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Ten Things All Children Need

Jennifer Birckmayer

Children's books can be a valuable resource for those of us who work with child-care providers, teachers, parents or parents-to-be. Sharing a well written, beautifully illustrated book with a young child can:

- 1) Provide mutual delight and satisfaction to both child and adult.
- 2) Reinforce relationships of trust and attachment.
- 3) Remind adults of what it is like to be a child.
- 4) Reflect how far we've come in understanding child development, children's needs, interests and fears.
- 5) Enable adults to communicate with children about issues that may be difficult to address directly in conversation (death, sexuality, separation etc.).
- 6) Present, in attractive easy-to-read form, ways for parents to help children with developmental problems (separation, food jags, bedtime issues, for examples).

Many parent education programs begin with an overview of child growth and development, or move directly into a presentation of child rearing strategies. We have chosen instead to begin with a description of our beliefs about the needs of young children. In our experience, beliefs about children are powerful influences on the ways adults will plan and implement programs for families – or for adults or children alone.

It is therefore desirable and necessary to articulate the values we hold in order to understand the ways in which they are reflected in programs for which we have responsibility. Beliefs and values stem from many sources. Personal experience and culture are certainly of primary importance, but professional training and work experience, conversations with other parents and colleagues, social groups, research findings, mentors, media information and mis-information combine in unique ways to influence each of us.

We present our "ten things all children need" as an example of the process of self-examination we found to be useful. The process itself is more important than our conclusions, as others who engage in the same attempt to articulate beliefs may come up with a very different list. We chose to illustrate each "need" with a children's book because:

- 1) Choosing an appropriate book provided an additional intellectual challenge
- 2) The process of choosing reaffirmed our belief that good children's books do indeed reflect how far we have come in our understanding of young children
- 3) It was fun to do and gave us a chance to re-examine some favorite books from a different perspective.

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Ten Things All Children Need

1. Children's basic needs for food, clothing and shelter are met in ways that let them know they are respected.

We are fortunate to live in a country that is rich in resources, in information and in human services. It is sobering to realize that, even in the U.S., there are many children who are hungry, destitute and homeless. These are children who will find it difficult, if not impossible to learn. Our first priority must be to meet their most basic needs.

Once these needs are met, we move to the kind of family scenario described and illustrated in *Feast for Ten* by Cathryn Falwell (New York: Clarion Books, 1993). In this picture book, a mother takes her young children grocery shopping. After shopping, the family returns home and the father comes out to carry the baby. The family then prepares a meal, eaten together with grandparents at the table.



2. Children are engaged in sustained relationships with one or more caring adults.

In 1979, psychologist Urie Bronfenbrenner said, "Learning and development are facilitated by the participation of the developing person in progressively more complex patterns of reciprocal activity with someone with whom that person has a strong and enduring attachment and where the balance of power gradually shifts in favor of the developing person." In plain English, "What every child needs most is someone who is crazy about him (or her)." The importance of one or more adults in the lives of children is documented in the research on social-emotional and cognitive well-being.

The Wednesday Surprise by Eve Bunting (New York: Clarion Books, 1989) is a story about a young girl and her grandmother who get together every Wednesday to prepare a special surprise for the girl's father.



3. Children receive positive attention from at least one adult every day.

James Garbarino, author of *Lost Boys*, quotes one of the incarcerated young men he interviewed as saying "I'd rather be wanted for murder than not be wanted at all." Geoffrey Canada, in his book *Fist, Stick, Knife, Gun* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995, p 145) describes testimony from children before the Senate Judiciary Committee:

One young boy in particular, only seven years old, told the poignant and revealing story of his young life, of how he had seen two people killed in his Central Harlem neighborhood and how gunshots were fairly common. He had eventually stopped going to school and with two older boys robbed other children of their money and sometimes clothing. He explained how a (Rheedlen) worker had changed his life and that now he hardly ever missed school and his grades were much improved. He was asked how the worker had reached him. His answer: 'He made a deal with me. If I went to school and did well, he would take me to a fancy restaurant once a week.' When asked what kind of fancy restaurant he was taken to, he answered, 'Ah, you know, Wendy's - that kind.'

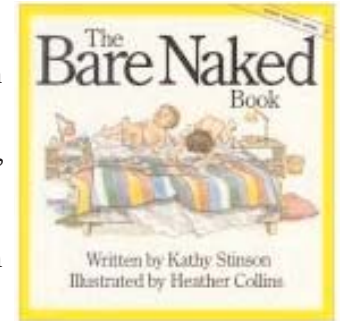
In *The Snowy Day* by Ezra Jack Keats (New York: Clarion Books, 1989), a little boy has wonderful adventures alone in the snow, but the reassuring presence of his mother is revealed when he goes inside to tell her "all about his adventures while she took off his wet socks."



4. Children can ask questions to which they receive thoughtful answers and they are encouraged to play out their own ideas.

Great thinkers like John Dewey and John Piaget have helped us understand the importance of curiosity and hands-on experience in learning. In a recent edition of *Young Children* (May, 2003, p.50), David Elkind wrote, "We need to resist the pressures to transform play into work -into academic instruction. We encourage true play by making certain that we offer materials that leave room for the imagination - blocks, paints, paper to be cut and pasted - and that children have sufficient time to innovate with these materials. When we read to young children, we can ask them to make up their own stories or to give a different ending to the story they are hearing."

Most children are curious about the parts and wonderful ways of their own bodies. *The Bare Naked Book* by Kathy Stinson (Toronto: Annick Press, 1986) provides rich material upon which adults can base thoughtful answers to children's questions. Detailed pictures and brief text describe every part of the human body from hair to toes – and everything in between.



5. Children receive more positive than negative adult responses to behavior and ideas.

"Authoritative" rather than "authoritarian" or "permissive" discipline appears to be most effective in encouraging independence and learning within a comfortable framework of guidance and limits.

"Children appear to do best when parents are warm and supportive, spend generous amounts of time with children, monitor children's behavior, expect children to follow rules, encourage open communication, and react to misbehavior with discussion rather than harsh punishment." Amato, Paul and Fowler, Frieda. "Parenting Practices, Child Adjustment, and Family Diversity." *Journal of Marriage and Family*: Number 64, August 2002; p.704.

The parenting style, documented by Amato and Fowler as effective, is warmly revealed in *When Sophie Gets Angry - Really, Really Angry* by Mollie Bang (New York: Scholastic, 1999) Sophie's mother calmly insists that it is her sister's turn to play with Gorilla. After throwing a gigantic temper tantrum, Sophie finds that her parents are still calm and loving.



6. Children experience predictability and stability in daily life.

It's long been acknowledged that predictable routines and stability foster feelings of emotional security in children. More recently, research on brain development has underscored the important relationship between healthy emotions and optimum mental functioning. If a person is nervous, worried, afraid, depressed, agitated or upset, it is difficult to focus on learning. A predictable routine (with some flexibility) allows a child to relax in the knowledge of "what comes next" and to concentrate on immediate experiences.

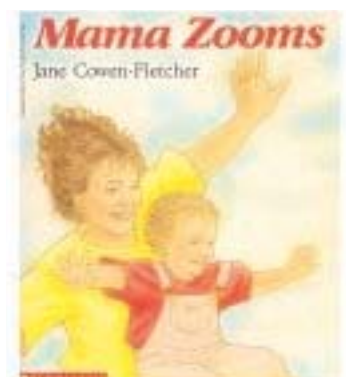
In *Say Goodnight* (New York: Aladdin Books, 1987), a board book for babies and toddlers, children's author Helen Oxenbury describes a sequence of activities leading to "hush little babies, say goodnight" with reassuring predictability.

7. Children engage in enjoyable, developmentally appropriate play activities with other children and adults.

"The major defining characteristics of play are positive affect, active engagement, intrinsic motivation, freedom from external rules, attention to process rather than product, and nonliterality." Klein et al. "Play - Children's Context in Development." *Young Children*: May 2003; p.38. In this article, the authors list the following suggestions for facilitating and supporting children's play (pp.40-41):

1. Focus on the process (rather than the product).
2. Elaborate or build on the children's play or interests. (Make comments, offer new or varied materials.)
3. Reflect the emotions children express in play.
4. Define the problem. Help children learn negotiation skills. Encourage them to think about alternatives.
5. Provide varied materials and encourage exploration.
6. Provide open-ended materials for play.

A mother and child have exciting playful adventures together in *Mama Zooms* by Jane Cowen-Fletcher (New York: Scholastic, 1993). Not until the end of the book does the reader discover that Mama's zooming machine is a wheelchair.



8. *Children's contributions are valued.*

Crayon marks on a page as a Father's Day card. Burnt toast and juice ("cause I'm not allowed to touch the stove") for Mom's breakfast in bed. A bouquet of dandelions. And the look of uncertain delight as a young child bestows these precious gifts. Sensitive adults are truly appreciative of such efforts. But sometimes equally well-intentioned efforts are more difficult to accept. A child pours a glass of juice - but doesn't know when to stop pouring. A toddler attempts to "help" by carrying a bowl across the kitchen - and drops it. A three-year-old draws a beautiful picture to welcome grandma - but she draws it on the living room wall. Adults will have to call up reservoirs of patience and understanding to see the intentions behind disastrous actions. Unlike other cultures in which very young children may be required to care for babies, cook and clean, it's hard to find legitimate opportunities for children to be useful in the U.S. But self-confidence and feelings of competence can grow from "being useful."

In *The Wednesday Surprise* by Eve Bunting (New York: Clarion Books, 1989), a young girl and her grandmother meet every week to plan Daddy's birthday surprise. When the big day finally comes, Daddy's mother reads to him for the very first time - just as the little girl taught her!

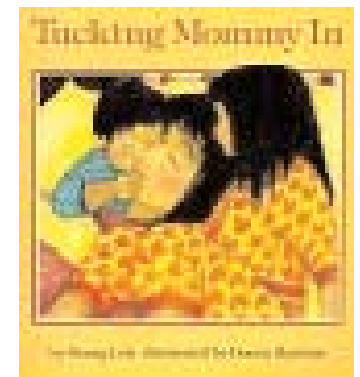


9. *Children are taught the rules of social behavior in a way that will enable them to become morally responsible adults.*

Research on effective parenting supports the notion that warmth, support, gentle limits and parental involvement are the ways to establishing conscience in young children. (Amato and Fowler, 2002; Baumrind, 1994; Steinberg, 1994)

Children learn self-regulating skills in a responsive social and material environment that provides opportunities for effective action and is predictable enough to allow children to recognize the effects of their efforts. They develop internal control of emotions and behavior in a warm and trustworthy environment where responsible action is modeled, approved and expected, and guidance strategies involve clarifying the effects of actions and problem-solving approaches to difficulties or disagreements. (Martha Bronson. *Young Children*: January 2000; p.36)

In *Tucking Mommy In* by Morag Loh (New York: Orchard Books, 1987), two children see that their mother is tired and lovingly tuck her into bed before their father comes home and tucks them in.



10. *Children's needs for privacy, dreaming and spiritual reflection are respected.*

Esther Buchholz, director of the Psychology of Parenthood Programs at New York University, in "The Call for Solitude: Alone Time in a World of Attachment," says, "Culture does not support the notion of being by oneself in a positive solitude; instead it is associated with antisocial acts, fear, loneliness and death - just as the need for attachment is not the same as wanting smothering, so the need for alone time does not mean the baby will be lonely."

In *Umbrella* by Taro Yashima (New York: Viking, 1970.), Momo receives an umbrella for her third birthday. As she walks...

On her umbrella, the raindrops made the wonderful music
Bon polo, bon polo, bon polo, bon polo
All the way home
Momo is a big girl now
And this is a story she does not remember at all
Does she remember or not
It was not only the first day in her life that she used her umbrella
It was also the first day of her life that she walked alone
Without holding either her mother's or her father's hand.

