

The Wonder of the Everyday

by Amy Laura Dombro

How do you answer when someone asks you, “What do you do all day with such little kids?” As an infant/toddler caregiver, I always hesitated whenever I was asked this question. I knew whoever was asking the question wouldn’t understand if I explained that we spent most of our days together doing ordinary everyday things such as dressing, preparing food, eating, cleaning up, and taking neighborhood walks. I didn’t quite understand it myself at first — even though it felt right — until I began looking at the world through the eyes of the infants and toddlers I was working with and asking myself, “What are they experiencing?”

As newcomers, infants and toddlers are just beginning to make sense of their world. They are learning about themselves — their bodies, their abilities, and their feelings. They are learning about other people — how they behave and communicate with one another. They are learning about the things around them — their colors, sizes, shapes, and how to use them. To learn about themselves and the other people and things in their environment, infants and toddlers need lots of *hands-on* experience and practice. Everyday activities give them the ongoing opportunity they need to observe, to participate in, and to understand the world around them.

From the perspective of infants and toddlers, the best thing about everyday activities is that they occur every day — often several times a day. They are predictable enough so that children can learn what to expect and gain a sense of mastery. At the same time, there are enough variations to hold children’s interest and attention. And everyday events are such rich learning opportunities that as infants become tod-

dlers these familiar activities reveal new meanings and offer new challenges.

Getting dressed, for example, is primarily a sensual experience for a four month old. The sound of her adult’s voice, the coolness of the air touching her skin when her old shirt is removed, the soft brush of cotton when it is replaced, and the sense of trust and safety when her caregiver holds her is what getting dressed is for her. As a one year old, getting dressed may turn into a tummy tickling game. She may be learning to name the parts of her body and beginning to learn about colors when her caregiver talks about the blue whales on her green shirt. At 18 months, getting dressed may have evolved into an opportunity to define herself as a separate person by declaring “Me do it!” and refusing help. Or it may be an opportunity to practice decision making when her caregiver asks, “Do you want to wear the yellow socks or the red ones?”

Clearly, everyday moments deserve as much of your time and attention as do the *special* activities you plan, such as making play dough or water play. Here are some suggestions to help you make the most out of the everyday moments you spend with babies:

- **Look through the eyes of children to see the wonder of the everyday.** Do by yourself an everyday activity that you usually do with children, such as making a snack, taking a walk around your building or neighborhood, or simply looking out the window. Pause occasionally and ask yourself, “What would a child be experiencing?” Try to imagine what children might be seeing, touching, tasting, hearing, and smelling. Ask yourself what children may be learn-

Beginnings

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ing about themselves, about other people, and about the things in their world.

- **Slow down.** Give children — and yourself — time to enjoy your everyday moments together. Remember, these moments are as important to children as anything you might plan. Take time to sing a song with a baby whose diaper you are changing. Take time to smell a flower you pass on a walk and listen to the crunch of a breadstick at snack time.

- **Talk with children about what they are seeing and doing.** Use vivid, descriptive language. Comments such as “The fish is gobbling up the food you sprinkled in the aquarium” and “I’m going to rub some of this cool, soft lotion on your tummy” promote children’s interest in language and help them make sense of their world.

- **Create materials that highlight the everyday.** Take many photographs of children doing everyday activities such as eating lunch, getting ready for nap, picking up toys, reading a story, and collecting stones on a walk. Cover the pictures with contact paper and place them in a basket on a toy shelf. Hang them up around the room. Consider turning them into books. **Where are Jesse’s Shoes?, Pamela Steps in a Puddle,** and **Broccoli for Snack** were some of the most popular books in my program. Six or eight pages each, some with stick figures instead of photographs, each told a story that was meaningful to children because it was about their lives.

- **Make your environment as home-like as possible.** If you are a family child care provider, you have it made. If not, be sure your space has comfortable, cozy spots where you can sit with children to read and talk, and lots of everyday things to play with such as sponges, measuring cups and spoons, pots and pans, funnels, and cardboard boxes.

- **Observe children to discover their interests and build on those interests.** If you observe, for example, that Leroy (11 months) is exploring hellos and good-byes by spending lots of time putting toys in a can and taking them out, play lots of peek-a-boo with him. Consider placing a box on its side on the floor so he can experience “bye bye” as he crawls in it and “hello” as he crawls out. If Benita (16 months) is mastering walking up steps, plan a “step-climbing walk” around the neighborhood where you let her climb every step in sight rather than worry about getting to a specific destination.

- **Help parents understand how you — and they — support their child’s development by taking advantage of the everyday.** The box for parents on the following page contains ideas you may want to use in planning a parent meeting — or you may want to reproduce the box in your parent newsletter.

*Amy Laura Dombro is an early childhood author and consultant. She wrote more about the wonder of the everyday in **The Ordinary is Extraordinary: How Children Under Three Learn** (Fireside, 1989).*

Making the Most of Everyday Moments with Your Child

Ideas for Parents

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- **Look at the world through your child's eyes.** For your child, the world is a new place to explore and make sense of. Everyday events — eating, bathing, dressing, trips around the neighborhood, and, yes, even diaper changing — are fascinating and filled with tremendous potential for learning.
- **Appreciate your child as a unique individual.** Get to know your child's likes, dislikes, and temperament. Let who she is help you make decisions about where you go and what you do. If, for example, your child is easily overwhelmed by lots of people and noise, taking him for a walk in the park will be more enjoyable for both of you than taking him to a crowded department store.
- **Slow down.** Take time each day to enjoy your everyday moments together. See what happens when you touch the bubbles in the bath water. Savor the sweetness of a slice of pear. Make up a song to accompany squeaky stroller wheels as you take a walk around the neighborhood. There is no better way to promote your child's curiosity and desire to learn about the world. And — you'll have lots of fun.
- **Be aware of how much you give your child as you live your everyday lives together.** Your daily interactions help shape your child's pictures of himself and his world. For example, by treating your child with respect — by responding to her crying, listening to her babbling and first words, giving her a few minutes warning before it is time to put away her toys — you enhance her self-esteem and offer a model for how to treat other people.
- **Have realistic expectations of yourself.** Like all parents, you will not always have the answers. Sometimes your patience will run out and you'll lose your temper. Most of the time, you will probably wish you had more time to spend with your child. But remember, your child doesn't need to be perfect. He needs you to be you.