with the other girls at recess kept her doggedly at it.

About then Nan Powell came over. She'd taught second grade before having children, and she'd given Jane several good ideas about teaching Annie. Since Jane had genuinely appreciated her

suggestions in the past, Nan felt free to offer help now.

“Hi! Seeing you work on jumping rope reminded me of a good method I learned when I was teaching. Will you let me show it to you?” Jane felt relieved. Annie was dubious, but willing to try.

Nan took one end of the rope, Jane the other. They held the rope slack to the side, and Nan asked Annie to jump, any way she liked, at her own pace, her own rhythm. Nan and Jane watched.

Jumping without a rope had gotten pretty easy for Annie, and she enjoyed doing something she felt competent doing. After a few erratic hops, she began to jump in a fairly steady rhythm. Then Nan indicated to Jane that they start swinging the rope back and forth exactly in time to Annie's rhythm.

They swung it gently from side to side first. Then, as Annie gained confidence, they turned it in big circles over and under her, still turning to the rhythm Annie had set. Next a little practice, and that was it; she could jump rope now—and she knew it!

They'd started with what Annie could already do, in her own way, at her own pace, then added one element—not a different rhythm, just the rope swinging under her feet—until that was assimilated. Then they'd added one more element—the rope going all the way around her. Once she got comfortable with that, one more element could be added—a different rhythm perhaps.

Rope over, rope under, new rhythm, three new things to learn at once—that's work. Starting with what you know and learning one new thing at a time—that's child's play, no matter what you're learning! □

(continued from page 2)

“BE QUIET,” “DON’T TOUCH THAT,” AND “LET’S WATCH TV,” ARE SOME COMMON PHRASES WITH A FEW ADULTS IN MY DAUGHTER’S LIFE. WHAT CAN I DO TO HELP THESE ADULTS COMMUNICATE WITH MY CHILD IN A MORE POSITIVE MANNER?

We tend to treat children as we were treated when we were young, and there are no easy answers to changing these behaviors. Such changes are usually gradual and with conscious effort. You may find that these adults would be more thoughtful in their communication if they felt that they had something valuable which they could share with your daughter. Everyone has something special within himself that is worth sharing. You could help these

adults become aware of their talents and the benefit of your daughter’s learning from them. One person might find that your daughter’s pretty charming when she’s handing him needed tools for a car repair. Someone else might find that baking cookies can be lots of fun with an “apprentice chef.” You can also help your daughter by talking to her about consideration for people’s differing values. (“People don’t always agree about how things should be done. Your Aunt Grace likes for the house to be very quiet when she’s reading — and you could help her by playing with your cars in another room.”) Helping your daughter learn how to minimize conflicts with others will be a skill she’ll use throughout life — and your daughter may be more open to learning these things than some of the alder people in her life! □

- 4 -

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