

Educational Philosophy

How Young Children Learn

By Jeanne W. Lepper

The world is so full of a number of things, I'm sure we should all be as happy as kings.

--Robert Louis Stevenson

"What a beautiful child!" the parents exclaim over their new baby. Thus begins a life-long relationship of unconditional love and support that is essential for the child to thrive and develop. This nurturing is the foundation for the sense of security and self-esteem that directly affects a child's ability to achieve success later, to learn, as Robert Louis Stevenson would put it, about "a number of things."

Consciously or not, we are all guided by certain principles of children's development.

Children Are Good Observers

Children learn from actively investigating the world around them. Coming upon a construction site, for instance, a four-year-old will be curious about the activity. The adult with the child should take the time to stop, really look at what's going on, and direct the child's attention to the details. "Let's watch and see what happens while that dump truck unloads dirt. See how big the wheels are?"

Children Respond Well to Open-Ended Questions

Open-ended questions encourage children to think and reflect. "What made the shovel move like that?" "What do you think the driver is going to do now?" "Did you hear the motor make a noise? I wonder what will happen next." Giving children time to come up with their own answers, even misconceptions, starts them on the road to constructing explanations and building theories.

Children Are Researchers

Assisted by adults, children have numerous ways to explore their interests. A child intrigued by construction vehicles can look in books at home or at the library. Sand box toys such as shovels, containers, and vehicles can give the child a chance to replay experiences and act out observed roles in order to construct his or her own knowledge. Revisiting a construction site will help the child track the progress of the work, gain more information, and clarify misconceptions. With a sketchpad and pencil, the child can draw what he or she sees. The adult in tow can jot down the child's statements to help further the experience at the next opportunity.

Children Benefit from Positive Models

In a natural, almost unconscious, process, children follow the examples set by others, modeling both behavior and the accompanying emotional tone. When children see their parents reading regularly, they want to read and be read to. When they see disrespectful or violent behavior, live or on television, they are just as likely to imitate it.

Positive Suggestions Guide Children

Responding to children positively helps them interact effectively with others. Often an adult's first response to a child's undesirable behavior is negative, controlling, emphasizing what the child cannot do: "Don't throw this ball here." But usually a more effective approach suggests what the child can do: "That's a good place to throw the ball."

Children Learn Through Play

Play is the child's work, perhaps the child's most important way of learning. This learning process occurs even when it may not be obvious when children actively explore their environment and act on their inborn curiosity. Adults can contribute to this natural process by encouraging children's interests and efforts, talking to them about what they are experiencing, and helping them elaborate and extend their play.

Children Learn from Their Peers

When children play with siblings and friends, they learn from each other. As questions, challenges, and conflicts arise, they learn how to solve problems. For example, three-year-old Sarah is in the block area trying to balance a structure and bridge the gap to "put a roof on my house." Her more experienced four-year-old playmate Lakisha suggests, "Let's try the longer block it looks like it might fit better." This mixed-age play in particular allows children to learn in two ways, both by modeling the behavior of older children and by "teaching" younger children.

Children Learn With Support

It doesn't work just to tell children "You must share." At best, such orders are effective only temporarily while adults are present. However, when adults guide children through the process of taking turns or waiting for a turn, the children can internalize those strategies and use them the next time. For instance, a two-year-old wants a turn pushing a wagon, but both wagons are in use. A teacher says so that all can hear, "Jason is really waiting for a turn. He'll be ready as soon as you're done. Let's see what you can do, Jason, until they're finished. You can help put some more leaves in the wagon. Here's a rake to get another pile ready." This approach helps the child have a role and a way to enter the play. Such emotionally supportive language also helps children view adults as their advocates. It helps them solve problems rather than turning the situation into an adversarial struggle. Often, when asked first how they could solve a problem, children think of the best solution.

Children Learn by Using Basic Materials

Young children learn by doing. Helping with cooking, chores, and other real work is of tremendous interest and value to them. This hands-on learning is also encouraged with open-ended materials such as the following:

- Materials for drawing, writing, and constructing: paper, pencils (thick primer ones are best for young children), crayons, scissors, glue, and tape. Commonly found materials such as cardboard boxes, which offer children many opportunities to represent their ideas.
- Easel paints and water colors for painting.
- Water, sand, playdough, and clay for sensory experiences.
- Building blocks (hardwood unit blocks are best), Legos, and puzzles for building and manipulating.
- Dress-up clothes, hats, and props for taking on roles—even better if children can make their own costumes.
- Dolls and doll clothes, so children can play out roles they have experienced.
- Some simple musical instruments and opportunities to listen to music.
- The outdoors for investigating nature and for running, climbing, and other active play essential for large motor development.

The more hands-on experiences children have, the more curious and capable they become and, best of all, the more joy they feel at learning "a number of things."