



Speaking

by Bonnie Neugebauer

I'd dozed off in the predawn light; and when I peeked, there she was looking at me, watching me sleep, watching me peek. Her stare looked all the way into me. I may be many things she does not yet understand, but I have no secrets.

Schon, almost 2, like Zachary, almost 3, watches and she copies. Even Jonah at four-and-a-half months sees me, really sees me. And 3-week-old Caroline is beginning.

It's when children use their observations to imitate that I realize the great focus and intensity they bring to their observations. Schon uses her mama's voice to talk to her babies and her stuffed monkey. Zachary is beginning to speak for his animals, particularly panda puppet — the falsetto and the head tilt are familiar.

There's such responsibility in being really seen. And in seeing back. It makes me want to be my very best self — for them, but for myself, too. And at the same time it makes me feel important.

So, children study us with great intensity and thereby empower us and set a high bar for our behavior. When we look back, do we communicate the same level of respect in our follow-up? Could we imitate their voices, words, and actions in such detail? Do we let them know that they are understood? Valued? Loved?

There are so many children. They see us walking through airports and grocery stores, eating at restaurants, browsing, jogging, walking by — popping into their classrooms, their schools. Some are afraid of strangers and don't look. Some are very polite and want to shake hands, "What is your name?" Some just zone in for a hug.

They want to show you things, "I made this!" "I found a worm!" They want to include you in their games, and beam with delight if you don a party hat or fireman boots and join them for mushroom tea or alligator soup — or if they spy the giraffe puppet on your hand.

Yes, we are so very busy. And there are so many children — in our lives (lucky us), in our classrooms, in our cities, in the world. But this is just a moment — the only moment that matters right now. Give it, live it with every ounce of your being.

These are the moments, the ordinary ones that won't be remembered. Yet their sensory, physical, emotional impact can create the foundation for a childhood. These precious and ordinary moments can build a childhood. All children should know, wherever we encounter them, that we really see them. As the moment passes, this message should be in their hearts, "I see you. I really see you, and only you in this moment. And you fill my heart and my head with your wonderfulness."

So I thought of these things as Schon stared at my peek. And then she closed her eyes and I watched her sleep.