

my granddaughter

by Francis Wardle

I am enjoying the company of a new grandchild. She is just over a year old. My wife and I are lucky that my older daughter, Maia, and her husband Bill, live close enough that we can see her often. In fact, we see little Elly (Elysia) almost every day.

While I deeply enjoy her company as a granddaughter — after all, her favorite activity is to pull my graying beard — as an instructor of child psychology, both for early childhood and psychology students, I am, of course, fascinated with observing what I teach in reality. While her parents are not amused with my continued references to theory and research — the inside joke is that everything she does is a new circular reaction! I certainly enjoy watching her grow and develop.

Of all the observations of this feisty, little spirit (yes, like my children, she is ‘off the charts’ — or, more accurately, she never got on them), these two areas have caused the most thought for me: she continually finds everyday objects far better playthings than expensive toys, and she is clearly preprogrammed to develop and learn.

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Everyday play objects

The other day Elly waddled into the kitchen and started playing with all the dishes in the dishwasher. When I returned her to her play area, with all the carefully designed, expensive toys, she quickly returned to the dishes, rejecting her plastic toys with lights and music. Her favorite activity is ‘unpacking’ — taking objects out of bags, boxes, and laundry baskets. And she loves to pick up anything off the floor, exploring it with the delight of an archeologist who has just discovered a rare prehistoric relic.

What’s going on here? Is she simply having great delight in rejecting the expensive, safe, well-researched ‘educational’ toys adults deem necessary for today’s world? Does she know more than the experts?

Many people talk about play being “the work of children.” Piaget viewed play as

practice; Bruner, as a creative process. I believe that the reason Elly prefers to play with real objects is because at this age play has a very central purpose: to learn about the world. It seems to me that she is simply playing to become familiar with the physical and human surroundings for survival. She needs to know what is in her environment, so that she can 1) become secure in a familiar environment, and 2) so she will know when her environment has changed — and thus her safety is threatened.

Since she already ‘knows’ her toys, she does not need to play with them anymore, except to occasionally check to see whether they have changed significantly.

We know that newborn infants look for order in the environment — both in terms of their parents and caregivers, but also the physical patterns of light and dark, lines and shapes. They seek out the eyes and mouth, and the

triangle between them; they look for checkerboard patterns and they seek out other regularities. To me Elly is continuing this process by playing with pots and plates in the washer, pulling the laundry out of the laundry basket, and picking up all sorts of objects from the floor.

What is new is that she not only looks for these patterns with her eyes, but now she can walk over to them and explore them with her other senses — what Piaget called sensory-motor intelligences (here we go with circular reactions again!).

Preprogrammed to learn

I have spent many hours marveling at how Elly will pull herself up to a standing position, wobble back and forth, and then fall to the ground. She then begins the entire process again, struggling to stand. She showed the same persistence and determination when she began to walk. She delights in clapping her hands and throwing things from her highchair onto the floor. I have also watched her make an accidental sound, and then repeat it time and again, as if to see first whether it will be the same, and second, what pleasure it gives her! And we all delight as she chatters to everyone as if she



were a backbencher in the British House of Commons!

While we all enjoy these obvious attempts to master a specific skill, and occasionally provide encouragement, it's very, very clear to me that both the attempt itself, and the deep sense of mastery and accomplishment, are pre-programmed into her. These new skills and behaviors that she is mastering are not reinforced by the outside world; they are attempted and ultimately achieved because she is programmed to do so.

Nature versus nurture

The observation above drives to the heart of the nature versus nurture debate about learning and development: do children learn and develop due to external reinforcement (rewards and punishments from those closest to them — i.e., their parents and caregivers), or do they learn and develop because “it is in their genes”?

The answer to this question is revolutionary regarding how we teach young children. If children are generally programmed to learn and grow, then our roles as caregivers and teachers (and parents) are to provide a responsive environment that stimulates and responds to this inner desire. We sit back and observe, altering the environment and providing new challenges as children move from mastery of one concept or skill to another. Because they are programmed to follow this script, we are not worried about whether they will fail, whether they will somehow ‘miss’ important learning, or whether they will be unprepared for school and life.

On the other hand, if we believe that children's development and learning is largely the product of the environment — what is reinforced by caregivers and teachers, and what is not reinforced (or

pushed) by caregivers or teachers, then it is critical that we carefully control the environment, the sequence of activities presented, and the curriculum. It is here that we essentially have little faith in the child's ability to learn, and deep faith in curriculum experts, intentional teaching, and standards.

Who should decide Elly's destiny?

Everyone is aware that the standards approach of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) — and its focus on academics — is now being pushed down into our early childhood programs. Standards are the ultimate ‘external’ view of learning. They are based on the deep belief that we as adults (experts) must program standards into the curriculum, intentionally teach these standards, and then assess them (to be accountable for our actions). If we do not do this, the child will not learn.

But where is the input into Elly's learning to walk, jabbering up a storm, the need to investigate and explore her surroundings, and delight in pulling her grandfather's beard? Where is the curriculum input in her obvious pleasure and delight in mastery from actions including clapping her hands and throwing her bottle on the floor?

And, besides, how can we say that input equals output, if we don't know what Elly is programmed to become; if we don't know her potential? I have one daughter who is a tax expert in Paris; another, an asset protection manager in Denver; and a third, a PR representative for a fashion company (my son is still discovering his potential). But I had no idea when they were Elly's age what they would become.

How do we know? And who gave us the authority to predetermine what our children will become?