

*Simulate life to facilitate learning*

# Boost Parent Education Through Experiential Learning

by Roslyn Duffy

*What if hot had to be cold? What if young had to be old? What if shy had to be bold?*

**What if . . .** doctors had to be patients? What if a fledgling doc had to get wheeled to the x-ray lab — then wait; sitting in the hall wearing an embarrassing gown with hairy or unshaven legs, as the case may be, peaking out from the too-short hem; feeling his or her exposed skin sticking to the plastic wheelchair seat?

**What if . . .** all legislators, before voting on funding cuts for public transportation or child care subsidies, had to commute by bus with a squirming toddler: drop her off at child care; rush to make the next bus connection to get to work on time; then reverse the process — rushing to arrive before late pick-up fees kicked-in, to retrieve the now tired, hungry, and squirming child?

**What if . . .** a parent of an ADD child had to spend a day in her child's body:

in and out of the time-out chair or principal's office; getting caught teasing the gerbil instead of doing long-division; carrying home the dreaded note that has to be signed before the next day?

It all boils down to the same thing — *walking a mile in another person's shoes*. That is the essence of experiential learning. Experiential learning opens doors — and eyes.

Experiential education can deliver your message; engage your audience and — keep them awake. Experiential education creates experiences. What is it, why does it work, and how to do it?

## The Learning Part

The brain uses three main processes: sensory input; organization and inter-

pretation of input; and output through motion. Information comes in through the senses; it gets sorted, integrated, and interpreted; and movement results.

Experiential education makes this learning process “user friendly.” Computers provide “pull down menus,” “point and click” features or “prompts” to make learning to use a computer easy while providing sensory input through the activity itself. Parent educators don't have children with “pull down menus” on their foreheads to demonstrate the morning's tantrum over having to leave the park. There is no “point and click” magic to bring little brother pinching his older sister during church to the screen. A portable “prompt” that will flash on the bathroom mirror with hints about how to handle a five year old clamping his mouth closed instead of brushing his teeth has yet to be developed. Therefore, in parenting classes, we improvise. When parents take part in activities that provide experiences on which to base new skills the learning becomes “experiential.”

## Sensory Input

Toddlers learn what a ball is . . .

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*By trying to bite it, finding that it rolls when dropped, feeling its shape while clutching it to their chests.*

*They learn size by how far their arms must stretch to encompass its smooth red surface; weight by how far down they must bend while holding it; their own strength by how hard they must push to move it.*

An adult learns how to drive by . . .

*Imprinting the shape of the brake pedal and the force needed to stop the car on the soles of her feet; discovering where elbows must hang while clutching the steering wheel; making sense of images seen through the rectangular shape of a car's mirror.*

Apply these ideas to Wednesday night's parenting class on bedtime routines. What does a routine feel like, look like, sound like?

**Try this:**

*Divide into groups of twos or threes, each person pretending to be a parent or child in an imaginary family. Each 'family' develops a bedtime plan.*

*Drawing a picture of a toothbrush onto a chart; listening to pleas for two stories at bedtime; or having to negotiate a bedtime snack from ice cream to warm milk, makes the process real.*

Experiential learning simulates real life, giving adults sensory input and practice time for their own skill development.

## Interpretation and Organization

Remember when you were three or four years old? What comes to mind? The ride on Grandpa's shoulders at the grocery store when your legs got tired? Lining up the Easter cookies in

rows of pink, yellow, and green and breathing in the sweet anise flavor infusing the kitchen? Catching frogs in the irrigation ditch that ran through the empty lot next door, feeling their slick skin on yours?

Follow a recall of such memories with the question, "What do you think will be your child's memories of her early years?"

Walking in little Annie's footsteps today is easier with the memory of our own pink-frosted cake, the one mom made for our first ever birthday party, fresh in our minds. We use the past to interpret the present.

## Metaphors

In literature hair can be spun gold, clouds cotton candy, and eyes glittering jewels. Metaphors provide different ways to organize information. In a parenting class what can *training and boundaries* be? How about ping-pong balls? Yes, ping-pong balls.

**Try this:**

*Give out ping-pong balls and paper cups, then say, "OK. You have two minutes."*

*Silence. Then: "What do you mean?" "What are we supposed to do?"*

*Continue: "Hmm. What if you were my children and I said, 'Clean up the kitchen.' 'Make your bed.' 'Stop throwing that ball inside.' But the kitchen stays a mess, the bed doesn't get made and the ball bounces from ceiling to floor?"*

*"That's different. Surely they know what we mean," comes the reply.*

*"Do they? What does 'clean the kitchen' mean? Are we talking about refrigerating food, loading the dishwasher, or just bringing plates to the sink?"*

*Might a child staring at an unmade bed be thinking: 'How do I get a fat pillow into a flat pillowcase?' 'Which end of the sheet goes where?' 'How do I make the blanket smooth?'*

*Or, 'What's wrong with throwing my ball? That's what balls are for.' (Nothing really, its where it gets thrown that's the issue.)"*

The messy kitchen, the bed, and the unwanted indoor gym are all *ping-pong balls*; metaphors to help understand the need for *training and boundaries*.

## Motion

Adults arriving for the meeting exhausted revive when they get to pretend to be their children squabbling over who got to the television first. Tossing ping-pong balls, exchanging seats to form break-out groups, or walking up front to volunteer are ways of moving. Movement strengthens learning.

But the bigger movement we want is — change. The goal of parent education is to motivate, encourage, and support change — change in the way parents and children co-exist.

Emotions are forms of movement: they move us from thinking with our heads — to feeling with our hearts.

Memories, such as the joy we felt on Grandpa's shoulders or the pleasure evoked by Easter cookies, rekindle the same feelings today. Experiencing those feelings moves learning from the head to the heart — the birthplace of yearning.

*Yearning anchors learning — and fuels change.*

Experiential learning keeps things moving, whether in class with bouncing balls, internally from the head to the heart, or at home from the heart to the hearth — to the tiny hands we hold in ours.

## Types of Activities

Let's look at packaging. What form can experiential activities take? Here are three types.

- Demonstrations
- Role-plays
- Structured tasks

### Demonstrations

Demonstrations take place in front of the group: by the presenter alone, with volunteers, or by participants alone. One presenter uses a mirror to demonstrate *reflective listening*. A volunteer takes the role of the child. The volunteer might say, "I hate it when my little brother messes up my dollhouse."

The presenter then angles her mirror to *reflect* back the comment. "It really upsets you when your little brother makes a mess of your dollhouse."

### Role-Plays

The emotions experienced during role-plays simulate life, allowing adults to experience different perspectives. Instead of discussing how to get little Matthew to quit squirming, role-play the wait at the checkout stand.

#### Try this:

*Divide the group into pairs, one playing the adult (A), the other the child (C). C bends down or gets on her knees to simulate a child's size.*

*A holds the kneeling child's hand above C's head.*

*In less than a minute the child will be squirming around and the adult saying, "Quit squirming!"*

*Ask the children why they squirmed? "To get some blood moving." "My arm was going numb."*

Children's behavior often makes sense when we look at it from their perspective. *Walking in a child's shoes* shifts the focus away from *how to make the child stand still*; a basic mental shift needed to motivate change.

### Structured Tasks

Structured tasks may be demonstrations, role-plays, or lead to individual or group work.

#### Try this:

*Ask each person to list three things she does well. Pair up and trade lists. Acknowledge one thing from each other's list.*

*Mary wrote: "I make great chili. I am a pretty good skier. I grow prize-winning tomatoes."*

*Mark looks at Mary's list and says, "Mary, you make great chili."*

*Follow up with plans to comment on a child's strengths over the coming week; or pass out post cards and write notes doing so, with the homework being to mail the card to the child.*

Experiencing being appreciated helps adults understand its value.

### Honor It

Think of the ages of the children whose parents are sitting in the too-small chairs at your parenting class. Mentally total up all those ages: 5 years, 4 years, 12 years, and so on; the result is an awesome accumulation of experience. Honor that number.

### Keep On Keeping On

Silence is not fatal. Allow time for responses to begin. If the presenter exudes comfort with silence, group members gain courage to speak.

If speaking before the group is too uncomfortable and the silence endless, provide post-it notes for people to write down ideas and pass them forward.

## A Recipe for Creating Experiential Activities

- **Identify a small segment of the topic.**

*Example:* When discussing bedtime, focus on the need for a routine.

**Experiential Goal:** Practice involving children in the planning process.

- **Devise an activity to invite participation.**

*Example:* Divide group into *families* of three or four members each.

Have each *family* member decide their role and age: mom, dad, child. Have the *family* come up with a plan for a bedtime routine.

Pass out art materials to create a poster of their routine.

- **Process activities as a group.**

*Example:* Have each *family* share their routine.

Ask what was hard about doing this. Ask what was easy about doing this. Ask what they learned.

- **Optional: Handouts or Text.**

Refer the class to a chapter in a text that covers this topic.

Provide a related handout with tips relating to the activity.

Provide art supplies for them to do this at home.

If people do not read or write, use art or craft projects or simulate game shows to encourage participation. Experiential education crosses language and cultural boundaries because the mother tongue of experience is universal.

Fill your parenting classes with ping-pong balls; invite remembered yesterdays to enrich today; let business-suited adults turn into tantrum-throwing three year olds; and the only glazed eyeballs in your classes will be the ones you supply as props for learning about boring communication styles.