



Concord Children's Center
1300 Main Street
Concord, MA 10742

Concord Childrens Center Childrens Journal

Winter 2009

Back to Basics

From the Editor

It is the childlike mind that finds the kingdom.

- Charles Fillmore

It's quite an interesting time to have children. We're smack in the middle of a "back to basics" movement, which applies to everything from spending more mindfully to using cloth diapers to teaching our offspring how to grow vegetables from seed. At the same time, there's currently a prototype out for a "Twoddler," which is basically a tricked-out Fisher Price Activity Center that— I kid you not — allows your two-year-old to post to Twitter.

Since my hubby and I ate dinner every night while our first baby (now 6 ½) was plopped in front of Baby Einstein, becoming the first-ever infant genius, I'm the last person who's fit to preach about the benefits of simplicity. Better to let this issue's contributors do just that. This issue of the *Journal* features a variety of articles that will make you think — about the importance of child-adult relationships, children's social development, learning from nature, storytelling, and gift-giving.

The "back to basics" philosophy includes returning in to the simplicity of an earlier era. However, fully embracing this mindset means turning our backs on some of the positive things our children enjoy — enrichment activities, technology, and more. It can be tough to keep that balance in check, especially during the holidays when I'll admit I can get caught up in trying to show my love for my boys with "stuff."

Thank goodness my sons are there to keep me on track. Even though they occasionally beg for everything in the store, the other 99% of the time what they want is together time — for reading stories, playing Monopoly, making card houses (and

watching *Phineas & Ferb*. Happy holidays, and happy reading.

Lisa Liberty Becker, Main Street Parent, Children's Journal Editor, Board Member

Fundamentals of Community

HEWON HWANG, RIPLEY PARENT, BOARD CHAIR

Before I had kids, the words "education" and "back to basics" used to immediately bring thoughts of reading, writing, and arithmetic. After all, how far can you go in your academic endeavors and in life until you solidify these basic skills? While it is true that these are the fundamental skills necessary to build other academic endeavors on, now that I have kids, I realize that the basic education really starts in preschool. This is where our kids are learning the basic social skills that are fundamental to being happy, well adjusted, life-long learners.

In my years of working outside the home, before I became a professional mom, I realized how important good social and communication skills are in professional success. More importantly, I believe good social skills are keys to happiness in life. Of course we all want our children to be very successful in life but when we get right down to the basics, what we really wish for them with all our hearts is for them to be happy.

Robert Fulghum's poem "Everything I need to know I learned in Kindergarten" ought to credit preschool. This poem cites the simple truth about the basics that are learned at younger ages. Share everything, Play Fair... Put things back where you found them. These basics and more are expertly taught at CCC.

I am glad that my daughter is making friends and learning to be a good friend at CCC. With the support of wonderful teachers, she is learning to

stand up for herself and ask for what she needs instead of breaking out into a tantrum. She is learning to work out issues with other kids and learning how to solve basic problems like how to join a group that is already playing, how to share, etc. All of these successful experiences will set her on a good path towards having more successes in the future.

My older daughter is in 2nd grade this year. The toughest problems she solves at school are often the social issues. As we all know, there isn't always enough time to focus on social issues at elementary school as academics has come into full swing. I am very glad that she has positive reserves from years of CCC preschool to draw upon to help her along the way.

To quote Ripley Program Director Penni Hensley-Wagner, "Every moment is a teachable moment". The support that is there for our preschoolers to learn at their pace when they are ready is critical to their success. This would not be possible without low student/teacher ratios and experienced, caring, and knowledgeable professional teachers. As the holiday season approaches I am extra grateful to our teachers. CCC could not be what it is today for our preschoolers without the extra funds we raise beyond tuition.

With the end of the year approaching, our annual appeal is underway, providing an opportunity to donate before the end of the calendar year. As you go through your favorite nonprofits, please remember to include the Children's Center. I hope you find time this busy season to relax and connect with families and friends. Happy Holidays!

Winter Poem

by Emma Drisko, Ripley alum and 2nd grader

Wind gusts through trees in a snow storm breeze
Ice is hanging from every house and tree
Ice is even hanging from me
Nine hundreds thousands and more
tons and tons of white galore
Trees are covered by ice
Gleaming and glittering, they look twice as nice
Everything covered by white galore
Everything except for my front door
Rolling and tumbling in all that white
Everyone turns to see a wondrous sight

Three perfect angels buried in snow
All covered in white they seem to glow



The Most Important Basic

PAT NELSON, M.ED., EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, CCC

I couldn't be happier with the subject of this *Children's Journal*. I have written often, for this journal

and elsewhere, that there are basic fundamentals of education that should not be lost as we strive for better test scores or brainer babies. Without a doubt, the most important basic ingredient for successfully teaching young children is the relationship they have with the adults in their lives and the environment in which they are learning.

Our natural playscape project at Ripley that Melissa Gorgenyi writes about in this issue, and Heather Radenberg's piece about storytelling, embody this "basic" fundamental element. Melissa captures the feel of a child being in relationship with nature and Heather describes how the child's relationship with the storyteller contributes to the experience of learning. The relationship between the child and his or her learning delivery system is fundamental to the learning experience.

Spending time in the infant room or observing our Afterschool group at work on a project, it is hard to miss the importance of the relationship between Erica and the infants or Jess and the second graders. The highest compliment that can be paid to any of our teachers is when a parent thanks them for really knowing their child. Research has demonstrated the importance of this relationship time and again. A great example of the importance of relationship to learning can be found in the rise and fall of the "baby videos" and other media-driven learning tools for young children. The makers of the Baby Einstein videos are now refunding customers for the cost of the videos bought between June 5, 2004, and Sept. 5, 2009 when these videos were marketed as a learning tool for babies. It turns out that there was a serious

missing ingredient in the learning delivery system – human interaction. For babies, the relationship with a human is the key ingredient for learning.

Here at Concord Children’s Center, we place a high value on the role that relationships play in your children’s growth and development. We value equally our relationships with our families. Having teachers at the Center who are themselves parents serves to strengthen those relationships. When families know that their child’s teachers will be here throughout their experience at CCC and in fact that their siblings may all share the same teachers also strengthens the relationship. These aspects of education are separate and distinct from curriculum, or assessment, or the latest teaching tool. I want to be clear that all of these learning tools are important; however, for young children the most important tool is our teachers and the relationships that they have with you and your children.

The Children’s Center and the Annual Appeal Included in this Journal is a Year End Annual Appeal request letter. Fundraising for private schools and private nonprofit early care programs is an inevitable part of life and can make the difference between a program that is very good and one that is terrific. We believe that we offer a terrific program to our children and families and have been doing so for almost thirty-five years. We have also been fundraising for that long. Delivering such a high-quality program takes resources and cannot be covered through tuition alone. Hiring and retaining the best teachers, providing ongoing professional development, and assuring a safe and well-equipped program requires additional fundraising. We spend over 85% of all revenue on direct program delivery, making every donation truly meaningful.

In December we invite our current and alumni families, along with our longtime community supporters, to consider a year-end donation to the Center. We are looking for 100% participation, and that participation can come in the form of large and small gifts. The success of our Annual Appeal is a strong testimony to the success of our Concord Children’s Center community and its

enduring impact on the families and children who have benefited over the years. Our goal for our 2009-10 Annual Appeal is \$20,000.

Storytelling: Harry in the House

HEATHER RADENBERG, MAIN STREET TEACHER

“More Harry today?” Phoebe asks as I set up a project in the Heart room, “After lunch,” I tell her with a wink.

The Harry she refers to? Harry Potter of course. So continues a tradition that started many years ago at CCC, telling Harry Potter stories. Why Harry Potter? It all began eight years ago when I first started teaching at CCC; a group of my afterschool students were terrorizing the three-year-olds on the back playground with tales about the second HP movie, emphasizing the scariest parts, I came over and said, “well actually, what happens is this..” and I started to tell them the story. They listened wide-eyed until it was time to go in, and I thought this was the end of it. The next day these same children came running up to me saying, “Can you tell us that Harry story again?” and so it was.

Almost every day since, I have been telling these stories and others to various groups of children, and I am always amazed at how riveted they are. No matter how busy and chaotic things get, a good story always seems to calm things down, bring kids together and bring order to the world, even if it’s only for a few precious minutes. No bells, no whistles, no CGI or pyrotechnics, just simple old-fashioned storytelling. What’s the attraction? Some people say it’s the way I tell the stories, and perhaps there’s some truth to that; I sit on the floor with them and the environment is very cozy. Even with a large group of children there is a real sense of intimacy, which adds to the effect. However, a great story can captivate children no matter who is telling it if it’s told honestly, if it’s something dear to the storyteller.

For centuries storytellers imparted history, knowledge and morals through their art, until somewhere along the line, a different art of the more technological kind seemed to take over. Suddenly the cumbersome task of telling a story was replaced with a more convenient alternative. I too,

when my children were very young, went on a desperate quest to keep my children entertained. I found a toy that seemed perfect; it had lights, it moved, it taught colors, numbers and letters, it played the music of Bach, Beethoven and Mozart and taught kids how to say hello in four different languages, but still, they clamored for my attention. What was missing?! I was. It was the interaction that was missing. They are older now, and storytelling has become a part of our daily routine.

I use stories not only to entertain, distract or contain, but also to teach. I ask the kids questions about what's going on in the story, and I let them ask me questions. It's amazing how many "teachable moments" can come up – how many great, insightful observations and "aha" moments.

For me, the subject matter isn't as important as sharing the moment. Many CCC alums still remember stories about a little mouse named Cooper (my college pet), my dog Lucky, and the "gremlins" that wreak havoc in the Heart Room late at night, and why? Not because these are incredibly interesting stories of epic proportions, but because they came from me, because they got to share them with me and felt connected to me through them. What a treasure to be able to keep your children engaged and have the opportunity to bond with them. All you need is a good story, no batteries required.

Nature Adventures

MITZI JOHNSON, EMERSON AND MAIN STREET PARENT

If you're anything like me, you've woken up on many a morning (earlier than you wish) and wondered, "What am I going to do with my kids today?" There's only so much time you can spend at the playground without losing your mind. And these days heading to an indoor playplace or museum is like diving into a Petri dish.

Lately we've been taking walks. We can take walks around our neighborhood, but I like to bundle my children up, pile them into the car, and head to one of the myriad of conservation areas we have in Concord and beyond. Recently we

went to Estabrook Woods and did a loop – close to an hour with the little ones. There is a lot to see in fallen trees, leaves changing colors, creeks trying to make their way to their final destination. There is a lot to hear – birds, a tractor from a nearby farm, a plane overhead, animals rustling in the underbrush, that creek again. Even the smells keep you inspired. Maybe someone is burning brush down the road, the pine trees, even the wet leaves. There's plenty to touch too – moss, lichen, bark, rocks, mud, pine cones and needles.

When we pulled the bark off a fallen tree, it was a science lesson waiting to happen. Worms, bugs and other critters crawled around revealing a new layer of life in the woods to my almost 4-year-old. Meanwhile my 16-month-old spent most of the walk trying to launch himself out of the jogger stroller. When he was finally freed, he climbed up onto a small pile of logs and proudly looked at us. Ta da! He did a little dance to show his joy, grabbed some moss and promptly put it in his mouth. There really is something for everyone.

We sing "King of the Castle" when we climb on rocks and downed trees. We collect acorns, pine cones, pretty leaves and rocks. We play hide-and-seek around big trees and boulders. We run along paths, pretending to be foxes and rabbits having a race. Sometimes we get goofy, picking up big sticks and pretending they are, well, guns. But we shoot dirty diapers out of our guns whenever we see rotten avocados. Don't ask because I can't possibly begin to explain. I just know it provides oodles of entertainment for my husband and son.



My favorite conversation from this adventure was about the creek. "Where is it coming from?" asked Max. "I'm not sure," I replied. "But let's see if we can follow it and find out." We followed it as far as we could while it was near the path, spying it here and there and hearing it from time to time. We came upon a little pond which looked man-made and he called out, "From there! It's coming

from there!" We searched for an outlet – a dam, a pipe, any escape for the water- and saw nothing. Max then decided that it must not be coming from the pond and that we had to keep looking. Though we did not find the source, we've opened up a little door for every time we visit Estabrook Woods.

We only moved to Concord 5 months ago but we have always been big fans of heading out into the world for an adventure. We used to take advantage of what our more urban setting had to offer – the Arnold Arboretum, Blue Hills, even the woods behind Millenium Park off the VFW parkway in West Roxbury. Nature play, nature lessons, just plain nature, is everywhere if we look for it. It's simple, fun, and satisfying. You don't have to be a botanist, a scientist, an outdoorswoman or even a nature enthusiast to have a great little adventure in the great outdoors.

Natural Playscape at Ripley

MELISSA GORGENYI, PROJECT COORDINATOR AND RIPLEY TEACHER

Imagine for a moment that you are running on a gravel path, hearing and feeling the small rocks move beneath your feet. Suddenly the ground changes to large, round, stepping stones sunk into the ground, and you begin to leap from circle to circle. As you move, your hand brushes the bushes and you hear the sound of chimes jingling, and you smell fresh thyme growing along the edges of the ground. You smile as you crawl into a little hiding spot in the weeping willows. As you sit there, other children are passing by, not knowing you are there because they are too busy experiencing the nature around them. As you watch them, a butterfly lands in the flower box nearby and begins to drink from the brightly colored flowers. You are joyfully lost in that world, forgetting where you are.

This is the kind of experience we want to give children at the Concord Children's Center Ripley site and within the community – an experience where they can use their senses to explore the world around them. Last spring, we received a grant for \$6,000 from the Northwest Suburban Community Health Alliance (CHNA 15) to create a

master plan for a natural playscape to be built on the Ripley playground. This playscape will be accessible to all abilities and used by the three programs located at the Ripley building and the community.

Many studies have shown that playing in nature can reduce a child's stress level and help those with ADD and other behavioral issues. Playing in nature also stimulates all aspects of a child's development. Children are challenged every time they play because the environment can be used in many ways and is unpredictable.

A focus group is in place to design a master plan for the playscape. The group will also hold a conference next spring on the importance of children and nature play. The group consists of a representative from each of the early childhood programs located at the Ripley building (CASE and Integrated Preschool), the director of Special Education for CPS, the head of the preschool team, two Early Intervention therapists, a landscape architect, a landscaper, and a child psychologist. The group will meet several times throughout the school year.

This playscape is a community project. When it's time to build, we will be looking for many volunteers. In the meantime, if you have any resources that would be helpful to us, please let us know. Perhaps you are cutting down trees in your yard, have some large rocks you are getting rid of, are knowledgeable about plants and herbs, or work for a landscaper or nursery. We would love to know. Let's get children back into nature!

For more articles or information on natural playscapes, go to planetearthplayscapes.com.



Simple Holiday Gift Ideas

AMANDA HAENI, RIPLEY PARENT

In case you haven't noticed the not-so-subtle reminders in every retail store since just after Halloween, the holiday season is here. Every year it seems there is more pressure to spend excessive amounts of money and energy. In my mind, there's no better time to resist that temptation. Instead, take a step back, slow down, and enjoy the basic joys of the holiday season -- peace, love, and togetherness. This doesn't mean we have to refrain from giving or receiving gifts. Gift-giving can be a simple act of love and caring; it does not have to be a stressful competition that leads us to over-spend in search of the latest and greatest! There are plenty of opportunities to involve your children in selecting and creating gifts for others. Establishing simple gift-giving traditions in your child's life sets the tone for holidays now and in the future.

Here are some simple holiday gift ideas. Some are homemade, some are quick and easy; all are uncomplicated and relatively inexpensive.

Grandparents: most grandparents never tire of grandchildren-related gifts. Whether it's homemade or store-bought, if it's about their grandkids, it's sure to please.

- Shutterfly, Kodak, Apple iPhoto and other photo sites offer plenty of picture gift ideas

that are easy and inexpensive. Some of my favorites that have thrilled grandma and grandpa are a wall calendar, coffee mug, or mini-photo album.

- Have your child create a tree ornament using materials such as felt, ribbon, buttons, colored paper, candy canes, or popsicle sticks.
- Have your child make an old-fashioned pinecone bird feeder. All you need is a pinecone, peanut butter, birdseed, and ribbon.

Hosts/hostesses: Attending holiday parties this year? Here are some ideas for gifts.

- A bottle of wine and two wine glasses
- Beer/pint glasses monogrammed or engraved
- Wine glass charms
- A simple pair of candles tied up with a bow
- A batch of homemade cookies in a pretty basket. You could also include a jar full of your favorite cookie recipe(s), cookie cutters, or a cookie mix.

Kids: Get back to basics when considering gifts for neighbors, friends, nieces, nephews, and even your own children. Books, puzzles, music CDs, and coloring/activity books are sure to please.

Other friends and family: Here are some more ideas that could work for almost anyone.

- Wrap a banana bread or two with some tea bags or hot chocolate mixes and a couple of mugs for a gift of breakfast in bed.
- Make a personalized CD! Remember making mixed tapes in high school? Bring back the fun by burning CDs for friends or family. One year, I made CDs of some favorite Christmas songs and made a copy for five different family members. You can make your own cover with paper, scissors, and markers. If you want to take it a step further, consider a personalized label for the CD. Check out these web sites for some ideas: cdbyme.com or myownlabels.com.
- Travelers would appreciate a frameable custom map (hometown, favorite destination) from the U.S. Geological Survey – usgs.gov.
- Find a simple yet beautiful note card set – personalized stationery or thank-you cards.

Plenty of web sites, like etsy.com, have many options . . . or buy local!

- Everyone could use a “cold winter night kit.” Start with a basket and fill it with things like a candle, an assortment of hot cocoa packets or tea bags, and a homemade treat (with recipe card). Other items to include are a DVD (or rental gift certificate), a mug, or playing cards.

Hopefully these ideas will help you remain stress-free this holiday season. Enjoy getting back to basics and focus on the true meaning of the holidays with family and friends.



A Unique and Meaningful Gift

SUZIE KORNBUM, MAIN STREET PARENT AND BOARD MEMBER

As I thought about Christmas giving during the 2008 holiday season, the phrase “Dickensian” kept entering my head. Given our financial hardships last year, would my family be happy with the simple orange in the stocking, or just a long-distance phone call to express our love and well wishes? I certainly believed so, but at the same time felt there had to be another option. I had a problem – a limited budget and yet a desire to give family members a thoughtful gift.

We set a budget of \$20 per person for each grandparent, aunt and uncle. Certainly there are affordable items out there that appear to be good choices, but it seemed ludicrous to spend on a widget that someone didn’t need or wouldn’t use. A new set of salad tongs, for example, would simply go into the stove-side crock with

the others, to be pulled out a few times during the year.

Adding to my angst was the idea that these same family members with full houses didn’t want or need anything that would add to their household clutter. With a slew of articles and websites on how to reduce the clutter, I struggled to find the balance. In the end, I think we found a perfect way to give an inexpensive but meaningful gift that wouldn’t take up space in the closet.

During the holidays, my sons’ elementary school had a presentation from an organization called Heifer International. This organization is 65 years old and uses the phrase “giving families a hand-up, not just a hand-out.” They give the gift of livestock to help families around the world “improve their nutrition and generate income in sustainable ways.” Clearly, a worthwhile organization with lofty goals, following the “teach a man to fish” philosophy. We hear from many organizations soliciting our donations during the holidays; what makes Heifer different? How could it help me with the gift-giving dilemma?

When my son brought home a Heifer International catalog, something caught my eye. My father raises bees as a hobby. It was his lifelong dream, and in his later years he has been able to make it a reality on his property in rural Virginia. Through Heifer International, I could buy a beehive in his honor for a family in a third world country, which would help them not only pollinate their fields but also provide income through the sale of the honey. The cost was only \$30. Then I saw a flock of ducks and geese for \$20, which is perfect for my mother’s boyfriend (admittedly he hunts these animals but it still seemed a logical connection for a gift). There are heifers, or a share of a heifer, for \$50, a share of a goat or pig for \$10, and a flock of chicks for \$20 among other animals. Also, you can purchase a share of a “knitting basket” for \$50 – a pair of llamas and a pair of goats. Heifer International was my answer! The organization will even send a card to your designated “honoree” telling that person what’s been purchased on their behalf.

I have just received Heifer’s catalog for this year, and am excited by the idea of giving this gift again. I’m keeping my costs down while increasing my holiday spirit, I’m not giving gifts that no

one wants or needs, and I'm not adding to anyone's clutter. And we're helping someone else in the world have a better life. I encourage everyone who is thinking about reducing their holiday gift-giving stress to check it out – www.heifer.org. Not only will you feel good about what you're giving your loved one, you'll feel good about what you're giving someone you don't even know. Isn't that simple concept, and not the mindless shopping for "stuff," what the holidays are all about?

****Save the Date!*

CCC Auction

March 27

A Celebration of Children's

Literature

. Mark the calendar, invite your friends,
find a sitter and plan to be there.