

Docia Shares a Story

EXPLORATION AND DISCOVERY

When I stopped by the Hill & Dale Family Learning Center in Santa Monica, California, to talk with Judy Brunk, the executive/program director, about the upcoming 15th anniversary gala the center was having, I found myself so drawn to what the children were doing that instead of staying for a few minutes, I stayed for over an hour. Here are a few observations:



Photograph by Jean Berlfein

The staff and children made me feel welcome. I didn't feel like a visitor who was supposed to observe for a short time, ask a few questions, make a few comments, and leave. I sat on a low chair out of traffic and at eye level with children and shortly they began to come over to me to ask who I was, did I have children, was I a grandma, how long was I going to stay, did I know their mothers, was I going to come back, and why was I there? I felt like Grandma Hen with a brood of Grand Chicks.

When I walked over to where some children were engaged in an art project, I was asked if I would like to join in the activity. The children shared their crayons with me and I began to draw experimentally, purposely not making any object or design. It became evident that the child next to me did not consider me a Van Gogh or a Cézanne when he said, "You draw funny. I'll help you."

At a table nearby, the children were building elaborate rocket ships with Lego blocks. One boy was trying to explain to his friend that his ship had red and green "chargers" that "ignited" and gave signals when to "bank" and when to go up and down. Another child kept interrupting him. He became impatient. When his teacher, Chrisann, asked what he might like to say to the interrupter, he turned to the boy and said, "Stop interrupting me. I'm busy."

A few minutes later, a girl started to run through the room. Her teacher reached out to her, put her arms around her, and said, "I'm stopping your body from running because running is for outdoors. We are going outside in a few minutes and then you can run. What would you like to do until then?" The girl said she wanted to play with blocks and joined her friend in the block corner.

I went into a small room where children can dance, listen to music, and have stories read to them. I sat looking at books. A four-year-old came in to the room, saw me, and said, "I don't want you to read me a story." "Okay," I said. "I only want my teacher to read me a story," she said. I asked, "Is this where she reads to you sometimes?" She nodded her head in the affirmative. I smiled at her and went on looking at the pictures in my book. In a minute or two, she went over to the book shelf, picked out a book, and sat next to me. She handed me her book, and when I asked if she wanted me to read it to her, she answered, "Yes." I don't know why she changed her mind but I believe it had to do with my acceptance of her wish that I not read to her when she first entered the room and her being able to change this decision on her own.

From the beginning of my visit until I left, I could see that I was in a center that offered the children rich, varied, and fulfilling play opportunities; a center where children had a choice in what to engage in; where there were reasonable rules, positively phrased, to play by; and where play and learning went naturally together. The staff set the stage and the tone for exploration and discovery and the children responded in a relaxed and unpressured way.

Just as a pebble makes ripples on the water, all childhood experiences affect how children grow and learn. These experiences grow in size and number until they encompass one another and become a part of the whole child.

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