



Children are inexperienced, vulnerable, and often get themselves into trouble; my first priority is their health and safety.



Children say and do the darnedest things; they're so cute and funny and always keep me entertained!



Children need me to help them develop skills that will get them ready for school and life.



Children are eager, curious, creative and competent learners, deserving of rich, challenging experiences to develop their fullest potential.

Which of these best describes how you see young children?

Changes in how we see children

by Deb Curtis

All of these statements have simple truths to them. Yet, how we see children is not so simple. Our view of children and childhood is rapidly changing in response to the pressures of modern life, new research on brain development and learning, as well as the belief that many young children in the United States aren't ready for school. There are powerful messages coming from commercial, social, and political interests, as well as from many factions in our profession, suggesting solutions.

"Early Learning Matters" is a slogan that reflects the changes in how our culture sees children. Many state and community initiatives for early childhood education have names like Thrive by Five, Best Beginnings, and Project Lift-off. Federal policy has been built around



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the view that "No child should be left behind." It's great that we have so many new resources and initiatives that show early learning is being taken seriously. However, within the promise of this good news are many challenges: How do these initiatives influence our view of children and, in turn, how we plan for and respond to them within the context of our programs?

Outcomes focus on helping children succeed, and readiness and remediation are emphasized. Of course, we want to help children develop the skills they will need to be successful in school, but does this focus narrow our view of children as people who need to be tested and fixed? Commercial interests respond with products and resources intended to guide us in helping children meet outcomes. While resources are useful for our work, it's important to question the view of children they suggest.

There is also increased attention to regulations and requirements to ensure that we are caring and educating children using best practices for health, safety, and opti-

mal learning. Yet many programs respond by limiting the environment and activities offered to children. Do regulations and requirements impact our practices so much that we stop offering children appropriate challenges and rich experiences that contribute to their learning, their view of themselves, and life?

Reflecting in this way helps me realize that I need to continually negotiate these influences. How I see children strongly impacts everything I do and say in my daily work. I want to make sure I draw on additional sources to bring an enhanced view of children to my work.

Do we see children as scientists?

The writing of researcher Alison Gopnik (*The Scientist in the Crib* and *The Philosophical Baby*) has helped me understand and value the profound abilities of young children when they are able to use their flexible brains. Gopnik promotes the idea that young children naturally bring the disposition and skills of a scientist to everything they do; this is how they learn and develop their brains. I want to notice

and support children's innate ability to bring scientific inquiry to their everyday encounters as Gopnik describes. I want to offer them opportunities to engage deeply in the big work they are drawn to. This requires that I see children's competence and believe that their ideas are worth pursuing as the following story suggests.

The Hole Story

The excavation started when we decided to add heavy-duty, child-sized shovels to our sandbox at the Burlington Little School where I was a teacher. The children quickly discovered that these 'real' shovels worked quite well to dig large holes, and soon the sandbox became too small a space for this big work. The children decided to move the digging to the grass. Cutting through the sod with the shovels was difficult work, but the children were totally engrossed in this unearthing. The adults were initially worried: Would the holes be too deep and dangerous? Could the children be trusted to use the shovels safely? Many of the adults seemed unsettled with the children's voracious quest to keep digging deeper and wider. How far would they go? Was this destructive behavior or an important way for the children to feel powerful and learn together? We decided to support the children's unstoppable interest; and as the hole grew, so did the amazing collaborative learning. The youngest children repeatedly used the shovels and buckets to dig, fill, dump, and fill again. For the

older pre-school children, the holes and dirt became a backdrop for big dramas, and the school-age children created a complex system of holes with connecting tunnels. Conversations expanded day after day with theory making about what might be at the end of the dirt: China, the other side of the earth, or the river that was just across the road?

When the weather changed, so did the children's work. Rain created wet dirt, which provided more opportunities to explore, make comparisons, discover, and learn. Dry, fine dirt created beautiful patterns in the sky as the children threw it up in the air and watched it fall. The cooperation and problem solving among the groups was more than we could ever have planned a curriculum around.

All along the way the teachers had to negotiate our view of children and what we believed they were capable of and deserved. Observing the details of their work helped us know how to support their safety while allowing them to keep going. Although at times we struggled, we came to deeply understand the children's competence and trust in their ability to be engaged in

multifaceted learning, with an incredible capacity to work together.

Ten years later that dirt hole is still a source of vital connections and learning for the children and adults in the school. I can't imagine all we would have lost if we had stopped the children back then on behalf of protecting and teaching them.

Do we see children as spiritual beings?

In his article, "The Infant as Reflection of Soul," William Schafer (2004) suggests that babies are born with three spiritual dimensions that we no longer experience as adults and that many people try to reclaim through spiritual practices such as prayer and meditation. He describes these as:

- **Presence:** approaching life with pure awareness, free from internal judgment, comparison, fear, or desire
- **Joy:** a strong sense of being drawn toward something or someone in wonder, curiosity, and interest
- **Awareness of others' awareness:** the realization that we are not alone, that others exist who are present to our experiences.

I have had many encounters with the spiritual dimensions that Schafer describes in my work with children under 3.

"I See You"

Snuggled together in the big stroller, my group of one year olds and I would head to the neighborhood park where there is plenty of space to explore and run in the grass. Located in the middle of the park is an interesting concrete structure that serves as a water park on summer days. Although I doubt it was designed for them, for my babies this structure is a magical world, wet or dry. The children are enchanted with the space as they



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move through it, immersed in the experience. There are whimsical openings in the structure with different levels to look

up, down, or through. The children delight in every detail, the shadows, shapes, textures, and different views from each hole, which provide endless opportunities to explore and wonder.

I was most fascinated with one game they invented together and played every day. At first I thought it was cute the way the children would play peek-a-boo, taking turns looking through the holes at each other and laughing uproariously together. But as I watched them day after day, I came to believe that something more profound was going on in that game.

The children radiated with feelings of joy each and every time they saw each other through the holes. Their elated laughter touched me in a way that is hard to express. I experienced what Schafer describes as the spiritual dimensions of babies: intense wonder in being present to these moments, being drawn to each other with pure joy in the realization that we see each other.

I now bring this experience to all my encounters with babies: in classrooms, airports, and stores. I keep looking at the

baby, waiting until the baby notices me noticing her. The response I get each time is so very gratifying when we both fill with pleasure as we



communicate the simple yet powerful message "I see you." Try it for yourself; as you do, imagine how the world could be such a different place if we were all able to see each other in this way.

Do we see children as offering us a more meaningful way to live?

My view of children has been most profoundly influenced by the educators of Reggio Emilia in their work promoting a strong image of the child. One of the most significant resources for me is the book *Reggio Tutta* (Reggio Children, 2000). It's a delightful, yet profound guidebook to the city of Reggio Emilia, written by the children. It is full of words, images, and drawings created by the children to describe the city from their point of view. This book invites us to imagine how different the world might be if we really did take children's points of view seriously in the way we plan for our communities and how we live together in the world. I'm thrilled by this notion and try to imagine how considering children's views would impact the way we develop policy and design our communities: What changes would we make? How might the quality of our lives be different? The story of the Music on the Bridge from London Bridge Children's Services in London, Ontario, Canada, gives a powerful glimpse into the possibilities.

Now that you have read these stories reflect again on how you see children, this time considering the possibilities in stories here or your own stories of the gifts children have offered you:

- How will you change your view of children?
- How will your image of children impact your work?
- How can we all help others see the power and possibilities in children's points of view?

Listen to the words of William Schafer here to deepen your reflections on these questions:

"Babies, by their very existence, call us back to something we all sense we have lost. They do not enchant us simply because they are 'cute' but because they awaken in us a thirst that sleeps deep within some wellspring of yearning that we know we have neglected."

References

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Music on the Bridge

We had been working with the children on a long-term project to study a local bridge in our community. As a part of our investigations, the children were engaged with the different sounds that they could make on the bridge. The children noticed that the deck of the bridge made a unique sound, since it was made of wood. They discovered that the metal supports on the top half of the bridge could be shaken to make a sound as well. The children also loved to run on one side of the bridge and drag their sticks along the rungs of the railing.

A young mother, walking her small baby in a stroller, stopped to listen and watch the children. She leaned down to her baby and said, "Do you hear the music?" Many other people using the bridge paused to listen to the music the children were making as well.

The children's relationship with the bridge appeared to be connected to the music. Making music on the bridge left the children feeling powerful and desiring to share this experience with others. As new children moved into the classroom, the other children shared their excitement, inspiring them to develop their own relationships with the bridge. Each day, the children asked to relive the experience, prompting us to make weekly trips to the footbridge.

The children were eager to share this musical experience with people in the community. We collaborated with the children and made a plan to attach a sign to the bridge and put a can of sticks at each end, inviting people to explore music on the bridge. We requested people leave us a message about their experience. The response from the community was tremendous. We visited the bridge often to collect the comment cards from people who took us up on our invitation to make music on the bridge. Here are some of the many comments the children found on the bridge from their neighbors.

- What a great idea!!! The bridge music sounds fantastic.
- Thank you for a wonderful treat. It brought back memories from my childhood!
- I dragged the stick across the bars. I noticed that the sound got higher at either end.
I wonder why? Thanks for the smile.
- Great idea. Try tying string or cloth around the stick to make different notes.
- On my way to work I walk over this footbridge. Thanks, children, for collecting sticks to make the bridge sing. I did it and walked the rest of the way to work with a smile on my face!
- I used to hate bridges before this. You make the world beautiful!

Comments like this from the public are a reflection of the value the community sees in the children's invitation. This initiative gave people the opportunity to view the children as members of their community who are capable and worthy of our attention and support. There was a true dialogue between the children and the community, as people have shared suggestions and observations, offered praise, and raised questions with the children. The nature of this reciprocity has been generous and full of grace, bringing joy to people of all ages and backgrounds, and has helped to define, through this shared experience, our community.

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