

The Child's Job: Talking to Parents About Child Development

by Jim Greenman

A child's job is to learn all about the world and fully develop into the very best person that he or she can be.

Child development is complicated. There are many research studies and thick textbooks that cover every aspect of child development. Good caring practices, environments, activities, and the expectations of children and teachers are designed to promote and foster each child's development. How can we explain that to parents? How can we help parents understand and recognize the value of what we do?

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from working with employer-sponsored child care to inner city, hospital, and university programs; early childhood and family education programs; Head Start, family child care, and public and private schools. Jim has played a significant role in the facility and program design process for over 100 early childhood projects and teaches the Institute on Child Care Design at the Harvard Graduate School of Design. He received a Master's Degree and completed additional advanced graduate studies at the University of California at Berkeley.

Of course, what good early care and education programs *should* do is under siege by a growing national anxiety attack and obsession with school readiness. This anxiety casts a cloud (or shroud) over early childhood programs, as if all we should focus on is how to create the ideal child for a kindergarten classroom, and an academic kindergarten at that! The irony is many of these of children may live to be 100 years old. Drawing from a popular expression, they will experience "40 as the new 30", "60 as the new 50." So why does four have to be the new six?

In reality, the focus of good child care is much broader and deeper because our programs provide the foundations for lives that extend far beyond the kindergarten year.

The child's job concept

The idea of *The Child's Job* is to articulate the fundamentals and goals of child development to parents (and staff) and explain the logic of why we do the things we do. Think about children as being born with a job to do. *Their job is to live their lives, learn about the world, and develop into the very best people that they can be.* Children are fully equipped and

driven to pursue that job. They are filled with possibilities. From birth, children are marvelous learners, immediately investigating the sights, sounds, and feel of the world. They are born to be competent little scientists driven to move, to experiment, to know. They also are programmed to connect with and learn from the people around them. Children are in a state of constant learning long before the big steps of walking and first words for infants; or the real social play and first sentences for toddlers; or the confident plunge into reading, writing, sports, and a complicated social life that marks the development of children through the preschool and early school age years, *long before they appear to us as students.* As they move through childhood, they are exploring all their own bodily powers and what this world is made of: the sensations, people, things, relationships, and the elements and forces of the natural world.

The child's job: Full development

Make sense of the world: To a newborn baby, the world is not yet completely differentiated by sight, sound, touch, smell, and taste. Sensory input blends

together and flows into the nervous system as waves of sensation. The task of separating out and sorting through sensations begins at birth. This process continues all through childhood as we refine our senses, and learn to make more refined distinctions. As we mature, our senses become sharpened by experiences, and the world becomes a finely woven fabric of color, size, shape, hard and soft, sweet and sour, and much more.

Learn to communicate fully: Babies are wonderful communicators and engage us with cries and smiles. They are wired to grab our attention and we are wired to seek it out and respond. Toddlers make huge leaps, in facial expressions and sounds, body language, and ultimately, words. From that point, communication explodes to more expansive use of physical expression, oral language, mastering written language, and the many ways that children and adults learn to communicate their thoughts and feelings.

Discover and develop all bodily powers. Babies begin to hold their heads up, discover their hands, develop their grasp, and creep around the room. These first infant movements begin the journey that years later result in all the wonderful things our bodies can do: walking, running, climbing, playing sports, writing, using tools, making things, singing and dancing, and anything else we choose to do with our bodies.

Understand how everything works: Curiosity is a powerful human trait and young children are born with a drive to discover — bursting with “whys” and “hows.” Babies touch, taste, poke, suck, pick up, and drop things (and bite). Toddlers do all of that and throw things, climb up and down, go over, under, and around, which are really experiments in gravity, spatial relationships, and physics. They love to turn things on and

off and combine some most unusual objects: “What’s that cookie doing in the VCR?” Older children construct and even tear apart places and things that that they have created; communities built with toys, blocks, dolls, and props. They also learn how to make more and more tools and machines work.

Deeply connect with people. Our sense of safety and security, our enthusiasm and desire to please, and our development as family members, friends, lovers, and citizens flows from the innate drive to form deep relationships. Babies begin bonding with sounds and gestures that appeal to our own attraction to their smiles and murmurs, and our concern for their cries. As children grow, they develop empathy, and the ability to both give and receive love, support, and affection. They learn the social skills to become contributing members of a community.

Doing their job has ups and downs

Much of what gets children into “trouble” actually occurs when they are “doing their jobs” in ways that sometimes drive us crazy or could result in harm to other people, things, or themselves. Development is not trouble or pain free — there will be mishaps, bumps, bruises, and heartache. Exploration of a new world and testing new powers is not always easy.

The push or bite of a baby is actually the beginning of social science; as is the “you are not my friend” of a four year old or an eight year old’s “girls keep out.”

Climbing on the table, throwing the ball through the window, jumping on the bed, or riding the bike as fast as possible is part of the “Look what I can do.”

Dropping the spoon, opening the forbidden door, or stuffing the VCR

with a toy is an example of “What will happen?” or “How does the world work?”

Our job: Supporting each child in his or her job

What are our jobs as adults who design and provide places for children? We need to offer *each* child the opportunity and place to do and learn what he or she needs to do in order to thrive. If children are to eventually step out and take advantage of what the world has to offer, they need:

- opportunities for practice and mastery of tasks that fit their emerging skills and understanding; a sensory- and movement-rich, aesthetically pleasing environment filled with conversation and written language
- ample opportunities to use and test their motor skills, both large and small
- a place for exploration and discovery of the natural world, toys and games, interactive time with safe machines, household objects, and also experimentation with various media
- people for whom they care and trust

Our job is to be patient and protective but not too protective, and encourage their innate sense of adventure: providing them a safe, yet challenging *world at their fingertips*. We are their guides who know when to step in and when to step back!

Environments that help children do their jobs

Rather than a classroom based school environment, to help them really excel at the job of development, children need an environment that is one part

laboratory, one part home, one part classroom, one part natural park, and one part playground:

Make sense of the world:

- Varied *lightscape* and *colorscape*: mobiles, mirrors
- *Aromascape*: natural materials, cooking, scented materials
- *Soundscape*: music, conversation, sounds of nature
- *Texturescape*: natural materials, manipulatives, learning centers
- Time outside in the natural world
- Planned learning centers with sensory-rich learning opportunities

Learn to communicate fully:

- Places and opportunities for conversation, singing, drawing, writing, games, and reading
- Play telephones, computers
- Ample books and reading, dramatic play

Discover and develop all of their bodily powers:

- Well designed diapering, toileting, and meal routines and places that help children develop autonomy and competence
- Time on a comfortable floor
- Time outside with challenges to move in all the ways a child can move with their arms, legs, hands, feet, and whole bodies
- An object-rich environment to handle, manipulate, build, push, pull, haul, put together and take apart: manipulatives, loose parts, push and pull toys, wagons, wheelbarrows, trikes,
- Places that encourage physical and intellectual challenge and problem-solving

Understand how everything works:

- Cause and effect toys, objects from the adult world

- Opportunities for projects and investigations
- Opportunities to build, cook, take apart and put together, and experiment

Deeply connect with people:

- Close attachment to primary caregivers and a place that welcomes and supports parent influence and attachment
- A place that supports consistent routines and engaging rituals, and responsive caregiving
- A place that supports ample touch and physical contact, ample eye contact, and responsiveness to needs
- A place that supports self help, collaborative efforts, and compassionate helping
- A place that supports conversation, social interactions, group projects, and friendship

Final note

Parents look to us to help them understand their child's development. They also want to know the *what* and *why* of "the way we do the things we do" (apologies to the Temptations). Using the language of a child's job is a good way to accomplish both. It is also a useful conceptual framework to help look at the experiences that we offer children to make sure that we are helping children *do their job*.

A Child's Job

"Children have a job. They are born to learn: competent little scientists driven to move, to experiment, to know, and to connect with and learn from the people around them. Our job is to offer them a safe, rich world at their fingertips, and our knowledge, support, and love." JIM GREENMAN

MAKE SENSE of the world



Learn to
COMMUNICATE
fully

Discover and develop bodily powers



Understand
how **everything**
works

DEEPLY CONNECT WITH PEOPLE



The *Child's Job* posters

Available from NAEYC, *Child's Job* posters are visual job aids that provide cues for staff discussion, and staff conducting parent tours or talking to parents. They are reminders of how children approach the world and why our learning and caring environments are designed in a certain way. *Child's Job* posters may be ordered through the NAEYC web site store for \$8 each: <http://sales.naeyc.org/default.aspx?Category=CPoster>.