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It's Already There: Children's Passion for Learning

by Sandra Duncan

“Education is not the filling of a bucket —
but the lighting of a fire.”

W. B. Yeats

It was a brilliant summer day on the sandy white shores of Lake Michigan as I played with my granddaughter. I felt the warm sun peek from behind the billowy, marshmallow clouds, and watched the gentle breeze make Sierra's curly blond hair dance around her bonnet. We were playing the age-old seashore toddler game of fill and dump. Each time we filled the bucket with sand, the teacher in me would declare “full” — and each time Sierra dumped the contents of the bucket, I would announce “empty.” Fill and dump — grandma makes announcement. . . . Fill and dump — grandma makes announcement. . . . Fill and dump — grandma makes announcement . . . until at last Sierra played a trick on me. She intentionally emptied half of the sand from the bucket. And, then looked up at me with her crystal blue eyes sparkling with humor and passion, and giggled.

Children are born with an inherent sense of passion for life as evidenced by a newborn entering the world with a loud wail, or a toddler's declaration of “Mine!” They are born with innate capabilities to navigate their world and a passionate desire to figure out how it works. Babies learning to scoot, crawl, walk, and eventually run exhibit a passion to move. Toddlers demonstrate a passion to become independent when they learn to feed themselves — first with their whole hand, then using pincher fingers, and finally mastering a spoon. Two year olds delight in putting on and taking off their shoes, socks, shirts, pants, and even diapers. And, young children's enthusiasm for reading a favorite storybook for the umpteenth time or their passion for putting off bedtime cannot be denied.

Somewhere along the way, however, many children's passions for learning appear to fade away or vanish all together. Newspaper headlines and television media,

research studies and reports, and knowledgeable professionals all point to a widespread public perception that something is seriously wrong with our educational system. Students are leaving school with little more than a third grade reading level and an inability to compute even the most basic math (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2013). For decades, researchers and educators have been searching for ways to increase student achievement and to improve our educational system. Recommendations for improvement have included increasing learning time, rehabbing the curriculum, raising students' expectations, increasing teachers' pay, and revolutionizing learning standards and educational goals.

Rather than waiting until children reach elementary school:

- What if the recommendation for increasing academic achievement was for adults to realize and attach importance to babies', toddlers', and preschoolers' inherent passion for life?
- What if we, as early childhood educators, refused to let these passions falter?
- What if our focus was fanning these intrinsic flames of passion, as opposed to a myopic focus on achievement? What would our early childhood environments look like?
- What changes would we make with our curriculum, daily activities, and classroom happenings?
- What alterations would we make in our expectations for children's learning and their behavior?



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■ How would we help children keep their inherent passion for life and learning?

Perhaps there would be fewer requirements for sitting still, standing quietly in lines, less emphasis on learning by rote, and more realistic and age-appropriate expectations for children. Instead of focusing only on cognitive traits, there also would be attention paid to important psychological traits. Rather than stuffing children's brains with insignificant information, teachers would concentrate on non-cognitive traits such as self-regulation, persistence, and determination. As an alternative to traditional environments that encourage uniformity, classrooms would be designed to be adaptable, flexible, and responsive to children's interests and ideas. Here are some additional thoughts about keeping and fanning the flames of young children's inherent passion for life.

Stop Stuffing

America's educational system and its expectations for children is based on the belief that success is dependent upon the achievement of certain cognitive skills (e.g., recognize words, detect patterns, and solve math problems). For centuries, our system has fostered the notion that students who score highest on standardized tests are those who will be most successful. In order to master the cognitive skills required, students are bombarded with what is known as the *cognitive hypothesis*, which is the need to practice as much as possible, and begin as early as possible (Tough, 2012). The *cognitive hypothesis*, unfortunately, has trickled down to the early childhood level where expectations for preschoolers' academic skills are ever increasing.

"We overestimate children academically and underestimate them intellectually."

Lilian G. Katz

There is, however, momentum building from many educators and researchers who believe we are concentrating on the wrong educational skills, especially in the early childhood years. Dr. Lilian Katz, well-known and respected researcher and author, contends that some early childhood classrooms are *academic boot camps*. In these classrooms, children are stuffed with academics (e.g., ABCs, count to 10, shapes, and numerals) with little focus on the intellect. Although math and science skills are important and necessary, knowing how to work together, think creatively, engage in investigation and observation, and problem solve are also important.

Because learning is an emotional experience, it is critical for teachers to stop stuffing children with academics, and become more committed to understanding the whole child — not just the intellectual being, but the child as a social and emotional being. A paradigm shift occurs when teachers stop stuffing. Their role is no longer the giver of knowledge ("Open your brain and let me stuff it with the knowledge I think you should know."). Rather, their role becomes a facilitator of children's learning. The teacher facilitates rather than dictates the process of learning, which enhances skills such as building social relationships and solving problems.

When teachers forget about the idea of stuffing children's minds, there is less direct instruction (e.g., "This is the color red"; "That is a triangle"; "This is the letter 'A'"). Opportunities for problem solving increase when the focus is not on academics, but on posing real-life problems for children to solve. For example, there are very few students who get excited over the story question about two trains leaving from Chicago at varying speeds. However, posing the simple question, "How many bricks do you think our school has?" is sure to inspire real-world math use and creative problem solving. For very young learners, it isn't arriving at the correct answer that is important; it is about building the mental processes that allow them to tackle the complex issues of life. Even preschool-aged children have shown (in their drawings and dictations) an amazing understanding of complex math concepts and the passion for discovering the answer when presented with this real-life question.

Say "No" to Rote

An effective way to keep young children's passion for learning alive is to say "no" to rote. Rote learning is learning by memorization (e.g., singing the "Alphabet Song," counting to 20). With rote learning, the teacher is typically the giver of information and the student is the receiver. Oftentimes, the information being stuffed into children's minds is abstract, meaningless, and developmentally inappropriate. Calendar time, for example, is a typical daily ritual when a group of children sit in front of a calendar to recite and learn by rote the days of the week and months of the year. Rote learning is ineffective because it only focuses on the transfer of information from the teacher to the student. When children learn by rote, they typically cannot transfer the memorized information because they do not have a meaningful understanding or contextual framework of what they have memorized. Children who have memorized the days of the week and can recite the days in perfect order, for instance, may have trouble answering the question, "If yesterday was Sunday, what is today?" With rote memorization, the brain

does not engage in critical thinking and, therefore, children are not learning how to problem solve in order to come up with the correct answer to the question.

When teachers use rote learning as their primary pedagogy (way of teaching) the routine becomes tedious and mundane. Reciting the alphabet, saying the days of the week and months of the year, counting to 100, and reviewing the basic shapes and colors (in both English and Spanish) on a daily basis and in the same sequence is downright boring. And we wonder why children act out and are fidgety at circle time! Children are not being rebellious by fidgeting and poking others; they are merely finding creative ways to ward off the boredom.

To keep children's passion for learning alive, say "no" to rote and consider these two passion-based strategies:

1. *Find out what excites children by observing their play and listening to their conversations.*
 - When children are passionate about something, give them chances to share their knowledge with others.
 - Encourage them to write letters to experts in the field in which they are interested.
 - Create opportunities for children to make displays that show what they have learned.
 - Videotape children making presentations about their interests.

Passion grows as children see themselves as competent contributors to a topic of interest.

2. *Use authentic tools and materials for children to physically touch and manipulate.* Make learning a touch-and-do experience instead of a keep-your-hands-to-yourself experience. Make learning a move-and-groove experience rather than a sit-and-be-quiet experience.

Go Paperless

There is too much paper — including construction paper — in an early childhood classroom. Young children do not need pencil-and-paper work in order to learn. And their passion for creating can be stifled when construction paper is continually offered for cutting, drawing, and art projects.

There are many ways (other than using paper) by which children can be artistically expressive, so consider eliminating paper of any type from the next few projects or activities:

- Instead of drawing paper, offer children interesting and different writing or painting surfaces, such as tree bark or pieces of plywood.
- As a replacement for coloring on or creating with construction paper, offer unique materials and objects for children's artwork.
- Eliminate the word 'coloring' from your lesson plan vocabulary, and insert three-dimensional art experiences that involve different types of construction (e.g., sculptures, dioramas, and weavings).

Types of Construction	Writing Surfaces	Construction Materials
Mobiles	Birchwood	Driftwood/Wood
Sculptures	Tree Bark	Bricks
Costumes	Tiles	Twigs/Tree Cookies
Masks	Terra Cotta	Buttons
Dioramas	Placemats	Rocks/Stones
Models	Plywood	Polished Sea Glass
3-D Maps	Cheesecloth	Corks
Weavings	Fabric/Textiles	Metal Objects
Décor	Foils	Clay/Mud
Scenes	Plastic	Pine Cones
Wall Hangings	Cardboard	Wire/Twist Ties
Collages	Leather Pieces	Tin, Cardboard Boxes
Pâpier Maché		Screws/Nuts/Bolts
		Baking Racks

CHILDREN'S CHOICE, ST. MICHAEL, PRINCE ALBERT CANADA • PHOTOGRAPH BY SANDRA DUNCAN



Fanning the Flame

by Michelle Salcedo, Chief Academic Officer,
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There is much talk about the need to ignite a passion for learning in young children. In truth, the passion is there from the very beginning. Anyone who observes a newborn's fascination with a ceiling fan can see she is burning with an ardor to make sense of her world. Too often, as educators, we smother that passion with rote learning and standardized expectations. Our main drive should be to find a way each day to stoke children's passion, as opposed to smother it. To keep children engaged, we need to feed the fire already there until it explodes into an inferno of learning. There are many tools and curricula that provide the content of what can (or has to be) taught in the classroom, but only a teacher can supply the passion that makes the content come alive.

The Power of Passion

The passion is there. Be a keeper of children's passions: Say "no" to rote, stop stuffing, and go paperless. Take a different path of intellectual engagement that goes beyond academic boot camps and test scores. Better test scores will not change education, but teachers who are committed to keeping young children's passions alive will create a love of learning that will last a lifetime.

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