

We Love School!!!! (Does your child?)

By Nancy Monson

Does your child wake up in the morning excited to go to school, or do they complain, drag their feet, or even act out? On the weekends do you hear your child ask if they can go to school? Does your child TALK AND SHARE ABOUT WHAT THEY ARE LEARNING, freely, with enthusiasm, even asking you to get more information at the library or off the Internet? School should be a source of joy, enthusiasm, and great interest – and above all, interactive and stimulating learning for all children. Here is what that means:

First of all, what compromises real learning? How do you know your child is learning and not just memorizing information? What do you most remember learning in school (any grade) and how much have you totally forgotten? What went into those real learning experiences? Real learning gets kids excited, engaged, thinking deeply, asking questions, wanting to know more. The components of real learning include:

Three Centered Learning

- * A “feeling” component: The child feels an interest, there is meaning, value, importance, a relationship to the child, it touched their heart in some way, there is a desire and reason to learn. Stories, music, direct experience (such as seeing something and being impacted, like theater or meeting a person, or visiting a place) all stimulate a child’s feeling of connection. If kids aren’t interested, forget it, but...there are lots of ways to wake up passion in children, through giving them real experiences.

- * All children learn with their bodies; they use their senses, they try and experience through moving and imitating, and they manipulate their environment to find out for themselves how things work.

- * Children need intellectual development; to be engaged in problem solving, wondering, asking questions, talking and analyzing. Searching and engaging a process to find their own answers, is valuable and necessary. Children need experiences rather than answers. Life does not present complete solutions to problems, and neither should school. The process of real learning requires children to dig down into what they already know, and to find ways to solve what they don’t know, without being told there is only one right answer or being guided by an adult along a process to a predetermined result.

When teachers are presenting material using all of their “three centers” (feeling, intellectual and physical) and children are engaging from all three centers on a daily basis, knowledge will be based on personal experience. What this means is that children will not learn unless they are fully engaged in these three areas, and all real learning does this. Do you ever just learn something from someone telling you something, or just reading a book or just doing something once? No. But the main way that most schools present information is by telling the children or having them read.

Integrated Learning

In real life, everything is connected. Children need to study subjects in depth. For example, when we studied recycling we visited every possible place in our area that had to do with dealing with recycled goods: Eco-cycle, Resource 2000, Hard to Recycle, as well as going to the landfill, dump and the old Marshall dump. In Language Arts, we read about what happens to everything that gets recycled, and made our own books based on our trips and reading. We wrote letters to companies that had products the children played with or used (such as Legos) to ask if they could be recycled.

In Art, we made sculptures from recycled materials that were entered in a Denver art show. We created multi-medium murals of different earth cycles. In Music, we learned environmental songs. In Math, we weighed our trash every day after lunch, kept a chart and graphed what we threw away. The whole school was involved in trying to reduce the amount of trash we generated. We went to several local grocery stores and compared costs and weight of packaging that was recyclable and non-recyclable. In History, we studied how recycling was invented and evolved. In Science, we learned how the earth recycles itself, how the rock, water, air and life cycle works. We studied how the human body recycles. On our weekly hikes we picked up and then sorted and weighed litter. In Drama, we wrote and performed a musical about recycling. In Cooking, we talked about food waste and created a compost for our garden.

In Outdoor Time, we spent time looking for clear and polluted air, water and trails, and wrote poetry, letters, and talked about how we could help the earth. At the end of this unit, which was tied to a larger year-long theme of the Earth, all the families at our school had set up home recycling centers, we had a recycling fashion show, and had adopted a creek which we all cleaned on a Saturday. The children were extremely knowledgeable about recycling, and weren't afraid to point it out wherever they went: "how are YOU recycling?" they ask now.

IF A CHILD ONLY STUDIED A FEW THINGS A YEAR, BUT STUDIED THEM IN-DEPTH, the child would know a great deal more than if they studied many things on the surface for a whole year. We are teaching them HOW TO LEARN, not just information. That is the key point here.

This kind of integrated learning is crucial if children are to develop a life long love of learning. Children always want to know why, and want to know more. We need to leave no stones unturned when it comes to children's questions and longing to understand and connect to what they are learning. We want children to enter life as adults wanting to fully understand the world in which they live, instead of stopping and accepting simple answers.

Other important elements:

- * Small classes, connection and daily personal contact between teachers and students. The teacher needs to know how every child in their class learns, their strengths and weaknesses and how to address them.

* Teamwork: Children need to have experiences of working in teams to problem solve, see every angle, understand and appreciate other's contributions, and to learn to think in terms of a bigger whole, and not just their opinions.

* Time and support to pursue personal interests, AND time for individualized guidance from mentors (adults and older children).

* These are some of the most important keys for children to be fully engaged and loving learning. Look closely at the curriculum and the work your child brings home, how much and what they talk about, and their level of enthusiasm. And...just ask your child: "Do you love school?"

Nancy Monson is director of Running River School (ages K-8). For more information about how children learn, and what is possible for children in school, go to <http://www.runningriver.org>. Nancy also hosts Parenting Solutions on KGNU (88.5 FM) on Tuesdays at 10:30 AM. Her phone number is 303-718-2101.