

Family Matters 24, 2007-08

Feed Your Child a Healthy Diet of Sensory and Play Experiences

There is an inverse relationship between the size of a child and the size of his presence. By and large, the noises and movements of young children are just naturally more explosive than those of adults. They are in every way bigger, louder, longer, and stronger. Young children fill a room with physical joy – and angst. They hug to express love and hit to express anger. And slowly, over time, they learn to shape those big, big expressions into more sophisticated, nuances. They learn to stop and start. They learn to speak and read and write. They learn to attach higher order reasoning and planning to emotional expressions.

As we mentioned last week, this development doesn't just happen. The complex process known as self-regulation is a central nervous system function that begins in infancy. Everything we "feed" the central nervous system shapes the regulatory function that allows us to sleep and wake, stop and start, modulate voice and movement, control impulses and do "executive planning." What goes into the system affects what will come out. Movement, tactile sensations, auditory and visual input all impact a child's ability to self-regulate. And, perhaps surprisingly, so do rules.

Among the first rules that impact this development are ones the child initiates in his own fantasy play. Setting boundaries on the limits of a make-believe script is the very beginning of literacy development. Leading literacy researchers have established a clear link between early literacy skills and self-regulation – going so far as to say that the regulated movements involved in reading and writing will not happen without a foundation of the more fundamental sensory and play-based rule regulation.

Our "car-seat generation" begins school at a distinct disadvantage in this area. Fantasy play is fading away in favor of imposed stimulation that assaults little systems with sensory overload. Even the deceptively quiet activity of watching a moving video display stimulates the same part of the brain that movement play does –but without the work of depth perception and body-in-space adjustments. And movies give our children the stories they play with the licensed toys the movie-makers sell. They don't have to pretend that the stick is a light saber because they have a real one. Of course they love it. And we want to please them, so we give them more.

This shift in the typical diet of early childhood experiences is creating a generation of children who are literally hard-wired differently than we are, bringing new challenges to the business of school. As parents and teachers, we need to be intentional in seeking a balance between adapting to this new animal on our doorstep and heeding the cautions of the researchers.

Let's love the myriad options our world presents, but let's also be diligent about feeding our children a healthy diet of sensory and play experiences. It's only in this way that they will come to feel comfortable in their own skin, attach meaning to the world around them, and order, store, and retrieve information in an efficient manner. These skills are

foundational to academic learning and higher order thinking. And they come from the children's menu.