

THE LEARNING PROCESS TAKES TIME



Photograph by Jean Berlfein

As Georgia Acevedo, a demonstration teacher at the University of Hawaii's Manoa Children's Center, walked with a small group of two and young threes to the trash can to throw away some big sticks they had found on the ground in the yard, they saw a caterpillar crawling up the side of the can. When she asked the children if this was where the caterpillar belonged and they responded no, she lifted the caterpillar on a stick and took it to show the other children. Georgia said, "They were all very excited about it and wanted to take it back with us. Max's mother volunteered to get a branch off the crown flower bush and carry it back on the top of Max's baby brother Leo's stroller.

"Back at Poni Room, we put the branch on a plastic bug box. There was much observation and talk about our caterpillar that we had rescued. The children showed it to their parents. We watched it eat and eat, just like *The Very Hungry Caterpillar*. Then one morning before rest time, it was hanging from a leaf in the shape of a J. When we observed again after nap time, it was already in the cocoon. Some children asked, 'Where is our caterpillar?' and we talked about how it had made itself a cocoon and would stay inside until it was ready to come out as a beautiful butterfly."

On the morning of the tenth day, Georgia noticed that the cocoon had turned dark. Later in the day as the children were getting ready for their afternoon rest, she and the children became aware that the butterfly was emerging from the cocoon. As they watched, the butterfly slowly spread its wings. Georgia said, "The children showed it to each other and talked to it about flying into the sky. When it did finally fly away, the children said, 'Bye butterfly.' We saw it fly around the yard for a while. Now every time we see a Monarch butterfly, the children say, 'Look! Our butterfly.'"

This is a lovely story. How Georgia provided the opportunity for the children to watch how the caterpillar ate, and how it spun a cocoon which became its house until it was ready to emerge as a beautiful butterfly, illustrates how a teacher was able to help the children have an interesting, exciting, meaningful learning experience at their developmental level. There was time for questions to be asked and answered; time to hear stories about caterpillars and butterflies; time for simple, factual material to be discussed; time for up-to-the minute news on the latest cocoon development to be shared with other children and with the children's parents.

With the emphasis on the academics these days, there are probably some people who believe Georgia should have had the children learn that caterpillars are worm-like larva of a butterfly or moth, or that butterflies are any of a group of lepidopterous insects with diurnal habits. All of us can read that last sentence, but how many of us comprehend what it says?

When Zorba the Greek found a cocoon on the bark of a tree just as the butterfly was getting ready to emerge, he tried to hurry the merging along and breathed on the cocoon to warm it. To his horror, he discovered he had forced the butterfly to emerge before it was ready and the butterfly died. He wrote, "We should not be impatient, but we should confidently obey the eternal rhythm." That is what Georgia and the children were doing — giving the process the needed time.

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