



The Natural Passions of Children

By Mary O. Parker

As Linda Sullivan looked out at the glazed eyes of her fourth-graders she knew she had to do something quickly. They'd just finished reading about maps and their enthusiasm for learning about the different places of the world had waned more with each turning page of the textbook.

Remembering that her students liked to congregate around the classroom globe, she picked it up and asked, "Who wants to hold this while we talk some more about maps?" Hands shot up and voices cried out, "Me! Me! Me!" Suddenly the classroom came back to life.

Even kids who didn't usually participate were halfway out of their seats so their hands could reach higher into the air.

Just minutes before, the children had obviously been bored with the concept of a map, but suddenly, at the idea of looking at yet another one, they were excited as could be. What was happening?

"I'd tapped into one of their natural passions," explains the Portland schoolteacher. "Kids love to think about exploring the world and seeing new places and to them the globe represents that like a map in a textbook for some reason doesn't."

But what was it about this particular experience that engaged the kids so much? Based on the ongoing research of Dr. Laura Schulz, assistant professor of cognitive science at MIT, it was likely the fact that exploration was involved.

"Passion is the emotional component that exploration can give. It's that desire for the 'ah-ha' moment when we engage in discovery," Schulz explains.

In Sullivan's classroom, the globe offered the children a doorway to creating an "ah-ha" moment for themselves. It gave them the chance to make their own discoveries and reap the emotional rewards of doing so.

Kids' Natural Passions Under Attack

Sullivan and others like her are smart enough to recognize the need to tap into the natural passions of kids, but educators are finding that opportunities to do so are lessening with each passing year.

“Children are naturally passionate learners,” says Portland-based therapist Anne Allanketner. However, she adds, “These days we tend to be taking our children lockstep through a canned curriculum.”

Kevin Hall, a child development specialist with the Newburg school district, agrees that placing too much emphasis on testing the basics is partially at fault for stifling children’s natural passions. “There is value in learning to work within what is socially acceptable but also holding onto what makes us unique and driven,” he says.

Schools aren’t the only places where kids’ zest for discovery is under attack. Children are finding their natural ardor squelched in many other arenas from overly structured extra-curricular schedules to homeowners’ associations that discourage outdoor exploration because of litigation fears.

Too many kids today live overly compartmentalized lives that keep “ah-ha” moments at bay. But, experts stress that childhood experiences that give birth to such opportunities are a crucial part of growing into an emotionally healthy person.

“In the field of Gestalt psychology,” explains Portland-area child therapist Margaret Schilling, “we talk of ‘health’ as the integration of our body, including all five senses, our emotions, and our intellect.”

“The modern society we live in, unfortunately, does not support children’s natural desire to integrate these different parts of themselves. Instead, we offer many one-dimensional activities such as television, computers, worksheets, paper and pencil tests, lectures, etc.”

Allanketner agrees, citing television in particular as a passion-killer. “T.V. galvanizes children’s intense concentration without developing their relational, expressive, and learning functions.” Even when the tube is off, television’s effects continue to cheat kids of their “ah-ha” moments by causing them to “lose their own inner-world development.”

Why Are Children’s Passions Important?

In addition to exploration, what other sorts of activities do children’s natural passions encompass? Experts cite music, dance, relationships, art-making, spending time in nature, and creative play as some of the most compelling.

According to Schilling, “Children naturally seek these experiences,” allowing them to tap into “a sensation that we experience when all aspects of ourselves are being used at once.” At times like these, she says, “We have a satisfying feeling of integration of many parts of ourselves, a synthesis of who we are.” Such satisfaction is truly the ultimate emotional payoff received when “we engage our bodies, our emotions, our intellect, and our spirit in one common purpose.”

Therein lies the key to defining children’s passions and their importance. At their truest, they allow for whole-body experiences that encourage intuitive exploration because, as Schilling puts it, “Using all parts of ourselves creates a sense of self.”

“Children feel deeply and with their whole bodies, their whole beings,” says Allanketner. “This is the natural state of all people, yet adults have been trained to mitigate, delay, and sometimes lose their natural intensity.”

Schilling says, “Children who have been engaged with all parts of themselves tend to be better at abstraction and exploring concepts from many dimensions.” She cites, as an example, a discussion about an apple. “A child who can abstract is more likely to draw on sensory experiences with an apple, remembering going apple picking: the brisk air, the apple with the worm, hands sticky with juice. These are the types of reflections that evolve into poetry, essays, and short stories.”

And, more importantly, “These are the kinds of experiences that make children passionate writers or passionate scientists.”

In her classroom, Sullivan says she’s certain passion plays an important role. “Without it, I wonder what would drive kids to seek understanding and the emotional rewards that come with it.”

But, its role may diminish the longer kids are in school. As Hall explains, “Once formal education begins children feel an urging to study what others want them to study.”

How Can We Nurture Kids’ Passions?

Hall says, “We know through learning theory that only those behaviors that are reinforced tend to endure.” Thus, we can nurture kids’ natural passions by reinforcing much more than simple curiosity; we can reinforce opportunities to engage in natural passions.

One of Hall’s suggestions is to take a deeper look at concepts such as Dr. Howard Gardner’s theory of



multiple intelligences. Gardner, a Harvard professor, believes that public schools place far too much emphasis on being word and math smart and ignore other ways kids can be smart. He suggests that, as a community, we “broaden our scope of what intelligence can look like.”

The best childhood experiences naturally blend different aspects of the experience into a meaningful whole. In the same way, they also support a child’s natural desire to integrate the different parts of herself.

Allanketner provides an example of successfully doing just that. She uses nature, one of kids’ most vibrant passions, as her theme: “Time in natural settings allows a child to have relational passion with trees and streams, with the earth. Learning about the natural world happens as the child asks questions and experiences tactile connection. He also learns to view himself within the natural context.”

The danger of not nurturing children’s natural passions, says Hall, is that, “We lose a part of each child.” And, when parts are missing how is a child to integrate himself into a meaningful whole?

Mary O. Parker is a freelance writer who brings her own natural passions to her writing. She’s interested in how to help children grow up into healthy and happy adults.

