

# How Children Learn



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## **From the Editors**

If a tree falls in the woods, and a three year old is there to watch it, what happens? Should an engaged parent have a pre-prepared lesson on hand on Newtonian physics or Platonic metaphysics? Does the Parent of Today best help their child by describing the scene in French, Spanish, or Mandarin? And what about how this relates to Adam Smith and the invisible hand of the market place? Here at the CCC, we have come to the conclusion that the best thing to do in such a case is to jump out of the way because trees are falling all around you!

All parents are challenged to provide the best for their children, and recent trends have raised the ante of what we parents should be doing. And yet, there is a growing body of evidence that shows that we may be doing too much. Are you seeing the benefit of all those Baby Mozart tapes, pre-school art history classes, and Tennis for Toddlers lessons? As a new father I feel pressured to keep up with my wife, who just found a nursing bra that had elemental graphics printed on the inside face to help junior with his aim. I wish I were joking.

Without a doubt, there have been great individual gains achieved by well intentioned parents, but at the same time it is worth asking if perhaps the modernists got it right when they advocated Less is More. In this issue, we ask the question How Children Learn, and how to best apply this to the raising of our children. We are thrilled to have several CCC teachers share their insights gained from the field and their own coursework.

On a different note, we at the CJ would like to take a moment to bid a personal farewell to retiring board members Mary, Nancy, and Pam who have given and achieved so much in the pursuit of excellence in early childhood education. Their presence and companionship on the board will be greatly missed. Upon taking the reins of the board, Pam joked about the backgrounds of the board chairs that preceded her, and the travails that assailed them: we survived an eviction when we had a lawyer, we built a building when we had an architect, but what will befall us when we have a scientist? The answer has clearly been the need to cry 'Eureka!' at all the wonder

and excitement that exists at the CCC. What began as an 'experiment' 30 years ago by a pair of Concord parents has become a benchmark standard for early education. Thank you Pam for all that you have done.

Jonathan Campbell on behalf of Meighan Matthews, co-editor, and Editorial Committee members, Pat Nelson, Leslie Koplou, and Graphic Designer Gretchen Hollworth.

## **A Message from the Director**

Pat Nelson, Executive Director

In the past decade there has been an explosion of information on how young children learn best. Even the language we use to describe a child's first school experience has changed - from nursery school, pre-school, or child-care to Early Childhood Education. This change is the result of the wealth of research demonstrating how important early learning experiences are and their impact on a child's development.

Unfortunately there has been an unintended consequence for parents of young children, many of whom may be experiencing a growing sense of anxiety and concern about children and achievement. An emphasis on academics for pre-schoolers and the baby video market puts the focus on a very narrow definition of education, neglecting the all important role of the social and emotional development of the child. An example of this misplaced emphasis can be found in the emerging market for pre-school tutoring, "the next big wave for the \$1.2 billion private tutoring business".

Dr. James Coder of Yale University School of Medicine's Child Study Center puts the dilemma like this: "To function adequately across the lifespan, children ... need formative experiences that aid their growth and development along the physical, social-interactive, social-emotional, moral-ethical, linguistic, and cognitive pathways. Indeed academic learning is not an isolated capacity but an aspect of develop-

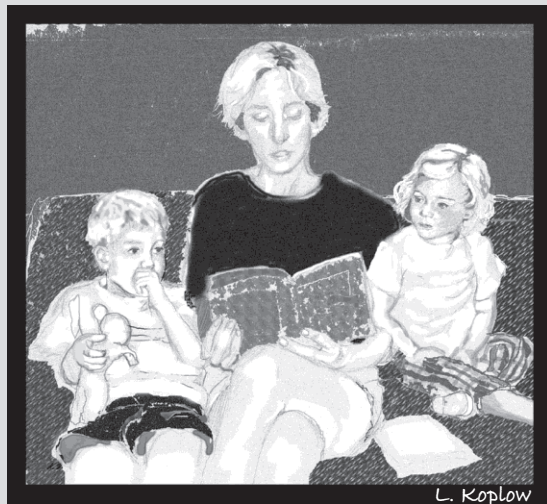
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ment. The two are inextricably linked and mutually facilitative." An early education emphasis on developmentally appropriate practice is critical to assuring that young children and babies are being given the appropriate experiences that will lead them to become successful learners throughout their education.

Concord Children's Center is very clear about how we view learning and young children. Our educational philosophy speaks to how we implement education in our classrooms. The articles that appear in this issue of the Children's Journal give you an opportunity to hear directly from our teachers about their role in providing a quality educational experience that embraces the all aspects of developing children.

### Concord Children's Center's Educational Philosophy:

Dedicated to providing families with the finest early childhood education and care Concord Children's Center integrates skill building into the purposeful play of children. Our programs use a child centered approach that seeks to help each child reach challenging and achievable goals, vital to ongoing learning and development. The foundations for children's confidence in themselves, curiosity about learning, and the formation of meaningful, social relationships are fostered in all aspects of a child's day. Low child-to-teacher ratios, well trained tenured teachers, and supportive learning environments result in a program that can be tailored to individual learning styles and addresses each child at their own developmental stage. We use play based curricula to foster a deep understanding of concepts while engaging children in the process of lifelong learning.



## **A Message from the Board of Directors**

*Dear families and friends,*

As I conclude my tenure as Board Chair of Concord Children's Center, I am so grateful for having been given the opportunity to be an active member of this remarkable community. The superb learning environment coupled with the true collaboration between teachers and families make CCC a truly exceptional program. The friendships and the love of learning found at CCC will be with my children and my family throughout our lives.

The CCC Board of Directors wants to thank those members who are also finishing their terms: Nancy Messina, for her masterful orchestration of CCC events the past two years as Fundraising Chair, and for her thoughtful insight at meetings and as Board Secretary; and Mary Heinsohn-Roe, who has been on the Board since 1999, for her active participation on the Long Range Planning Committee, fundraising events, and especially as the staff representative on the Director Search Committee.

We also want to thank Julie Sinclair and Kate Hall, the co-chairs of the 2006 "CCC Goes Hollywood" auction. The event was a great party and raised \$32,500. Over 90 parents and staff worked for weeks to create the special evening - complete with our own HOLLYWOOD sign on the back hill at 1300 Main Street. We are very grateful to all our families and friends who made donations and who contributed their time and talents to make the auction a resounding success.

With the conclusion of the CCC Capital Campaign, we will be reinstating our Annual Appeal. In order to support our excellent educational program, maintain our facilities, and provide competitive salaries and benefits to our teachers, we need to ask for your support. We hope that current families, alumni families, and friends will join us in supporting the CCC Annual Appeal. Our foremost goal is to preserve the thriving community for children, teachers, and families at CCC.

*Sincerely yours,*

*Pamela Gannon, Board Chair and 1300 Main Street parent*

## Social Problem Solving: How Children Learn To Do It On Their Own

Jennifer Summers, 1300 Main Street Teacher

It is a typical day in a typical preschool classroom. Children are playing quietly and happily when suddenly an argument erupts in the block area. Two children are arguing over one particularly unique block and a tug-of-war has ensued. The teacher intervenes, quietly asking the children “what is the problem?” They both want the block, and since they cannot both use it at the same time, the question becomes “how will they solve this problem?”

Social problem solving, or the process of solving problems as they occur in the real world, may be the most important social skill young children can learn (Frauenknecht and Black, 2004). Recent research has shown that social adeptness and academic learning in young children are much more closely tied than has been previously understood and that children are more likely to transition successfully to school if they can relate to peers in positive ways, manage their feelings, and identify emotions in themselves and others (Raver and Knitzer, 2002). Clearly there is reason to support children in their own quest to master social skills; the question is how.

Teaching children to problem solve is not an easy task. Luckily for us, children are naturally driven to learn and socialize through their curiosity and daily interactions with others. A child who has many peer and adult interactions will pick up techniques such as making eye contact, turn taking, and sharing. Also, in a quality preschool program these skills are fostered and encouraged and children learn by seeing and doing, or modeling and practicing, in a safe environment. Most children have the skills, tools, and abilities to successfully problem solve. Why, then, does it not happen every time? Of course, no one can be expected to behave in a textbook manner every time a problem arises, especially not a young child, but there are key factors that may determine whether a child uses social problem solving skills or reacts in a less desirable manner, such as with aggression. One of these main factors is the feeling of ownership of these skills, or the intrinsic value. If a task is most motivated by rewards, praise, or other extrinsic factors, a child’s interest may decrease even in a task that the child previously enjoyed. Participating becomes about earning the reward (Lepper, Greene, &

Nisbett, 1973). In order for a skill to be used consistently it must be intrinsically motivated.

According to Betsy Evans (2006), in order for a task or skill to become intrinsically motivated it must possess several qualities. First, it must be fun and challenging; secondly it must serve some interest or need; third, the child must have some control or choice over the situation and actions; and finally there must be a good chance for success. If all of these qualities are present then a child is likely to internalize the behaviors and use them on his or her own. Further, once internalized these skills are more likely to generalize across situations, so a child who has learned to problem solve in his classroom with peers may begin to exhibit these same skills on a playground away from school or at home with siblings.

Social problem solving, when motivated by personal need and interest, allows children to gain independence and express themselves. As adults, our role in these lessons is as moderator, intervening when necessary to help and coach the child. It must be up to the child, as much as possible, to develop solutions to arising problems. This allows for the sense of ownership and responsibility. Once these skills are internalized a child is better able to handle conflict in socially appropriate ways, assert themselves, and feel confident. In turn, children gain self-esteem and are better prepared for the transition to elementary school and academic learning.

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## The Block Corner and Educational Theory 101



Jen Conradt, 1300 Main Street teacher

In my opinion, the importance of play in the early childhood classroom could not be viewed as anything less than a critical and key component to the development of a young child. During my education, I remember hearing over and over that children learn best when they can discover on their own. As an early childhood educator, I have witnessed, on countless occasions, what my elders preached to me for so many years. I have observed children learning skills, from sharing a toy, to recognizing a letter of their name in a book. The various areas of the classroom help teachers appeal to the interests of children as well as help focus their attention to a specific concept or task.

The block area is a great place to explore many science and math concepts as well as help children learn to negotiate and share materials and space. As children build they use both their fine and gross muscles to handle the blocks and create. The child may then point out perceptions of size, shapes, weight, position, height, direction, speed, and dimension. When using specific materials they also can explore things like the use of ramps, shadows, and reflection.

The book area is a corner of the classroom where children can be exposed to literacy and familiarity with print. As children play they have the opportunity to look at print in books and around the room. Through play and exploration they begin to become familiar with the form of letters, the direction of print, and the concept that letters form words and words form sentences and so on. Along with these early reading skills, children also learn how to retell stories while hearing familiar stories read aloud. They begin identifying that the pictures tell a story and use the pictures as well as their imaginations to tell their own versions.

Although the concepts mentioned above are almost always learned in their corresponding play areas, they can be learned in other areas as well. It could be as simple as wrapping some blocks in paper and then providing the children with writing utensils to draw or write on the blocks. By doing this, children who may not regularly attend the art area have an opportunity to be exposed to skills that are learned there.

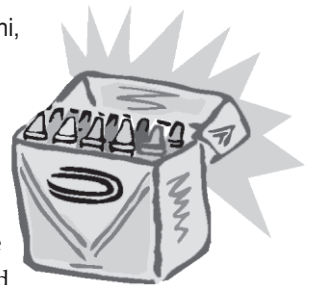
Most importantly while children play throughout the day, they are developing their social skills. This is happening in every area of the classroom. In order for children to be most successful and reach their potential in a more formalized setting, they need the fundamental social skills learned while in a group. For example, the ability to sit attentively within a group of peers, to problem solve using their words, to share, to negotiate, to forgive, to show compassion, to listen, and to compromise. One example of this is building individually or in a group in the block area, where children are developing language skills. They are discussing locations of the structure, locations of individual blocks, which blocks to use, when to knock the structure down, and many others throughout the process.

The social skills and cognitive skills that are built through play are developed in a way that creates a very solid foundation for future learning. By learning these skills early on in their education, it allows for the time and ability to learn more complex skills later on. Children have a natural drive to “learn” about the world around them. Exploration and play using a variety of materials completely supports and stimulates their curiosity.

## How Infants Learn

By Erika Gutermuth and Chelsea Barbini,  
Emerson Teachers

Concord Children's Center Emerson has the fortunate ability to offer care to infants, toddler's and two year olds. It is our privilege to witness the beginning stages of life for infants and experience with their parents the amazement of watching them learn.



Our two youngest classrooms at Emerson are our Infant room which hosts babies from 12 weeks to 10 months in September, and our Toddler One classroom which is meant for older infants aged 10 months to 16 months in September.

Infants are born ready to learn. They are curious about the world around them and love looking at faces. In the first week of life a newborn can recognize and respond to their mother's voice and other interesting sounds. Smiling and talking with an infant is their greatest source of comfort. An infant will learn to associate mom and caregivers with getting

nourishment and warmth, and will be soothed by their touch.

Babies are born with reflexes and respond greatly to touch. Reflexes help ensure survival and also provide an opportunity for an infant to interact with the world. By three weeks infants learn to turn their head and look for nourishment when their cheek is stroked. As infants grow from weeks to months they will be awake longer and become more curious about their surroundings. Babies who are quiet and alert will be attentive and responsive to those around them. Although babies may not seem active, they are aware and interested in daily life. Babies who are over stimulated (demonstrated by squirming body, flapping arms and kicking legs) are less able to focus on anyone or anything.

Feeding an infant, rocking them, talking to them, singing to them and changing their diapers are all events that help babies learn. Recognizing the sounds of a caregiver's voice, the sight of their face, the feel of their touch is essential. Attention given to these areas lays the foundation of a trusting, loving, safe connection for both the caregiver and baby.

Rattles, textured toys, musical toys and unbreakable mirrors are all good first toys. Contrasting color patterns (red, white and black) help with an infant's developing vision. As vision improves, baby will gain more control over their movements and will interact more with their environment. The five senses play a large role in how infants learn. Babies use their senses to figure out the world around them and explore their surroundings by putting everything in their mouths.

Learning is a social event. Going on outings such as shopping or visiting a farm are exciting for a baby. Infants love people watching and seeing animals. Learning about their everyday lives by experiencing life is vital to baby's learning. Infants watch their caregivers very closely. They learn how to respond or react to different events by watching them. For example, if the adult were enthusiastic about seeing baby pigs at the farm an infant most likely would be too. Infants also appreciate conversation at the supermarket such as "do you think we need pasta?" In another instance, if a newly walking infant falls, all the attention is focused on the adult and how they will handle the situation. If the adult makes a big deal about the child falling then the child will often cry. If the adult responds with an upbeat "you're okay" the child is less likely to get upset and continues to practice walking. Other children will learn from observing the scene as well as the child involved.

Babies develop at different rates and achieve milestones on their own accord. Alice Sterling Honig, Ph.D. offers some interesting facts about what happens as a baby's brain develops.



**4 months:** An infant's brain responds to every sound produced in all the languages in the world.

**8 to 9 months:** Infants form specific memories from their experiences, such as how to push a ball and make it roll.

**10 months:** Infants can now distinguish and maybe produce sounds of their own language (such as "da da") and no longer pay attention to sounds that are foreign.

**12 months:** Babies whose parents talk with great inflection "lookie at the doggie" will go to the appropriate picture of a dog in a picture book more often than babies talked to in normal, flatter voices.

**12 to 18 months:** Babies can keep in their memory something that has been hidden and find it again, even if it has been completely covered up. They can also hold memory sequences of simple activities such as winding a jack-in-the-box until it pops!

**24 months:** Preschool children now have clear pictures in their mind of people who are dear to them, and can get upset when separated from these people (even their peers).

Concord Children's Center Emerson is delighted to provide such loving care and stimulation for the youngest population of CCC. Each day the entire Emerson staff marvels at how connected the children are with their friends and caregivers, and are very happy to provide such a nice opportunity and atmosphere for learning.

## **Their eyes are watching. . . me.**

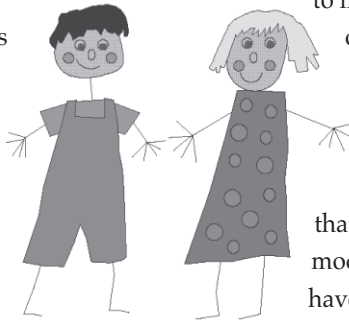
Cheryl Kirkpatrick, Emerson and Main Street Parent

Zora Neale Hurston's novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, is a story about self-discovery, choice and the decisions individuals make that determine their future. I read the book for the first time when I was in high school. At the time I was entirely sympathetic to Hurston's protagonist, Janie Crawford, a young girl who in the beginning scenes of the book is forced into an arranged marriage by her grandmother. Throughout the novel we watch Janie struggle to undo some of the choices that others have made for her and

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to determine what decisions will make her truly happy and complete.

I re-read the novel a few months back, this time from the perspective of a parent. Admittedly, I felt quite a bit more sympathetic to the grandmother in my understanding that as Janie's primary care-giver, an arranged marriage was the way she thought she could best care for Janie. Not surprisingly, since re-reading the book, I have found myself thinking a lot about the decisions that I make for my children and my hope that someday they will learn to make healthy choices and decisions on their own. How will they learn to make choices and decisions that will bring them happiness in the future? How I can best help them learn to make "healthy" choices? For the purpose of this issue of *The Children's Journal*, I thought I'd share one of my most recent, and perhaps most daunting thoughts on this subject. When it comes to helping my children learn to make "healthy" choices, one of the best things I can do is to model these choices myself, because in the case of my children, their eyes are watching me.



Children make decisions about how to act and behave, in large measure, by observing the behavior of others. As one of the main actors in the drama that unfolds for my children each day, my actions and behaviors are constantly in the spotlight. My children listen to the way I choose to speak, do things and interact with other people. Each day, whether I am conscious of it or not, I am modeling hundreds of choices for my children.

A few days ago I made decision that was both unpopular and unfair. I told my girls that we would not be going to the playground until they made thank you notes for their Auntie Liz. There were sighs and grumbling, but the crayons eventually came out and there they sat making thank you notes while I went back to cleaning the kitchen. However, after digesting the injustice of the scene, Allie called into the kitchen, "Mommy, Auntie Liz gave you a birthday present last week and you haven't made her a thank you note either." Ouch. She was right. Like many kids, she never misses a trick. It was easy for me to make the decision for them that not another minute would pass before their thank you notes were completed. But how will my children ever learn to choose to make expressing their

appreciation a priority if they don't see me making the same decision?

I draw parallels between this scene and other little choices I may or may not make like hanging up my coat, brushing my teeth, limiting my consumption of sweets, eating all my vegetables, and exercising regularly, to name a few. Some of these choices are, admittedly, much easier for me to make than others. My children actually do most of these things pretty regularly, but it is not because they choose to do them, it is because I tell them to do them. I issue instructions that accomplish my short-term goals. But, the key to helping them learn to value these choices so that one day they'll make them on their own is modeling these behaviors and showing them that I have made these choices myself. A few nights ago, after hounding Allie and Audrey to return to the bathroom to brush their teeth (once again, while I was picking up), I decided to put down the clothes I was folding and join them. Not only did I get the benefit of an extra brushing, but they brushed with more vigor and concentration in an effort to mimic me. Now, I don't expect them to voluntarily take up their tooth brushes each night as a result of me brushing my teeth in their presence. But when the time comes that I am not there to tell them to brush, and they have to decide what to do on their own, I am confident that one of the things they'll consider is my example.

Beyond these simple choices, I also think about larger values and inclinations that I hope my children will have someday. I hope they will choose to develop a love of reading. I hope they will choose to respect and honor individual differences. I hope they will choose to care for the environment and be active citizens who take responsibility for the well-being of others. Modeling these choices can be challenging for many reasons. Opportunities to model them may not come as regularly as brushing our teeth. We may, in fact, have to create opportunities to model these choices, and this may place additional demands on our already limited time. But, if my husband and I want our kids to learn to love reading, they need to see us enjoying books. If we want our kids to value difference, we need to introduce them to other cultures. If we want them to care for the environment and be active citizens, we



need to plant, recycle, vote, volunteer and include them in these activities.

And after all the great modeling that we do, we also have to be able to reconcile the fact that, in the end, our children may not make the decisions we hoped they would. In the end, the decisions our children make will in large measure reside in them. That is one of the scary and wonderful realities of parenting. But, every choice that they make will be based on experiences that they have had previously. And, every interaction they have with others contributes to their developing sense of how to behave and what choices to prioritize. That is why I am going to bite my tongue the next time someone cuts me off, plan an outing for Earth Day, break a sweat at least three times this week, and bring my kids to the post office to mail the thank you notes we have all finally finished.

### **What does play look like at age 5?**

by Cory Salo, Main Street Teacher

Walking into a classroom of 5-year-olds isn't like it used to be when I was growing up. I remember the supportive words of my mother as she helped me into my day, "Enjoy your day and play nice." I remember the block area and painting with green and blue hands. I remember making pretend gourmet meals for my fellow peers. I still have the sense of being five and enjoying school as if it were an extension of being home with my brothers. I had no sense of stress or anxiety or conflict, I didn't even know what those foreign words meant.



Now, as I teach in a class of five year olds, the classroom looks, sounds and feels so very different. The common thread that links my memories and those experiences of children today is the essential element to any learning environment: play. The children arrive each day expecting play time with their peers. They know coming to school that they will have opportunities to try out new projects on their own or with a teacher. They have an understanding of how play works with peers.

Now, as a five year old, they are experiencing play as more than toys and scenarios. Play has become more complicated. They are experiencing (healthy) conflict during play.

New expectations are being asked of them. There are more social elements and skills to remember. Play is a safe and familiar place for children to practice, recognize and understand who they are, how they feel and what they think.



The five's classroom uses play as its learning catalyst. Everything can be incorporated and adapted to fit into the realm of play. Beyond materials, play incorporates the essential social skills that children will need to be successful throughout their years of interactions. Simple concepts of listening, cooperating, recognizing differences, using vocabulary, simple math skills, kinesthetic work, problem solving, sharing of ideas, and brainstorming are just some of the numerous parts of play. Children don't realize the amount of work they are putting into their play on a daily basis. I believe it to be so vital as an educator to point out to children the incredible work and creativity



they put in on a daily basis. Not only are the children's individual talents developing, they are discovering how they learn. I cannot stress enough how great the laughter sounds and the smiles look as a five year old is playing: learning.



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