

THE PRINCIPLES OF PLAYFUL INQUIRY

By Susan Harris MacKay

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What is the role of adults in playful inquiry?

Our research practices at Opal School and at Portland Children's Museum have offered us the opportunity to observe, interpret and reflect on countless interactions between children and the adults who are their caregivers. On any given day, we see children and grandparents, parents, caregivers and extended families. We see our own volunteers and play guides interacting with children who visit our museum exhibits and studios. We see children and their teachers in our preschool through fifth grade classrooms. From this vantage point and within the context of current research from the fields of the neurosciences, developmental psychology and education, we've developed some ideas intended to support adults in their desire to be productive and inspiring companions to the children in their care.

We have found the following ideas help to guide adult interactions with children in playful inquiry.

Adults can... **Inspire Curiosity.**

We have found that when adults pay attention to the interests of children, children get serious about learning. The more they expect to be listened to, the more curious they become about their experiences. Children come into the world wired to try and make sense of it. When we pay attention to the things that children seem to wonder about, learning becomes joyful and a sense of wonder is established and sustained.

We encourage adults to listen to children and ponder questions together that neither of them knows the answers to. As noted Stanford professor Elliott Eisner reminds us, "Unanswerable questions should be a source of comfort. They ensure that you will always have something to think about! But why do puzzlements provide satisfaction? Because they invite the most precious of human abilities to take wing. I speak of imagination, the neglected stepchild of American education."

A curious mind is an alert mind, and one that is primed for learning. Alertness, focus and attention are the keys to developing strong pathways in the brain because the physiological process of developing those pathways relies on them (Merzenich, 2008; Neville, 2008). Children attend to meaning because it motivates and engages them. They benefit tremendously from the company of a curious, attentive adult who is willing to share his or her own meaning making process authentically and generously.

Adults have the opportunity to create environments that are as rich in possibilities for curiosity and discovery as an old growth forest or a beach at low tide. Classroom environments should encourage children to become lost in their play, and adults to let them.

Adults can remember to... **Explore Playfully.**

Playfulness is an attitude of freedom, joy, possibility, and imagination. It is a quality of genius

(Armstrong, 1998). An essential aptitude (Pink, 2005). In play, we have the opportunity to reinvent the world we find around us. Adults can offer children the opportunity to explore art, nature, mathematics, literature, geography, technology or anything else they want children to learn—and they can do it with a playful attitude.

During play, focus is often so intense that all sense of time is lost. A mind that has been playfully and freely associating is “primed to tackle new ideas” (Paley, 2005).

In playful inquiry, the idea isn’t so much to avoid or distract ourselves from reality as it is to find a personal way to interpret and make meaning of it. In play our minds have the best opportunity to make meaning and connections because we are free from the consequence of mistakes and the fear of being wrong. The pleasurable emotions associated with play relax our neural pathways and free them up for layered and multi-dimensional growth.

Adults encourage children to explore playfully when environments are thoughtfully prepared with playful inquiry in mind. But opportunities increase when adults approach their own work from a stance of playful exploration themselves. Adults can observe children with these questions in mind:

- What environments, experiences or materials elicit the greatest delight?
- What environments, experiences or materials sustain children’s interests and play for the longest periods of time?
- What questions do children seem to be asking within the environment?
- What environments or experiences tend to invite the most collaboration between children?

Based on these observations, how can we create new possibilities for joy, wonder and inspiration?

Adults can support children to... **Seek Connections.**

A connection feels like a hole in your heart that has just been filled. —Olive, age 8

We have come to believe that the quality of our learning is determined by the quality of our relationships-- our ability to have them with others, and our ability to perceive them in our world. Without question, children benefit from the support of a caring adult who is willing to enter into a genuine relationship. Respect, trust and love lay the foundation for the emotional state most conducive for the learning brain. But equally important, is the support we give to children for seeing relationships, patterns, and connections in the world. Definitions of creativity are hard to pin down, but all have a similar theme: crossing boundaries, seeing relationships other people haven’t noticed, and the ability to make novel connections between old familiar parts (Pink, 2005; Rinaldi, 2005; Robinson, 2001). Playful inquiry thrives in an environment rich with possibilities for the arts, sciences, and language.

Creative work is play... The creative mind plays with the object it loves. Artists play with color and space. Musicians play with sound and silence. Children play with everything they can get their hands on.

—Stephen Nachmanovitch, 1990

There are many opportunities to support and encourage connections between children, teachers, families, materials, the natural world and ideas. Connections are the building blocks that strengthen creativity and are one of the most powerful learning tools supported by playful inquiry. Adults invite children to discover connections and relationships when environments support children to slow down and get lost in their play. Important connections range from concrete and hands-on work with materials, to abstract ideas conveyed through themes and activities. Children may make connections with clay, blocks, or by manipulating a water flow. They make connections when they engage in spontaneous and improvisational theater in a dramatic play area. They make connections when they consider the many

shades of green they can make with watercolor paint after spending time observing the ferns in the forest. They make connections when they experience big ideas between books and songs. Connections help create complex wiring in our brains.

In order to support children's innate drive to connect, see and create relationships, adults can provide a child with loose parts (for example, blocks, found objects, natural materials), art materials and time to tinker. They can appreciate and encourage the use of metaphor. And adults can talk with children about what they see. They can marvel over and celebrate novel ideas, and delight in children's tremendous capacity to create them.

Adults can encourage children to... **Share Stories.**

Stories are how we remember, how we think, how we communicate, how we understand. In his book, *The Literary Mind*, cognitive scientist Mark Turner writes, "Story is the fundamental instrument of thought." (in Pink, 2005, p. 101) Opportunities for playful inquiry are enhanced within environments that contain abundant invitations for story making and story sharing. Stories are how we take the parts of our lives and make a meaningful whole.

Over time, in our memories, the story of our life becomes our life. Playful inquiry opens the door for that story to be defined by success and contentment. In 2002, psychologist Jerome Bruner told an audience in Reggio Emilia, Italy, that children learn the syntax of language in order to tell stories. It is important that we listen to them.

It is equally important that adults tell children their own stories. Adults can put children on their laps and transport them through time and space with those found in books. And when children grow too big adults can sit side by side, eye to eye, arm in arm – and keep the reading and telling of stories alive in a child's world.

Remember this one thing, said Badger. The stories people tell have a way of taking care of them. If stories come to you, care for them. And learn to give them away where they are needed. Sometimes a person needs a story more than food to stay alive. That is why we put these stories in each other's memories. This is how people care for themselves.

–Barry Lopez, Crow and Weasel (1998)

Open-ended environments such as dramatic play and block spaces, forts or other shelters, or child-sized versions of familiar places like grocery stores or doctors' offices, naturally lend themselves to rich storytelling and imagining.

Adults also have the opportunity to tell the stories of their own experience through the documentation of playful inquiry. By taking the time to photograph and narrate stories of experiences and observations, adults can make visible their professional interpretations of the importance of those experiences. Quotes, photographs and narrative accounts have the effect of slowing down an event so that it is easier to appreciate. Moments of playful inquiry are filled with treasures to last a lifetime. Documentation offers adults a tool to stop motion, to shine a light on those treasures and to let them sparkle. When carefully displayed, these stories and photographs allow adults a concrete connection to the importance of play for the children they care for. As Badger advises us to do—we can put these stories in each other's memories. They will help us take care of ourselves.

Adults can... **Nurture Empathy.**

Empathy is that incredible human capacity to imagine ourselves standing in someone else's shoes. Empathy is what allows us to connect with other human beings and to experience the meaning and joy in knowing we are not alone. Empathy is what allows us to live by the golden rule. When we are empathetic to another's experience, it is impossible to do what we would not have done to ourselves. The challenge to imagine other perspectives, to seek connection between our own stories and those of people whose

experiences are very different from our own, is at the very heart of genuine inquiry and one of its most powerful uses. In her 2008 Harvard commencement address, the author of the Harry Potter series, JK Rowling, spoke of the power of empathy:

Unlike any other creature on this planet, humans can learn and understand, without having experienced. They can think themselves into other people's minds, imagine themselves into other people's places.

...many prefer not to exercise their imaginations at all. They choose to remain comfortably within the bounds of their own experience, never troubling to wonder how it would feel to have been born other than they are. They can refuse to hear screams or to peer inside cages; they can close their minds and hearts to any suffering that does not touch them personally; they can refuse to know.

I might be tempted to envy people who can live that way, except that I do not think they have any fewer nightmares than I do. ... I think the willfully unimaginative see more monsters. They are often more afraid.

What is more, those who choose not to empathize may enable real monsters. For without ever committing an act of outright evil ourselves, we collude with it, through our own apathy.

We enable healthy relationships when we support and encourage children's social play and collaborative work. Adults can make emotions visible by naming them and being curious about the behaviors associated with them. We can try to ask questions before we jump to conclusions. It makes sense to invest in a child's social and emotional intelligence as an integral and vital part of creativity, intellect, and healthy development. Adults model caring by listening to children, and asking questions about the interpretations he or she makes of experiences. Adults can talk with children about the things they care about and let children see what it looks like to take action on behalf of those things. Adults provide critical support for children to build awareness of unfairness in this world and for helping a child learn to cope with and respond to it appropriately.

No human being can achieve his full potential if his creativity is stunted in childhood. And no nation can thrive in the 21st century without a highly creative and innovative workforce. Nor will democracy survive without citizens who can form their own independent thoughts and act on them.

—Miller and Almon (2009)

If the guiding principles for supporting and promoting playful inquiry seem pretty simple, and maybe even a little old-fashioned, it's because they are. As it turns out, these simple things—telling stories, connecting with one another, being curious about the world, seeking meaning, and even being good to one another (Goleman, 2006), are hard-wired into our species. In other words, we're not broken—but some of our current systems most certainly are. In our efforts to organize, industrialize, strategize, standardize—we've lost our way, and we've obscured the creative birthright of many who've happened along. Placing a value on our natural learning strategies in our communities and our institutions will help shift our culture towards a sustainable future.

To be responsive to a child's innate sense of wonder is to help choreograph a life-long dance with the world that we experience and create as we live out our lives. Environments steeped in playful inquiry support children to grow into adults who have an understanding of their own capacities—who's minds have richly developed pathways layered with possibilities for new and flexible connections. These are minds that can solve complex problems, invent novel solutions, imagine another's perspective, and communicate with confidence and competence. These are the kinds of minds that create peaceful, sustainable, and happy communities.

For those who would be neuroscientists, a love of mathematics and technology (and time to play) might lead to the kinds of studies that are beginning to connect the relationships between the use of the arts

and general cognition. Such scientists are finding that the study of music and drama support strong neural strategies for long-term memory (Jonides, 2008). Others have found connections between the study of music and the development of attention (Neville, 2008). Still others have found that genetic predispositions to certain art forms lead to high interest and competence in those art forms (Posner, 2008). In other words, it turns out that Nachmanovitch was right: the creative mind plays with the object it loves (1990).

For those who would be educators, a love of learning (and time to play) might lead to the kind of recognition that Stanford professor, Elliot Eisner (2002), makes visible when he writes:

The aim of education ought to be conceived as the preparation of artists...individuals who have developed the ideas, the sensibilities, the skills and the imagination to create work that is well proportioned, skillfully executed, and imaginative, regardless of the domain in which an individual works. The highest accolade we can confer upon someone is to say that he or she is an artist whether as a carpenter or a surgeon, a cook or an engineer, a physicist, or a teacher. The fine arts have no monopoly on the artistic.

For those who would be poets, a love of words (and time to play) might lead to the kind of questions Mary Oliver (2008) posed in her poem, *The Summer Day*:

*Tell me, what else should I have done?
Doesn't everything die at last, and too soon?
Tell me, what is it you plan to do
with your one wild and precious life?*

Or the advice that 10-year-old Byron offers in his poem:

*Curiosity Killer
Curiosity should not be killed.
It's made to ponder, to explore.
Get to a place
Where your mind can wander.
Ponder the unpondered
Questions.*

Both poets invite us into a playful inquiry that inspires us to muse on our opportunities and our choices. What are we willing to imagine? To wonder? To dream?

There is a vitality, a life force, an energy, a quickening, that is translated through you into action, and because there is only one of you in all time, this expression is unique. And if you block it, it will never exist through any other medium and will be lost.

—Martha Graham
Dancer and Choreographer in Nachmanovitch

Playful inquiry is the means to tapping into a child's energy, and unblocking every child's capacity for expression. When learning environments promote playful inquiry, our communities will benefit from the voices of children now, and launch into the future citizens that have the creativity, the curiosity, and the care to live happy, healthy lives with one another.

RESOURCES AND REFERENCES:

Play: How It Shapes the Brain, Opens the Imagination, and Invigorates the Soul, by Stuart Brown

Living by Wonder: The Imaginative Life of Childhood, by Richard Lewis

Crisis in the Kindergarten: Why Children Need to Play in School, by Edward Miller and Joan Almon

Free Play: The Power of Improvisation in Life and the Arts, by Stephen Nachmanovitch

Out of Our Minds: Learning to Be Creative, by Ken Robinson

A Child's Work: The Importance of Fantasy Play, by Vivian Gussin Paley

What Can Education Learn From the Arts About the Practice of Education?, by Elliott Eisner

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