

How Children Learn Best

Or - Does your child's school curriculum serve his needs?

The article *Playing to Learn* by Susan Engel, published in The New York Times in February, was a response to the Obama administration's plan for reforming the assessment of our schools. Engel argues that first we need to overhaul the curriculum before judging any school's effectiveness. I couldn't agree more. School curriculum must fit with what child development experts have known for so long about how children learn best. It seems that our schools' agendas often work counter to a child's natural development. And why? Because schools must focus on test results in order to get funding. What is wrong with this picture? This trickle-down problem is clearly not working for our children.

Engel says, "Our current educational approach — and the testing that is driving it — is completely at odds with what scientists understand about how children develop during the elementary school years and has led to a curriculum that is strangling children and teachers alike." No fingers are being pointed here. It's how our educational system has evolved as the pressure of testing and performance has increased. Schools must be given the opportunity to teach to the student not the test.

Children experience so many stressors anyway—from peer interactions, to teacher expectations, to academic competition and its consequences—that day-to-day elementary learning should be engaging and fun. Instead of pushing preschoolers and kindergartners with worksheets and homework, they should be doing nothing but playing. We underestimate the influence and teaching capability of pure unadulterated play. It's how young children learn everything from mathematical concepts to getting along. Even older elementary children should have extended time devoted to independent play. Instead, their only opportunity at recess is often taken away as a punishment. Who is being punished?

As Engel explains, "Play — from building contraptions to enacting stories to inventing games — can allow children to satisfy their curiosity about the things that interest them in their own way. It can also help them acquire higher-order thinking skills, like

generating testable hypotheses, imagining situations from someone else's perspective and thinking of alternate solutions."

For too long, teachers have had the added task of handling children's social and emotional problems—problems that probably should be handled at home. But if the school curriculum were more suited to a child's developmental needs, perhaps schools could serve as an oasis for troubled children, giving them focus and easing up on teachers.

What is the risk of letting go of testing? Money? But what is the risk we now face? I hear more and more stories of children who hate school and resist getting out the door every morning, of homes fraught with morning battles, and evenings focused on homework pressure and dread of the next day. Is it any wonder family relations are stressed and power struggles abound? There is no down time to just be family.

Curriculum should immerse children in their own worlds—reading, telling and listening to stories they identify with; writing about things that have meaning to them; collaborating with, and learning to understand another's point of view about what is important to them. Real focus and time spent on collaboration skills in every area of learning can better set them up for the higher levels of learning that middle and high schools demand. "What they shouldn't do," Engel writes, "is spend tedious hours learning isolated mathematical formulas or memorizing sheets of science facts that are unlikely to matter much in the long run." From the first worksheets in kindergarten, children see no purpose in what they are learning.

The article continues, "Simply put, what children need to do in elementary school is not to cram for high school or college, but to develop ways of thinking and behaving that will lead to valuable knowledge and skills later on." Each day, sustained positive, non-critical conversation with small groups of children and a teacher are necessary to give children the opportunity to discuss a topic of interest, experience disagreement, articulate reasoning, communicate with evidence, change their minds, respectfully listen to one another, accept arguments, make decisions and solve problems. Many gifted teachers thrive on this kind of classroom and their children thrive as well. But more and more are having their hands tied.

Before we moved from New York City, both my children attended an elementary school where the curriculum focused on what the children could see in their world. Field trips were frequent and all areas of math, history, reading, etc. focused on what they had seen and could see in their neighborhoods. Granted New York City offers a lot: bridges for math, buildings for history, construction sites for any number of subjects, but their world was the core of their curriculum. They were interested. They were ready to branch out from there.

Hopefully the administration's education reform will get to the bottom of our educational problems, but I'm not holding my breath. So don't blame your children if they are uninterested in school. Find out what does interest them. After all they are the consumers; the business of school should meet their needs.

To read the NY Times article: (<http://www.nytimes.com/2010/02/02/opinion/02engel.html>)