

DEVELOPING A SENSE OF WONDER IN YOUNG CHILDREN:

There Is More to Early Childhood Education Than Cognitive Development

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Rachel Carson has written:*

"A child's world is fresh and new and beautiful, full of wonder and excitement. It is our misfortune that for most of us that clear-eyed vision, that true instinct for what is beautiful and awe-inspiring, is dimmed and even lost before we reach adulthood. If I had influence with the good fairy, who is supposed to preside over the christening of all children, I should ask that her gift to each child in the world be a *sense of wonder* so indestructible that it would last throughout life, as an unailing antidote against the boredom and disenchantments of later years, the sterile preoccupation with things that are artificial, the alienation from sources of our strength.

If a child is to keep alive his inborn sense of wonder without any such gift from the fairies, he needs the companionship of at least one adult who can share it, rediscovering with him the *joy*, excitement and mystery of the world we live in. Parents often have a sense of inadequacy when confronted on the one hand with the eager, sensitive mind of a child and on the other with a world of complex physical nature, inhabited by a life so various and unfamiliar that it seems hopeless to reduce it to order and knowledge. In a mood of self-defeat, they exclaim, "How can I possibly teach my child about nature—why, I don't even know one bird from another!"

I sincerely believe that for the child, and for the parent seeking to guide him, it is not half so important to *know* as to *feel*. If facts are the seeds that later produce knowledge and wisdom, then the emotions and the impressions of the senses are the fertile soil in which the seeds must grow. The years of early childhood are the time to prepare the soil. Once the emotions have been aroused—a sense of the beautiful; the excitement of the new and the unknown; a feeling of sympathy, pity, admiration, or love—then we wish for knowledge about the object of our emotional response. Once found, it has lasting meaning. It is more important to pave the way for the child to want to know than to put him on a diet of facts he is not ready to assimilate." (1965, pp. 42-45)

In recent years, the field of early childhood education, historically a field fully committed to *whole* child development, has focused primarily on cognitive and academic issues. From the point of view of the child, the most important dynamics of life and learning are emotional and social.

Where are we today in our understanding about the sense of wonder in young children? What thought and theory have been proposed, and what research has been done on this centrally important aspect of being?

Is our problem that we have so lost within ourselves the sense of wonder that we do not value—are even threatened by—its presence in children? Have we bought the powerful societal messages about which the poet, William Wordsworth, alluded to so perceptively many years ago when he wrote:

"The world is too much with us; late and soon,
Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers;
Little we see in Nature that is ours;
We have given our hearts away, a sordid boon!" (1952, p. 260)

Are we not irritated by experiences outside the timed lockstep of daily living? That lockstep does *seem* to offer surety and security to our lives. But does it really? If so, what is the life that remains? Is it not a bargain with the devil in which we ensure our survival by repressing our sense of wonder—the core and meaning of life itself? No wonder then that many adults are so threatened or annoyed by the spontaneity of young children. No wonder that “for most of us that clear-eyed vision, that true instinct for what is beautiful and awe-inspiring is dimmed and even lost before we reach adulthood”. How can we, as parents and teachers, most effectively become the companions that help each child discover the joy, excitement, and mystery of the world we live in? How do we make sure that our curriculum fosters and strengthens the sense of wonder in young children?

The sense of wonder is an integral part of every newborn infant. It is possible when children are free from threats and fears.

Here are some ideas which parents and teachers can use to provide an atmosphere in which wonder can flourish in children. A sense of wonder is created, nourished, and sustained when:

- sensitive adults react in a prompt, responsible, and satisfying way to the voiced and unvoiced needs of their children.
- children are well-fed, rested, and allowed ample opportunity to run, jump, ride, climb, and play.
- parents have lovingly held and cuddled their child in ways and amounts that addict not only the child but the parent to their mutual comfort and joy.
- the child feels secure in the child-satisfying love and attention of her parents.
- parents and other adults who are models for the child regularly show their surprise, interest, and attraction to the natural world and its happenings—from the movements of a worm, the wag of a dog’s tail, bubbles popping in a bath, the shadow cast by the sun, and a spider’s web, to the mold on an old slice of bread.
- parents and other adults close to the daily life of the child interact with the child and her world from evident interest, spontaneous humor, and joy.
- parents and teachers encourage children freely to experiment, taste, feel, hear, see, imagine, explore, and get into things that are interesting and safe.
- parents and teachers show their pleasure and delight and create novelty in what otherwise would be life’s daily mundane chores and routines.
- children see and hear their parents and teachers become engaged and responsively enlivened when doing such things as reading a story and playing or listening to

music.

- children safely and playfully enact the stories in their imaginations or the imaginations of creative, empathetic parents and teachers.
- children notice that their parents and teachers let themselves get lost in the fun and creativity of play.
- parents and teachers find something good about the mistakes children will make as they grow and learn.
- children in schools and preschools are influenced by educators who often ask, rather than teachers who usually tell.
- teachers and parents are flexible enough to postpone their planned activities from time to time and let a child's creative idea or direction lead the way.
- children are encouraged to voice their emotions and to talk about their hurts and fears with attentive, responsive parents and teachers.
- young children can choose play activities based on their own feelings of interest and boredom and not the decisions of another person.
- the efforts of young children are regularly encouraged and prized. Children's sense of wonder is damaged and grows weak if their efforts are often met by adult corrections and criticism.

Wonder becomes possible when children can risk being themselves without there being any risk at all.

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Oh, how I hope and pray that members of NAEYC, in their daily work with young children and through their local, state, and national organizations, deliberately choose to become allies of the good fairy. If they do so, it might come to pass that we may develop, preserve, and enrich a sense of wonder in children—of all ages.

References

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Haiman, P.E. 1991. Viewpoint. Developing a Sense of Wonder in Young Children: There is More to Early Childhood Education Than Cognitive Development. *Young Children* 46 (6): 52-53.

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