

# THE IMPORTANCE of BEING EARLY

## A CASE FOR PRESCHOOL ENRICHMENT

*by Ken W. McCluskey*



**I**n my past life as a school psychologist, I would now and again encounter some very young children who could do simply amazing things. For example, one day when assessing a four-year-old boy for an early entrance to kindergarten program in our

district, I received a request from another clinician to use my office for a group meeting. I moved with the youngster into our audiologist's room. Imagine my surprise when the little fellow, observing and reading from a piece of equipment, asked: "Impedance audiometer. What's

that?" I didn't know the answer, but I did know I had come face to face with something pretty special.

A four-year-old girl being considered for the same program produced a startling signed self-portrait, complete with detailed hair, eyebrows, fingers, and high-

heeled shoes. A kindergarten boy, one year older, answered all the items on one segment of a popular IQ test – he knew that silica is the main material used to make glass, that Darwin proposed the theory of evolution, that hieroglyphics are a form of Egyptian picture writing, and that turpentine is made from the sap of fir trees. And a nine-year-old girl I was working with on a project wrote: “What is life? Does it end at death or begin anew for eternity? Eternal life is a tantalizing thought, but maybe an unrealistic one. Is death to be feared or welcomed? ... My mother says I’m not to worry my pretty little head about such things ... but these ever-intruding thoughts cannot be willed away.” Rather powerful stuff!

Now changes in my own life are causing me to revisit my interest in early years enrichment. Even though I’m clearly far too young to have it happen, as I write this piece I’m about to become a grandparent for the fourth time. It’s a grandparent’s prerogative to think all the grandkids are talented, and I do.

Kristjana, an early reader, is a sensitive, altruistic, highly verbal girl whose joy in life is to go on “dates” with her doting grandpa. Kail, a truly warm and cuddly baby, has learned to walk quite early and also demonstrated a superior set of lungs.

Here, however, I will focus on Hunter, an interesting two-year-old young lady. She reached and rushed through certain developmental milestones at a rate that caused my wife and me to sit up and take notice. In a post-birth reunion of mothers from a prenatal class, nine moms reconvened with their infants for a celebration and photo opportunity. Of the nine babies born at about the same time, only Hunter could sit by herself, so the shot was taken with her in the middle and all the others leaning inward. At a restaurant, a waitress was impressed that Hunter could sip through a straw in precocious fashion for her age. By eight months, she was taking tentative steps, by nine months she was running and climbing in stable fashion, and by a year, she could – in her reckless, devil-may-care style – climb up and descend a playground slide on her own. Before turning two, she had no hesitation in jumping into a pool and trying to swim. Language and concept development were equally rapid. At 18 months,

Hunter – who had learned to hit the redial button – put in a call for help. The phone conversation went like this:

*“Papa!” (that would be me).*

*“Hi Hunter. How are you doing?”*

*“Papa loves Hunter!”*

*“Of course I do, but why are you phoning me?”*

*“Daddy angry Hunter.”*

*“Why is Daddy mad at Hunter?”*

*“Hunter color walks!”*

Two months later, our daughter took Hunter to the pediatrician, and bragged that her offspring could now recite the ABCs and count to 20. The doctor was skeptical. Hunter demonstrated flawlessly. Taken aback, the good doctor noted that this situation was “highly unusual.” At a wedding shower shortly thereafter, uninhibited Hunter grabbed the microphone and entertained guests with alphabet recitation and a unique rendition of *Twinkle Twinkle Little Star* (the words were right, but the tonal quality left something to be desired).

Hunter is now approaching two-and-one-half. On a recent family outing, she surprised us as we were driving on a bridge over our city’s railway yard by looking down and commenting, “I’m on a bridge and there’s no water beneath me.”

As Piaget himself noted, many preschoolers have difficulty understanding that their grandmothers are their parent’s mothers. Not Hunter. When my wife Andrea phoned one day, Hunter grabbed the phone and asked demandingly, “Who’s this?” My wife naturally answered “Grandma.” Hunter queried, “Andrea?” Grandmother laughed and said, “Don’t call me Andrea!” Hunter’s response: “How’s Ken?” She knows the first names of all the grandparents (and surviving great grandparents), and knows who is “mommy’s mommy,” “daddy’s daddy,” and so forth.

There is a downside. Unlike our other grandchildren, Hunter can be downright recalcitrant and defiant. She is extremely

overactive and impulsive. With sponge-like curiosity, she gets into everything, scurries tirelessly from hither to yon, and enjoys pushing the envelope to the limit. Recently, when her mother was caring for her year-old niece, Hunter became resentful about sharing attention with her cousin. Taking matters into her own hands, she slipped out to the porch, met the mailman, and asked him to take her cousin away in his bag! Right now, knowing that she’s waiting at our home for her weekly “sleepover,” I find myself – at the end of a long day – preferring to stay at the office writing about her rather than actually going home and having to deal with her endearing, but incredibly wearing antics.

Naturally, faced with this talent and the concomitant challenges, my wife and I began to wonder how to respond. Would it be a mistake to “push” our granddaughter too early? Many teachers, believing that we should not destroy the joy of childhood by putting on too much pressure too early, favor the “let-the-children-be-children” approach. Adherents of this school of thought, in almost evangelical fashion, use David Elkind’s work on *The Hurried Child* to illustrate that damage can result if we push little ones too soon. However, recognizing that it is generally best to base decisions upon fact rather than myth, we searched and discovered that Elkind was never opposed to moving high-ability students ahead on the basis of their achievement and skill level. Indeed, he supported early school entry and grade acceleration for certain talented children. Many others agree. For example, John Feldhusen observed that talented children are typically accelerated as quickly as possible in sports, music, and the arts. Would it have been “best practice” to insist that Tiger Woods, during his early childhood, be allowed to attempt only “age-appropriate” golf shots? Yet, in school, high-ability children are frequently trapped in a lock-step, grade-to-grade system.

Perhaps educators ought to be thinking seriously about designing more flexible schools. Certainly, research suggests that acceleration and early admission can be healthy for many individuals. Long-term studies of large numbers of children have found that early

starters are, in general, stronger academically in the elementary grades, and that this superiority continues in high school. Many reviews of the research conclude that, in terms of both academic achievement and social adjustment, early entrants and accelerated students perform well compared to their classmates. Interestingly, in several studies, there are signs that behavior problems surface if high-ability children are not allowed to proceed at a faster pace. This observation adds an oft-neglected dimension to the debate, suggesting as it does that the social risks may actually be greater for talented students who are compelled to “march in place” than for those who are fast-tracked. Tiger Woods, for one, looks happy to me.

What happens early in a child's life makes a tremendous difference. For one thing, during the first two years there is rapid growth, accompanied by major changes in structure and functioning, of the human brain itself. And there is compelling evidence to suggest that, in the early years, the physical development of the brain is more than simply “preprogrammed unfolding.” It is, in fact, tied also to the type and quality of early experience. Early environmental enrichment can make a very real difference to learning ability throughout life. From laboratory research with animals, we know that the brains of rats allowed to climb, sniff, and explore objects are, in general, larger than those of animals denied such opportunities. Isolation and experiential impoverishment tend to retard neurological growth. Environmental stimulation has a direct effect on the physical properties of animals' brains, including the number of synaptic or physical connections between neurons.

Burton White, a proponent of the early experience view, suggests that the first three years are crucial in human cognitive and emotional growth. He asserts that the critical period may well come in the eight- to 18-month range. According to White, it is important to ensure that children have stimulating toys and materials in the home. Another key is the quality of environmental interaction, in particular between mother and child. The capable mother, in his view, provides encouragement, support, and stimulation,



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without becoming smothering or unnecessarily intrusive.

Most of us, quite rightly accepting that lifelong learning is a laudable and possible objective, continue to acquire new knowledge and skills as we age. However, a very powerful case also can be made for the importance of early years' stimulation. More and more, it looks like the earlier,

the better. Learning may well come easier later in life if a solid foundation has been laid through environmental enrichment in the beginning. The U.S. government recognized the need for early intervention in 1964, and responded by introducing the Head Start program to help prepare disadvantaged children for school entry. Designed to provide opportunities and services to preschoolers from low-income, at-risk families, it focused on early education, physical and mental health services, nutrition awareness, child and family social services, and parental involvement. Since its inception, many millions of children have been served through this initiative. More recent federal programs, such as Early Start and the Head Start Transition Project, have also been developed to provide young at-risk children, under three years of age, with enriching environmental experiences and opportunities.

It is true that research concerning the long-term impact of Head Start has been equivocal in many respects. For one thing, a “fade-out effect” has been found, where, after registering immediate gains on intelligence and achievement tests, children later fell back. However, part of the problem here might be the unfortunate tendency of investigators to assume that IQ scores are the primary indicator of success (a dubious assumption to say the least), or to compare Head Start children to those from more advantaged backgrounds. Thorough reviews of several programs suggest that environmental enrichment has had both immediate and long-range benefits. When “graduates” of Head Start and similar projects were followed over several years, their academic achievement in elementary school showed marked improvement. Long-term behavioral and social adjustment gains were also found. In adolescence and beyond, there are indications that early intervention programs contributed to higher high school completion rates and higher rates of employment after graduation. Reductions in delinquency, teenage pregnancy, and adult dependence on social assistance were also noted.

In light of all this information, what are parents (and grandparents) to do? After pondering the matter, my wife and I

decided it would be a serious mistake simply to “leave well enough alone.” Rather, we intend to get actively involved and help “stretch” (a better word than “push”) and challenge Hunter to develop her talents. For parents and educators who share our interest in enrichment in the early years, here are a few specific suggestions.

1.

*Look for talent strengths early.* As children grow, it is important, as Grover Young and others emphasize (see, “A Talent Identification and Development Story,” in this issue), to become “talent spotters,” to be aware of developmental milestones, to be watchful of a child’s progress, and to be responsive to emerging gifts. We need to appreciate a wide range of abilities, and to look for and nurture the strengths in all our children. Sometimes, to identify talent, it is necessary to step back, change one’s perspective, and reframe reality. Stubbornness in early childhood may be setting the stage for the later development of perseverance, seeking and monopolizing attention may grow into leadership, and unfocused daydreaming may evolve into creative invention.

2.

*Encourage infants and toddlers to explore, play, and learn.* Provide an enriching early environment through plenty of contact and cuddling, singing and music, pictures and mobiles, and age-appropriate (not necessarily expensive) toys. Talk! talk! talk!, so that children are immersed in language (and not constant “baby talk,” by the way). Celebrate successes – clap hands and create excitement about your youngster’s accomplishments. However, do not overdo it and “flood” children; there is also a time and place for peace, solitude, and independent play and reflection. To take a sports analogy, a good quarterback doesn’t always throw the ball to the receivers with as much speed and power as possible. Sometimes he does need to get the ball to the receiver very quickly (“firing a bullet”), but on other occasions a gentle, hanging floater might be much more effective, and might even be essential. Similarly, although an abundance of stimulation is a plus,

enrichment isn’t unrestrained bombardment; judgment and balance are needed.

With infants, it is often a good idea to carry them facing forward, so they can view the world more easily. We go for family breakfasts with our grandkids in a local hotel. After the meal, grandpa is charged with taking each child for a walk to visit the game room, wander through boutiques, look at paintings in the hallways, ride up and down the elevator, and peer out of windows on the different floors. With the forward-facing babies, I always make a point of chattering continuously in a soothing manner. One might not think that infants would care for discussions about the wax candles in the shops, the relative merits of two paintings, the weather, or the cars in the parking lot, but they soak it up. All the while, I encourage them to look, touch (one never knows what floor button they’ll hit in the elevator), talk (babble), and take turns.

3.

*Let young children, for a while at least, be the center of the family universe.* The internationally-known researcher, Urie Bronfenbrenner, observed that every child needs at least one adult who is “irrationally crazy” about her or him. For a time, it can be desirable for the child to be the main focus of our attention. In *Starting Out Right*, Nancy Leffert, Peter Benson, and Jolene Roehlkepartain noted that, for healthy mental and emotional growth to take place, children require some specific “developmental assets.” For infants and toddlers, these include support (e.g., high levels of affection, positive family communication, the presence of significant others, and an encouraging climate), constructive use of time (supervision and exposure to creative activities at home and elsewhere), and empowerment (e.g., valuing, protecting, and involving children, placing them at the center of family life).

4.

*Give young children the most important gift we have to give, time!* Educators often make a mistake here. All too frequently, they come home after a frenetic day working with children, and they just don’t

want to see another kid. Yet their own await. In today’s fast-paced world, too many adults, virtually consumed by their jobs, rationalize neglect by saying that they enjoy “quality time” with their young children. What this usually means is that they’re simply not giving enough time. A great deal is lost by parents who mistakenly think they can “make it up to the kids later.” If you find you’re not providing enough enrichment during your children’s early years, change your priorities. Setting aside a “family night” might be one good place to start. For a decade and a half, we spent each Friday together as a family, with the children picking the evening’s entertainment (I still bitterly resent the fact that I had to sit through both of the *Care Bear* movies). It isn’t always easy finding the time, but find it nonetheless.

5.

*Teach responsibility.* Although it is natural to want to do almost everything for little children, preschoolers are quite capable of managing simple tasks around the home, helping out with younger siblings, and making choices. To be allowed to help others teaches valuable lessons about altruism and compassion, lessons we want talented young children to learn. During family trips, preschoolers can become “cartographers,” showing us where we’ve been, where we are, and where we’re going. At weddings (we do take even young children to such events in our family), children learn the meaning of kinship, giving, celebration, and, if properly guided, acceptable behavior. Parents, of course, must set the limits. As Haim Ginott noted, it might often be a mistake to expect a four-year-old girl to pick out her own clothes, but she can learn something about responsibility and decision making by selecting from among three outfits deemed suitable by mom and dad.

6.

*Model appropriate behavior.* It’s easy to slip into the “do-as-I-say-not-as-I-do” trap. A co-worker of mine recalls when his daughter was a preschooler. She enjoyed sitting beside him in the front seat of the car, pretending to drive the vehicle. One

memorable day when engaged in this activity, she looked out the window and bellowed: “Get out of the way you stupid ass!” My colleague knew it was time to make some behavioral adjustments of his own. If you want children to stay on task, model stick-to-itiveness; if you want them to read, read; if you want them to be excited about learning, show enthusiasm for your own projects. For young children, silent modeling may not be enough. State what you are doing out loud, so they notice and understand.

7.

*Never say no to a book.* Even with infants and toddlers, make frequent visits to book stores and libraries. As soon as they're able, let children (again within limits) choose their own material. There's plenty available for the young reader. Waterproof books for babies in the bath; picture books; hands-on activity books, and beautifully illustrated stories. Reading to young children daily will help build in a love of books and a sense for the flow, rhythm, and beauty of printed language.

8.

*Infuse learning school-readiness skills with joy and excitement.* More and more educators recommend that we begin teaching the fundamentals of reading and math to capable preschoolers. What is called a spiral curriculum involves introducing complex concepts early, and then redeveloping them in increasingly abstract ways over the years. Respect the pace of the child and, since risk taking is an essential ingredient for effective learning, make it safe to experiment and make mistakes. Learning to count, to recite the alphabet, and to recognize numbers and letters should be fun. Many television programs and videos are educational, but be selective. From an early age, drawing and writing also should be encouraged. If possible, preschoolers should have their own black or whiteboards. Artwork and writing samples should be displayed proudly – isn't that why fridge magnets were invented? My wife and I put up the children's products outside our offices at university. After a few weeks, new masterpieces replace the old displays. In addition, in this day and



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age it would be negligent not to embrace technology and expose young children to it. It's amazing to see what some two- and three-year-olds can do on a computer.

9.

*Strike a balance between nurturing specific talent strengths and creating well-rounded individuals.* Encourage and help young children to identify and run with their strengths, for it takes time, commitment, and hard work to develop talents to their fullest. On the other hand, also be mindful of the need to be well rounded. Don't immediately force young children into one particular area, but rather let them explore and allow their talents to unfold naturally. The ancient Greeks emphasized the “golden mean,” where the truly talented individual was seen as having interests and abilities in a variety of domains. Early overspecialization in a single realm can be limiting, and cause other talents to be overlooked.

10.

*Strive for positive home-school communication, cooperation, and collaboration.* Sometimes parents may have a somewhat biased view of their children's abilities, and perhaps that's as it should be. Unfortunately, in many cases, I have seen teachers dismiss out-of-hand some logical and well-founded parental concerns about meeting the enrichment needs of children. Sensitive parents are the ones best positioned to make accurate observations about their youngsters; they shouldn't be hesitant, in a positive way, to share information, ideas, and expectations with teachers, even in nursery and kindergarten. However, while I feel parents should make their voices heard, it's also important not to be too shrill; non-adversarial home-school interaction usually works best. When school personnel lack awareness, time, or resources, and are unable to respond sufficiently, parents and others should be willing to help out and pick up the slack. As the editor of this magazine has emphasized in his work, education should not be seen as the responsibility of the school alone; it should ultimately occur within an “ecosystem of learning.” Enrichment can and should take place in school, in the home, at the computer, on

athletic fields, and in community clubs, churches, museums, theaters, and other potentially stimulating locales.

Incidentally, feeling guilty after writing suggestion #4, I forced myself—tired as I was—to head home for time with Hunter. The moment I opened the door, she held up a shoe horn and asked what it was. After I told her the name, she ran around trying to blow into and play it. Exhausted and longing for bed, my wife and I nevertheless clarified the true purpose of shoe horns, chatted with Hunter about her day, read her a book, watched and discussed the ramifications of a Disney cartoon, and essentially added another page to our own little talent development project. That night it was challenging for us, but after all, that is what it takes to become an enriching parent or grandparent. 🏠

*After 25 years as a special educator, psychologist, and senior administrator in the public school system, Dr. Ken McCluskey now serves as an Associate Professor for the Bachelor of Education Program at The University of Winnipeg. He has published many articles and books on enrichment and talent development.*

FOR ADDITIONAL READING

Leffert, N., Benson, P. L., & Roehlkepartain, J. L. (1997). *Starting Out Right: Developmental Assets for Children*. Minneapolis: Search Institute.

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