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What is Enrichment?

Parents, particularly in New York, feel a great deal of pressure to provide outside “enrichment” for their children in addition to the preschool experience. It seems that almost every type of class is available now to children under five: cooking, jewelry-making, golf, music, foreign languages, reading and math. We want to encourage parents to remember the indispensable value of unstructured time to young children’s learning and development.

What is enrichment?

A walk to the playground or a trip to the grocery store is enrichment. Any time you go out with your child, you will find many things to notice and talk about. Simply sharing an experience with your child provides you both with pleasure. You have the opportunity to play with words, to share humor and imagination. When you take time to have a conversation with a small child you are showing that you enjoy your child’s company, respect your child’s ideas, and are interested to hear what your child thinks about.

Reading aloud is enrichment. When you take the time to sit down and read to your child you are exposing your child to a world of imagination. Your child can ask questions, think about story plots and characters, or learn new information. You communicate that you find reading important and enjoyable. When your child is developmentally ready to begin reading and writing, she will already have established a love of books and storytelling and a basic familiarity with the way books work.

The Downtown Little School experience is enrichment. Young children learn best by doing. They learn about the world by touching, seeing, and listening. They learn about cause and effect as they move through space, manipulate objects, and interact with adults and peers. This need for hands-on learning informs our approach here at the Little School where children work primarily with real materials: blocks, sand, water, paint, paper, fabric, clay. Cooking projects involve tasting, smelling, pouring, mixing, kneading. Planting projects

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involve messy hands and spilled water. Social interaction among children, guided as unobtrusively as possible by adults, is viewed as an essential part of the school experience. And, perhaps above all, we provide an environment that combines clear structure and routines with freedom for each child to follow her own interests and ideas.

Music, art, tumbling or other classes can be enrichment too. Best are classes that provide children with the opportunity to 'do' as opposed to classes that rely on adults always talking and showing children what to do. Children need opportunities to explore materials, ideas, movement. Children learn and find fun in different ways and at different rates. Classes that include lots of waiting, learning of rules, or developmentally inappropriate academic prep are ones to steer clear of.

And, do not underestimate the high enrichment value of open-ended time spent at home or at a park or playground. When children have time to themselves they develop imagination, creativity, and self-motivation. They are free to follow their own ideas and interests. They learn to create their own fun and make independent choices. When children play with a friend on a playdate or with a group at the playground they develop key social skills. They learn to listen to the ideas of others and assert their own. They learn how to join in games and how to resolve conflicts.

We speak often against the push for early academic learning, particularly when it comes at the expense of the social and emotional learning that children are meant to do in early childhood. An emphasis on social and emotional learning gives children many of the foundational skills for later academic achievement. Delaying gratification, learning to argue and compromise, problem solving with concrete materials and ideas, are all fundamental to academic success and success in the workplace too.

Over the years, skills that used to be taught in first grade began to be expected of kindergarteners, and then of preschoolers. Children have stayed the same,

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but societal pressures on both parents and children have intensified. Children who are heavily 'prepped' for kindergarten do not do any better academically over time than children who are not, but even this is not the main reason that we discourage a focus on academics. We believe that the best possible preparation for school is the kind of enrichment we have described here—enrichment that encourages a child's sense of wonder, her active imagination, her ability to relate to other people, her willingness to try new things, her drive to explore, her independence, and her natural, unforced love of learning.

Kate & Meredith