

Good Things for Children and Teachers to Be Doing - Part 1

Classrooms consist of many things - chairs, tables, bulletin boards, educational materials - but the most important components of any classroom are the children and the teachers. In the next two columns, I would like to offer some ideas about some of the “good things” children and teachers should be doing in these classrooms. Today I focus on the children.

1. Exercise all of their senses

Good programs provide children with the opportunity to not only use all of their physical senses but to also exercise the emotional parts of their being as well. As human beings we are endowed with the ability to experience a variety of emotions, ranging from joy to sorrow, satisfaction to frustration, and contentment to anger. We may not always welcome some of the emotions but experiencing these emotions are part of what it means to be fully human. The role of the teacher is to help children accept these emotions and understand that they need to be expressed in socially acceptable ways.

2. Problem solves with both the physical and social worlds

In order to construct their understandings of how the physical and social worlds work children need the opportunity to engage their minds with meaningful challenges and problems. Quality educational programs provide children with large blocks of time to engage in various types of play, including manipulative play, art and music play, language play, and socio-dramatic play. Meaningful problem solving can also occur when children experience interpersonal conflicts with their peers. When these conflicts occur children should be given the opportunity - with guidance - to work out their own solutions.

3. Use symbols to represent and communicate

One of the most powerful moments in the developing child’s life is when she becomes a user of symbols. This is a major development in a child’s life because with symbols she is now able to represent ideas and communicate those ideas to others. Language, oral and written, is perhaps the prime representational ability that develops but it is by no means the only symbolic system available to children. Art, movement, song, and sign language are ways in which children can express their ideas and feelings. Quality educational programs provide opportunities for children to use a

wide variety of media for the purpose of symbolically representing their ideas and feelings.

4. Go beyond immediate experience

As human beings, our experiences are not limited to just what we can see and touch in the immediate here and now. We are able to consider past events and imagine the future and bring both the past and future to bear on our present experience. Good programs encourage children to reflect on the past, anticipate the future, and imagine possibilities beyond what is immediately present.

5. Make choices

Children's development as autonomous learners who are motivated to inquire, explore, and experiment depends on their having the opportunity to make choices. Children should be given as many opportunities as possible to encounter manageable choices that fall within their competencies. This allows children to feel in control of their experience and to have a vested interest in the outcome of their activity.

6. Experience alternative perspectives

It is the reality of our experience that there is often, "two sides to every issue" and "more than one way to skin a cat." Children need the opportunity to experience alternative perspectives, both within the physical world and within the social world. Materials and activities should be designed to encourage children to view things from different perspectives and to "consider all the angles." Social interaction sets the stage for children to experience the varying opinions expressed by their peers. In addition, celebrating the cultural differences that exist in our society exposes children to the variety of ways in which people live their lives.

Next week I will take a look at some of the good things teachers should be doing in the classroom.

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