

Getting ready for school



Love and fear

“How does what you do prepare my child for school?”

This is a very common question from parents for teachers in all early childhood services. The question is driven by two things: firstly love; love of the child and the desire for the loved child to fare well in the new environment. The question also reveals an underlying fear; fear that the loved child will be left behind and floundering when they leave that early childhood and head to school.

Crossing the bridges without rivers

But when you think about it, the question makes about as much sense as asking someone in their later years, “How are you preparing for the Old People’s Home? Practicing on a Zimmer frame are you?” It is not appropriate to practice Zimmer frame manoeuvres until you need to. You could if you wanted to, but why would you waste time doing that when you have other things to do?

Back to basics

The Zimmer Frame analogy is a mirror of the ‘ready for school’ concerns. What would be more useful for us as parents - and for our children - would be for us to focus on the basics which set children up for the next phase in their ‘away from home’ life, the basics which will serve them well both in school and for the rest of their lives. Out of fear, parents want early childhood educators to ‘teach their children their colours, teach them the alphabet, teach them to write their name, teach them to sit still on the mat’. But when you look at this list, it really is the most impoverished kind of curriculum - a few basic skills that school teachers get paid to teach your child when he or she arrives in the classroom. And remember, all children have a brain and as soon as they see that ‘the game at this place called school’ is sitting up with you arms folded like an Egyptian statue, they play the game - providing they have already mastered the basics of being a social being in a social setting. Sitting up on the mat takes all of one minute to master - why would you practise and practise and practise thereby taking precious time away from learning the basics? The basic curriculum from birth to 6 years, is to learn to be a social being in a social setting.

How well do you get on with others?

Now, there’s a first class curriculum question! How easily are you able to make and sustain relationships? The age that it is the easiest to learn how to get on with others elegantly is in those first six years. You will have noticed that when children have a falling out, two minutes later they are the best of friends. They resume playing without any grudge, without any notion of revenge, without any ‘stuff’ going on in their heads. So what do children need from the us so that we make the most of that ‘window of grace and openness’ and support them to unfold their social skills? A good place to start would be to ponder on what those skills are.

Social skills for human children

Our children need to -

- learn how to be empathetic to the feelings of others
- learn how to grow, exercise and manage their will
- learn how to ask for their needs to be met
- learn how to say no and to stand up for their own needs and rights

- learn how to negotiate
- learn how to manage and express their feelings safely
- learn the difference between using power or force with others
- learn how to stay in their power in conflict situations and never resort to using force.
- learn conflict resolution skills
- learn the speech patterns which are non-violent and lead to solutions
- learn the social conventions we call manners

If you think that list looks like the curriculum for professional development in a Team Building Non-violent Communication course for the adult workplace, you are right, it is. It is the curriculum that most of us need to learn as adults precisely because we didn't get the above basics (which form the fabric of a harmonious society) when it would have been easiest for us to learn them, before we went to school. We were too busy learning to sit still on the mat, chanting our colours or learning to write our name. In the adult world, personal grievance cases are epidemic, with all the unhappiness and misery that those soured relationships spill into the workplace. A personal grievance case is a result of one or two technically qualified human beings not being qualified with skills for working well with others. Unable to reach satisfactory results between themselves, estranged adults do the equivalent of the child who gets the teacher or parent to solve their problems for them. Nothing wrong with that per se, but it would be much better if we supported our children to master the skills to manage their relationships elegantly, so that as adults they could handle the conflict that inevitably arises in situations and relationships.



It's up to us

Behaviour is caught, not taught. Does that scare you? No? Then you haven't understood what I said. It is as Joseph Chilton Pearce says, "We tell children how to be and they keep mirroring back what we are. If we are to raise happy, intelligent children, we must bring to wholeness the models they are following." Children learn how to behave by 'downloading' the way the other people behave around them: so essentially, they are downloading us. Most of us have heard ourselves when we are flustered spouting stuff that is 'pure Mum or Dad', word for word. We downloaded their programmes and now we resort to them when we are hassled ourselves. They form our 'default setting'. Our task as teachers and parents of young children is to smarten up our act and learn the social skills we are not so accomplished in. In workshop situations, when people are asked how it is for them in conflict situations, to date, no-one has answered that they are pleased with their skills for successful relationships. People answer that they are not really competent in any of the skills in the list above except the last one; they do have a handle on manners.

Adults' job description

So that is our first task as parents and teachers: that we take seriously the social learnings which lead to living as a successful, happy, fulfilled social being. That means we will need to be honest with ourselves, and undertake to upskill where we have weaknesses. As adults we have to do the hard work of learning the skill consciously. It is not like that for the child though, he or she simply 'soaks in' the learning subconsciously. In those first six years it is absolutely effortless for children to become well adjusted social beings *if* the adults in their lives model friendship and harmonious social relationships.

Our second task is to support our children as they learn those skills listed above, and playing is the very best way to practise these 'people skills'. No difficulty there, every child *loves* to play: it is up to us to support them in their love of play. In the right play (learning) environments, and with people who are competent in people skills, children will be competent in the skills listed by the time they pack their bags for their first day at school. Primary school teachers (and secondary teachers) *long* to receive children in their classes who have great social skills. These children make their job worthwhile, and that frees them to get on teaching their curriculum. We know that when we support children in unfolding superior social skills we are not only "getting them ready for school", we are taking our responsibility very, very seriously: we are setting up those same children for a happy and fulfilled life.

Pennie Brownlee



Previous page: *Learning the skills of getting a creative project underway with my friend in the sandpit at 'The Nest'.*

Above: *Children at 'The Nest' in relaxed conversation as they soak their feet in warm footbaths scented with lavender oil. This sensuous calming activity is chosen by the children and is almost always followed by children massaging the feet of their friends, as the little boy in the front is doing.*