

5 Things Every Parent Should Know to Inspire Greatness in their Children

SMARTIE PANTS EARLY LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT

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“Before birth, the brain produces trillions more neurons and synapses” (connections between the brain cells) than needed.”

Even though there is still so much we don't know about the human mind, research into the dramatic changes that occur during the first few years of life

have yielded some amazing findings. At birth, a baby's brain contains 100 billion neurons, roughly as many nerve cells as there are stars in the Milky Way. Before birth, the brain produces trillions more neurons and

“synapses” (connections between the brain cells) than needed. During the first years of life, as a result of stimulus through a child's environment and the relationships they form with their care-givers, the brain undergoes a series of extraordinary changes as brain cells grow rapidly in size and neurons connect together to form complex structures. Each individual neuron may be connected to as many as 15,000 other neurons,



they form during their early years. This is not to say we should protect our children from negative experiences. On the contrary, research shows that the absence of negative experiences is equally detrimental to early brain development. Instead, it is important that children feel loved and nurtured so that they can manage negative stresses when they do occur.

So what does this all mean for parents?

- 1. First and foremost – nurture and love your child.**
- 2. Provide as many opportunities to explore rich, exciting**

forming a network of neural pathways that is immensely complex. This elaborate network is sometimes referred to as the brain's “wiring” or “circuitry.” **The most interesting fact, that we as parents need to know, is that if these connections are not used repeatedly, or often enough, they are eliminated. In this way, experience plays a crucial role in “wiring” a young child's brain.**

Research shows that stimulating the development of your child's young mind is just as much



ing experiences to stimulate all of your child's senses.

- 3. Provide challenge to your child through games and play.**



about providing warm and nurturing relationships as it is about providing a rich and stimulating environment. The way children feel about themselves in relation to the world, stems largely from the experiences

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Source: Rethinking the Brain - New Insights into Early Development; Conference Report - Brain Development in Young Children: New Frontiers for Research, Policy and Practice, Organized by the Families and Work Institute, June 1996

2. NEVER Force Learning



“The challenge is to know when children are ready to learn or improve a skill and when the best time to intervene or assist children in their learning.”

Every child learns skills at a different pace. The rate at which a child develops can be supported by adult assistance, but even then, every child will develop faster in some areas than others. Pushing a child to learn a skill they are not ready for, can lead to a low self-esteem in a child, as the task may be too challenging and they may fail. It is often better to wait for children to initiate or show interest in learning in their own time.

The challenge is to know when children are ready to learn or improve a skill and when the best time to intervene or assist children in their learning.

Children can show readiness to learn something new or improve a current skill in a

variety of ways. Often a child will indicate that they are ready to take on a new challenge by displaying boredom with tasks on offer. Other times they may ask questions to further their knowledge. Or, they may themselves attempt trying out new skills by mimicking or attempting new tasks.

Research shows that when a child shows such behaviour the chances of them learning and retaining new information is much higher.

How an adult intervenes to promote learning is equally important as identifying the timing of the intervention. One prominent early childhood theorist: Lev Vygotsky promotes the concept of scaffolding learning which describes the process of adult assistance in children’s learning. This process can be applied to almost any task.

There are three main steps to scaffolding. These are:

Step 1: Role modeling – The adult performs the task for the child to see

Step 2: Assisted learning – The child completes the task with the aid of the adult or physical aid

Step 3: Independence – The child is able to perform the task without any assistance.

Ultimately, the goal is to facilitate learning rather than to instruct it. Hence, it is important to remember not to push a child to learn something they are not ready for. Children will learn new skills much more effectively when they learn them at their own pace and in their own time.

Sources: Bodrova, E. & Leong, D. 1996, ‘Tools of The Mind: The Vygotskian Approach to Early Childhood Education’, Prentice-Hall, Inc. New Jersey.

Dockett, S. & Fleer, M. 2002, ‘Play and Pedagogy in Early Childhood: Bending the Rules’, Thomson Learning, Australia.

3. Get Involved in Learning

Many early childhood experts argue parents are essentially the first, primary and most influential teachers of children. It is through the parents that children develop and foster a healthy self esteem and well-being. Studies have shown that nurturing, warm, and responsive parent–child relationships and parental participation in child-centered activities relate to positive learning outcomes in later life.

Research shows that classroom partnership is also a wonderful way of improving the learning outcomes for your child. Parents add another important dimension to

children’s learning, as they have a unique opportunity to reinforce and follow up learning in a broad range of environments outside of the classroom. Furthermore, parents also spend a significant amount of time with their children and can offer a unique opportunity for intensive observation and supervision of a child’s development and progress. They can provide a wealth of information to a teacher not previously available to them. Some great ideas for getting involved include:

- Visit your child’s class (e.g. help with reading or give a

presentation about your work or hobbies);

- Find out what’s on the curriculum and find opportunities to talk to your children about what their learning;
- Share special experiences with caregivers, they can provide wonderful follow up experiences;
- Join a parent or fundraising committee and make a real difference to the programs, policy and practice where your child learns

Source: Hart, Craig H. (1997). Integrated curriculum & developmentally appropriate practice : Birth to age eight. Ithaca, NY, USA: State University of New York Press



A parent sharing their stories about their work with their child’s Kindergarten class

4. Know the Value of Play to Learning

Play is a vital part of a child's development and there are some early childhood theorists whose research

“The focus is therefore not on the learning itself, which is essentially a byproduct of play, but on having fun and enjoying the experience along the way.”

indicates that development of an emotionally healthy and creative individual is significantly impaired where learning with play is absent. Learning should be fun, enjoyable and allow a child to not only discover new things that may not necessarily make sense to them, but also to allow them to make changes, question and explore their sur-

roundings. Through play, a child will begin to master the skill of problem solving.

Recognising the importance of play as the vehicle for 'true and effective' learning is vital for all caregivers. The focus is therefore not on the learning itself, which is essentially a byproduct of play, but on having fun and enjoying the experience along the way.

Source: Sheridan, M. (1999) *Play in Early childhood: from Birth to Six years*. London, UK Routledge

5. Promote Early Communication and Language

Your child's language development starts from the day he/she is born and as a parent the content, quantity and quality of the communication you share with your child will greatly influence the development of their communication skills.

It is important to note that communication and language take place orally (words spoken) and visually (sign and written). While there is an enormous amount of research currently underway in early speech, most infants cannot communicate using the spoken word or if they can, we are yet to understand it. Infants do however understand verbal communication much sooner. This early knowledge of language can quite often be frustrating to children as their desire to communicate with you falls

behind their physical abilities. You, as a parent, are able to bridge this gap through an alternative form of communication called "Baby

Sign". Baby Sign is a visual communication system and, combined with vocal communication, can be an effective method for your child to use to communicate with you. The reason that this form of communication is successful for young children is because children's hand-eye coordination develops much quicker than their verbal skills, thus enabling them to learn to sign a lot quicker. A Baby Sign system can either be home-based (unique to caregiver and child) or sign language based (based on Auslan). There is no right and wrong Baby Sign language however, it is worth noting that Auslan based signs will allow other baby signers to communicate with your child. The use of sign language is a wonderful tool to help you start active, meaningful and engaging communication between your child sooner whilst also reducing negative behaviour that children sometime express when they cannot communicate their needs.

Studies show that children acquire the ability to comprehend and produce language as early as one year of age, with the most significant development in this area of taking place over the next 10 years of life. Therefore, this period is a critical window of opportunity for parents to provide their children with as many opportunities to engage in

active, rich and diverse communication as possible. This does not mean that as parents you should be playing word games, flash cards and reciting the alphabet day and night. Instead we, as caregivers, need to know that children learn most from everyday language that is meaningful to the person speaking it. Children learn through listening and trying to make sense of the world around them: A trip to the shop can be an ideal time for language development. Talk to your child and explain to them what you are buying and what you are going to do that day or what you may have already done. These interactions are so much more meaningful to your child and developmentally appropriate than other structured language experiences.

Similarly, encouraging your child's development of written language is also not about alphabet drills and letter tracing. Instead it's about sharing with your children a wide range of written communication which could range from signs, books, newspapers and magazines etc., which are also meaningful in their lives. Similarly fun and nurturing activities such as daily bedtime reading are incredibly positive literacy experiences.

Sources:

1. *Rethinking the Brain - New Insights into Early Development; Conference Report - Brain Development in Young Children: New Frontiers for Research, Policy and Practice, Organized by the Families and Work Institute, June 1996*

2. *Online dictionary to Auslan www.auslan.org.au/*

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“Inspiring Greatness”

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Smartie Pants Early Learning Development is a 90 Place Child Care Centre and Kindergarten located in Diamond Creek.

We are family owned and operated, open 5 days: 7am-7pm, Monday to Friday

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Photo: Natalie and Sharon (Owners and Directors of Smartie Pants Early Learning and Development)