

MEASURING SUCCESS

2/2009

Each September our preschool holds a Parent Orientation meeting for new parents. One of the first questions I ask is this, "What are your hopes and dreams for your child(ren)?" Not surprisingly, year after year, the answers are reflective and unrelated to money, position or title. Answers include; Be Happy, Confident, Healthy, Productive, Well-Traveled, Problem Solver, Accept Others, Curious, Self-sufficient, Loved/Loving, Learn from Others. Any combination of these qualities could indeed qualify any individual as successful. We all desire for our children to become skillful and independent over time. The journey to 'there' is commonly known as LIFE.

It is recognized that today's parents deal with many social pressures regarding child rearing and education. The boss, the neighbor, our own relatives may have other ideas regarding what children need. Ingenious marketing for 'educational toys' and other dubious trends challenges our confidence and common sense as parents, competing for living space and resources.

Parents worry over the possibility that their child will struggle and fail. What began over 20 years ago, as a misguided introduction to earlier and inappropriate academic learning for young children has now intensified into a competition to create super kids supported by industries who reap huge financial benefits and school systems that are now mandated to prove their salt through accountability scores. We have silenced the voices of reason as well as our own insightfulness and understanding of what makes accomplished and successful human beings and community partners.

What children need is time. They need time to tinker with their own ideas and with real toys that are unscripted by TV or computer games. I'm not a media ogre. We have two TV's in our home, not in the bedrooms, by the way. Electronic media is a fairly new phenomenon in our culture and needs to be governed with wisdom. We need to remind ourselves that WE are the grown-ups in our children's lives and make every effort to keep these and other competitive intrusions from over taking our daily lives and productivity. Parents are also well advised by established professionals that work with children to be wary of those with questionable credentials who stand to profit from their endorsement of products or programs.

Children need time to *be* with other children over a span of several years in order to understand the give and take of true friendship. These skills develop with experience and maturity and help us determine what kind of people to let into our lives and call friend. Children need time with their loved ones to learn the joys and challenges of everyday living. Research tells us again and again, that infants and young children thrive in a supportive, non-pressured environment where they can acquire a strong sense of security, a sense of who they are, and an enthusiasm for learning and other life skills. The results of hurrying (and herding) children into their adult life, has resulted in burn out, stress, and the lack of coping skills. Not to knock my own profession but we are the only species on the face of the planet that put large numbers of 2, 3, and 4 year olds in a room for ridiculously long periods of time and expect them to get along and then excel.

Success and risk-taking are companions. Developing a healthy sense of risk taking is essential. Note that there is a difference between risk taking and being reckless. Children who have had permission to explore ideas and try things out for themselves are typically

better adjusted, and more successful academically and socially than peers who have been heavily scheduled with enrichment activities by well-meaning but misinformed grown-ups. Making friends, riding a bike, learning to read, all require the ability to risk one's emotional, physical and intellectual welfare for something personally meaningful. Children feel success by what they can accomplish and produce, not by meaningless praise using trite and over used phrases. Contrary to the praise movement of the '70's these expressions do not build self-esteem. They create competition, jealousy, and dependency, and are without any relevancy to the child. Becoming dependent on continual feedback from others is replacing what a child should be developing in the way of a sense of community, belonging and social understanding. So the next time your child attempts to make their bed by themselves, tell them, "Thank you". Encouragement and gratitude are different from praise.

We all need to risk a little bit every day. It's healthy. To grow wise and fulfilled we must risk intellectually, socially, emotionally, physically, and spiritually, living life fully and with purpose. Children risk, fail, succeed, and little by little build skills and rejoice. Little by little they become their own barometer of success. They risk because they feel good about themselves and know that they are encouraged and supported by significant people in their lives. Sometimes we must stand back and ask ourselves, "Is the world going to end if I let my child do this?" Children want to learn, but in order to do that they need to put themselves out there again and again in spite of the stuff that doesn't go so well. We cannot rescue our children from bad days, and we shouldn't. Rescuing and being supportive and encouraging are different. Remember that. We can show them that in spite of bad days the risk is worthwhile and success is measured in how many times we failed but stood up and carried on.

While living in Colorado, years ago, we owned a small tri-level home with the bedrooms on the upper level. One day I heard my husband laughing from the boys' bedroom and calling for me to come upstairs. I joined him in the bedroom where he pointed out the window. There, at exactly eye level, were our two boys, then ages 5 and 8, waving at me from a very tall pine tree! ("Hi, mom!"). I was petrified. My husband very gently placed his arm around me and said, "Honey, just smile and wave. You don't want to scare them now do you?" I clenched my teeth, smiled and while presenting my best parade wave said, "Now what do we do?" He just laughed. The boys descended artfully and were fine. As our children take necessary risks while growing and developing life skills, and moving towards their dreams and successes they will likely scare the occasional poop out of us. But sometimes we just have to smile and wave.