THE IMPORTANCE of BEING EARLY

A CASE FOR PRESCHOOL ENRICHMENT

by Ken W. McCluskey

In 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-
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 grandparents 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 cousins 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
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Burton White, a proponent of the
early experience view, suggests that the
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According to White, it is important to
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and materials in the home. Another key is
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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.
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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 unfortu-
nate 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 back-
grounds. 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 gradu-
ation. 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 his 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 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.

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FOR ADDITIONAL READING
