What experiences really are important for young children?

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Expectations for children are changing
First is the decision to parent at all

Second, *when* to parent

- after careers are established or before?

Third, *how* to parent

- New parents are on their own
- Parenting is not a “rational” act
What *is* the proper way to start infants on table foods?
U.S. parents are besieged with pressure to start teaching their children young!
Are baby DVDs really 'educational'?

"You didn't play 'Baby Einstein' tapes while Tyler was In Utero?"
Do you think I'm pushing him too hard?
"Ummm let's see....perhaps you can play at the park on the second tuesday in September, after your accordian lessons; but you'll have to be back in time for ballet."
“Apptivity Cases”
71 Things your child needs to know before Kindergarten
New Push for in U.S. for Universal Pre-K Education

May 4, 2014

DiNicola said, "Children achieve 90% of their development by age 5. As a consequence, if they don't have the exposure to language, literacy, math, social development at an earlier age, by the time they get to kindergarten they are on the outside of the circle."
Academics receive much more attention in preschool than ever before.
Examples from Other Countries: There are alternatives!

- New Zealand (Principles of learning and development in early childhood)
  - Empowerment
  - Holistic Development
  - Family and Community
  - Relationships
  - Formal school at age 6

- France (Program for Primary Schools in France)
  - Discovering the World of Objects
  - Discovering the World of Matter
  - Discovering Live Matter
  - Discovering Natural and Human-Made Spaces: Sensitization to Environmental Issues
  - Formal school at age 6

- Sweden—”Educare”
  - Combined early childhood education and child care
  - Activities should stimulate play, creativity, joyful learning
  - Teaching care of and respect for other human beings
  - Formal school at age 7

- Finland
  - Play based
  - 3 hours required outdoor time
  - Formal school at age 7
Why these changes matter
Learning and the Brain

- Learning begins in utero
- Brain organizes itself in response to stimulation received
- When same experiences happen again and again those connections are strong
- Other initial connections, not stimulated, retract or die
- Brain highly dependent on regular patterns
- Young children ACTIVELY try to make sense of “messy” data
Early Experiences Affect Children....

- Cognitively
  - Language especially vocabulary
  - Learning to learn
    - Attend/Focus
    - Persist
  - Understanding cause and effect

- Emotionally
  - Regulating response to stress and stimulation
  - Developing self control to direct attention

All of these require interacting with a more capable adult.
Recent Research on Learning in Young Children
Alison Gopnik, UC Berkeley

- Direct instruction can actually limit young children’s learning
- Teaching is a very effective way to get children to learn something specific
- But direct instruction also makes children less likely to discover unexpected information and to draw unexpected conclusions

“it's more important than ever to give children's remarkable, spontaneous learning abilities free rein. That means a rich, stable, and safe world, with affectionate and supportive grown-ups, and lots of opportunities for exploration and play. Not school for babies.”
If not academics or direct instruction, what should parents and preschools focus on?
Provide Environmental Protection

Predictable
Reduced
Organized
Positive, warm
Consistent interactions
Small group size
Protection from unpredictable events
Give Children Personal Space

Freedom to explore
Materials to explore
Different textures
Different noises
Different shapes
Control over experiences
Training Children Not the Goal

- Less Management Required When --
  - Children are engaged and interested in the activities
  - Materials are organized and children do not have to wait between activities

- The more management parents and teachers do, the more they have to do

- Extensive management interrupts activities and interferes with children’s concentration

- In general children need many fewer rules
All adults need to talk less and listen more... to children
Opportunities to Listen to Children

- Not likely in classrooms
- Hard to do well
- Happens if adult does not interrupt child’s activity
  - Adult makes herself available
    - Crouch low
    - Watch what child is doing
    - Respond to overtures
- Adults have to practice waiting for children
The dangers of new media

Middle and higher income parents are actually listening to their children less
“Look Up” (Gary Turk) -- YouTube
“mom, could you push us, please?”

“one second.”
The new dinner time interactions
Media occupied adults are “still faced”

- Research consistently show that parental depression is the psychological problem with the most long term effects for children.

- Replicated experimentally in the “still face” experiment
“Children hate it when their parents pick them up and are on their phones and don’t even turn to say, ‘Hi honey, how was your day?’ Instead they’re giving them the shhh one minute signal which basically says ‘you’re not as important to me as whoever this other person on the phone is.’

Car rides to and from school as well as dinner, bath and reading time -- parents should be present and phone-free for all of these daily rituals. “Kids do not need our undivided attention all day long, but they do in those real-life moments of talking and reading and doing the hard work of parenting -- dealing with meltdowns, teaching them how to pick up their clothes.”

The bottom line: If you think your kids don’t notice that you’re distracted, you’re deluding yourself. One of Steiner-Adair’s subjects told her, “I miss the olden days when families were more important.”
FINAL WORDS

CHARACTERISTICS OF AN EFFECTIVE ADULT WITH CHILDREN

- Be “in the moment” with children
- Show respect for children
- Take joy in children’s behavior
- Treat children’s learning as an intellectual puzzle

These provide the really important experiences for children.
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REFERENCES cont.


