

# August / September 2012

## INSIDE THE WOODS

### Now We Begin Our 51<sup>st</sup> Year

Welcome to everyone . . . We've had a grand year-long celebration of our 50<sup>th</sup> school year. Now, the school bell has rung and our new school year – our 51<sup>st</sup> – is about to begin.

### The Parents' Organization wants YOU

Our Parents' Organization organizes and sponsors many fun projects and events, and in order to do them, they need volunteers. That means YOU. Sign up to volunteer at your earliest convenience and be a part of this dynamic group. These are the parents to seek out for more information:

**Cindy Oldham**, Events Coordinator;

**Ju Wotring**, Classroom Representative Coordinator;

**Diane Koonce**, Finance Coordinator; and

**Bridget Tomlinson**, Communications Coordinator.

**Exciting events are planned.** The Parents' Organization will sponsor several faculty and

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Edited by Eloise Rochelle

student programs for parents to learn about Montessori education.

The first one – September 22 – is “Montessori in the Home,” Teachers Pilar Higginbotham and Bridget Tomlinson will discuss how your home environment can enhance your child's classroom experiences.

The cost for this adult event is \$5 per person (no childcare available). Maximum attendance is 25 persons.

### TWO IMPORTANT DATES TO REMEMBER

① **September 12 - 8:45 AM**  
**Parents' Organization**  
**WELCOME COFFEE**, a fun  
happening at **Sherry Herron's**  
home, **12 Hilshire Grove Lane**

② **September 22 - 7 to 10 PM**  
**Parents' Organization**  
**ADULT SOCIAL** – to be held at  
the home of **Mark and**  
**Katherine Bodron, 1241 Ridgeley**

# Learning to Make Good Decisions

by Maren E. Schmidt, M.Ed

What should we teach our children? Research shows that 80% of the facts we learn for tests are forgotten in a month. We remember best that information with which we have an emotional connection. It's a lot easier to remember your birthday than the year of the Battle of Hastings, 1066, in case you're wondering.

If we don't emphasize memorizing facts in our teaching, what should we teach?

First, let me say that facts are important. Having a base of knowledge gives us some tools with which to think and do things. Actually, I've told students, we don't have to learn our math facts. We could carry around a chart with the facts or carry a calculator. But if we don't have our chart or calculator with us at a critical time, what do we do? If not knowing is painful, and knowing helps us, we discover that memorizing key bits of information makes us more efficient in our thinking and doing. Having certain information and skills at our fingertips makes doing more fun.

Teaching and learning. Two entirely different activities. Remember, we are rearing adults, not children. What we teach in our schools too

often depends on what we want our students to know instead of what they need to know. That raises the big question: what do our children need to learn to become fully functioning adults?

Helping our children possess certain qualities might serve our job best, qualities such as having the ability to make good decisions; loving to learn; understanding how one learns; dealing with change; making choices; setting goals; and much more. With these qualities learning becomes like breathing, something we don't even have to think about.

Learning to make good decisions is acquired by making poor decisions, and figuring out on our own how to turn it around. We learn far more from our mistakes than we do from our successes.

When confronted with a problem that we have to figure out over the course of a few minutes, a few hours, a few days, or a few months, we gain not only knowledge but wisdom.

By allowing our children to get clear and accurate information--which may be learning the hard way that the stove is hot--is about their interactions with their environment of people,

tools, nature and ideas, we start them on the path of learning to decide independently how they will act.

With our young children we've removed many feedback loops for learning and thus to making decisions, good or bad. Preschool administrators comment on the growing number of 3-year-olds who aren't toilet-trained.

Comfortable diapers remove feedback to the child about their actions or lack of action. Plastic tip-proof covered cups prevent spills along with preventing feedback on the fine motor control necessary to drink from a glass. A diet of finger foods prevents learning how to use a fork, knife and spoon, perhaps for a lifetime.

Within the limits of safety, learning to make good choices begins with clear and accurate information about personal interactions within one's environment.

Learning to make good decisions is based on having good information. Take a few minutes today, and think about how you might change a child's environment in order to give the child clear, accurate and timely information.

Wise decision-making is at risk.

## Classroom Design in a Montessori school

The design and flow of the Montessori classroom create a learning environment that accommodates choice. There are spaces suited to group activity, and areas where a student can settle in alone. Parts of the room are open and spacious, allowing a preschooler to lay out strands of beads for counting, or an elementary student to ponder a 10-foot-long Timeline of Life.

You won't find the customary rows of school desks; children work at tables or on the floor, rolling out mats on which to work and define their work.

Nor are you likely to find walls papered with brightly colored images of cartoons and syndicated characters. Rather, you might see posters from a local museum, or framed photographs or paintings created by the students themselves.

There are well-defined spaces for each part of the curriculum, such as language, arts, math, and culture. Each of these areas features shelves or display tables with a variety of inviting materials from which students can choose.

Many classrooms have an area devoted to peace and reflection: a quiet corner or table with well-chosen items -- a vase of daisies, a goldfish bowl-- to lead a child to meditative thought. And always there are places to curl up with books, where a student can read or be read to.

Each classroom is uniquely suited to the needs of its students. Preschool rooms feature low sinks, chairs and tables; a reading corner with a small couch (or comfy floor cushions); reachable shelves; and child-sized kitchen tools -- elements that allow independence and help develop small motor skills.

In upper-level classrooms you're likely to see large tables for group work, computers, interactive whiteboards, and areas for science labs.

Above all, each classroom is warm, well-organized and inviting, with couches, rugs and flowers to help children and youth feel calm and at home.

## Places to go

### Visit some observatories – easy to reach

We have more observatories in the Houston general area than the law allows (just kiddin'). You might not have realized that fact, but you won't have any problem keeping up with outer space from Houston. Here's the line-up:

**GEORGE OBSERVATORY.** A division of our Houston Museum of Natural History, George is located in Brazos Bend State Park, an hour's drive. It has three domed telescopes and a wide range of activities and information for the public. See the HMNS website for full information.

**BRAZOSPORT PLANETARIUM.** Located in Clute, TX, It was established in 1984 and is part of the Brazosport Center for the Arts and Sciences. The Planetarium features full dome and traditional public programs weekly and you are welcome to bring telescopes to planetarium star viewing events. Also about an hour's drive.

**HOUSTON ASTRONOMICAL SOCIETY** has its dark site observatory near Columbus, TX, some 80 miles west. It has three telescopes and the building's south wall folds down to reveal the southern horizon. For information about public programs, check its website.

Further afield . . .

**EAGLE EYE OBSERVATORY** is the joint dark sky site of the Austin Astronomical Society and Lower Colorado River Authority. It is inside the Canyon of the Eagles Park. It has two high-tech telescopes and is open to the public several nights a week. It is located near Burnet, 90 minutes NW of Austin.

But this one will tickle your fancy: In 2004 a group of parents at Camp Honey Creek in Hunt, TX wanted to build an observatory. One of them remembered that TCU had abandoned a small dome and telescope some 30 years before. He contacted TCU and they said, "Come and get it." It was a dome about 7 ft. high x 13 ft. in diam., with a 1950s 12" reflector telescope. They have built a bigger dome and refurbished the scope and now it's ready to receive visitors.

. . . . AND THEN THERE'S ALWAYS  
MCDONALD OBSERVATORY.

# Helping Your Child with Emotions

Adapted from *Brain Rules* by John Medina

by Elizabeth Stepankiw

In his book titled *Brain Rules*, author John Medina gives parents a recipe for raising children who are able to form happy relationships with others. It turns out that not only are these key points a recipe for helping your child learn how to have deep, rich friendships, but also a host of other factors that enhance your child's future.

Happy kids have better emotional regulation (are able to calm themselves more quickly), higher academic achievement, less depression and anxiety, and fewer infectious diseases, as well as a higher compliance rate with parental wishes and greater loyalty to parents. How parents deal with a child's emotional life has the greatest power to predict the ability to form friendships, which in turn influences future happiness.

According to Medina, parents can maximize their child's emotional development by paying close attention to the child's emotions in a very particular way. It is critical to focus these efforts on a child when their emotions become intense. These are the times when a child's behavior "push [es] you out of your comfort zone" (p. 199). Because the child needs to understand what these strong emotions are and why they are happening, it is the adult's job to help them learn to label the feeling so he or she will be able to make the links necessary in the neurological systems involved.

A developing child's "neural architecture" is not in sync with the emergence of emotions and the ability to understand and organize information. At birth, a baby is likely to be able to express distress, disgust, interest, and contentment. By six months, the infant is able to feel sadness, anger, fear, surprise, and joy. During the next year, most children will feel embarrassment, jealousy, guilt, and possibly pride. "This means that *children will experience the physiological characteristics of emotional response*

*before they know what those responses are" (p. 207). It is the reciprocal emotional relationship between caregiver and child that determines how successfully the brain will integrate the nonverbal and verbal systems involved.*

Healthy emotional relationships with infants and children involve what Medina calls "balanced emotional surveillance" (p. 204). Parents are not controlling over their child's every move, but rather are able to read their child's emotions in a secure and unobtrusive way. As an example, Medina relates the story of a father whose daughter is suffering from a bout of jealousy on her sister's birthday, despite the fact that the parents have given her a special gift of her own:

*"You seem sad. Are you sad?" is what the father said. The little girl nodded, still angry, too. The dad continued. "I think I know why. You're sad because Ally's gotten all the presents. You only got one!" The little girl nodded again. "You want the same number and you can't have it, and that's unfair and that makes you sad ..... Whenever somebody gets something I want and I don't, I get sad, too." (p. 206)*

The father in this story goes on to explain to his daughter that there is a word for that feeling. He respectfully asks if she wants to know what it is. He holds his whimpering daughter as he explains that it is called being jealous. He reflects back to her what has happened during the day and why it is she would feel jealous. He is willing to openly express his feelings and is teaching his child to do the same. This interaction has a calming effect on the child.

Medina explains that "large feelings are often scary for little people-tantrums often self-feed because of this fear" (p. 207). He relates another story, this time involving his own child:

*One day, as he was subsiding from a particularly fierce temblor, I looked at him squarely and said,*

*"You know, son. We have a word for this feeling. I would like to tell you that word. Is that OK?" He nodded, still crying. "It is called being 'frustrated.' You are feeling frustrated"...He suddenly looked at me as if he had been hit by a train. "Frustrated! I am FRUSTRATED!!" Still sobbing, he grabbed my leg, holding on for dear life. "Frustrated! Frustrated! Frustrated!" he kept repeating, as if the words were some kind of harness tossed to him from a first responder. He quickly calmed down (p. 208).*

Another story scenario described by Medina is of a fictional mother waiting in line at the post office when her child begins to escalate her demands for a glass of water. The ideal response would involve acknowledging the child's feelings: "You're thirsty, aren't you? Getting a big gulp of water would feel so good. I wish that drinking fountain was working so I could lift you up and let you drink as much as you wanted " (p. 214).

Even though this response may appear to some that it would make the situation worse, "empathy reflexes and the coaching strategies that surround them are the only behaviors known consistently to defuse intense emotional situations over the short term--and reduce their frequency over the long term" (p. 215).

Many parents may not have been lucky enough to experience this healthy modeling in their own childhoods because the emotion is often confused with the action that may follow. An angry person may choose to hit, for instance; the anger and the hitting are not the same thing.

We can better help our children if we learn to handle and recognize our own emotions. John Medina suggests that parents may need to practice knowing when they are feeling a strong emotion and learn to identify that emotion quickly, and be able to verbalize it.

Practicing the ability to recognize emotions in other people is another step toward becoming more adept at helping your child with emotional recognition and labeling.

Parents who get involved with their children's strong emotions must be careful not to put a judgment on the emotion. There are no bad emotions, they just

are; emotions are reflexive, something that is not a choice. "No technique known to humankind can make a feeling go away, even if nobody wants the feeling around" (p. 211). It is the behavior that follows the feeling that is a choice.

These moments are wonderful opportunities to teach your child how to solve problems and decide on an appropriate response to a situation in which they feel a strong emotion.

According to researcher John Gottman, you will raise a happy child if at least 30 percent of these interactions with your child demonstrate empathy (p. 217). Approach your child with an attitude of warmth by acknowledging emotions, give your child a name for those emotions, and relate in a way that empathizes. When needed, talk about possible solutions with your child's active participation, and clearly communicate that you expect your child to respond with an acceptable behavior.

To help your child acquire the social skills to make and keep friends, practice using the "empathy reflex" described above. Not only does this help you have a better relationship with your child, but husbands and wives who practice this on each other build more stable, long lasting relationships with each other (particularly if the husband practices it on the wife). It is not as important for spouses to resolve every difference as it is to respond in a way that shows understanding.

This simple and effective process involves two simple steps to use when you encounter somebody's "hot" feelings (strong emotional change). First, describe the emotional changes you think you see.

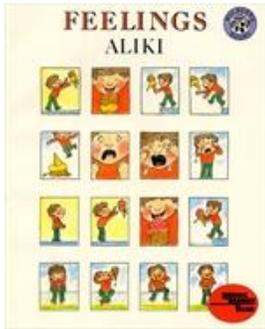
Next, make a guess as to where you think those emotional changes came from. It is important at the same time to make sure the person knows that you realize it is happening to them, not you (p. 85).

By modeling the "empathy reflex" repeatedly throughout the growing years, you will assure your child's ability to maintain healthy relationships into adulthood.

(See recommended related books, page 6)

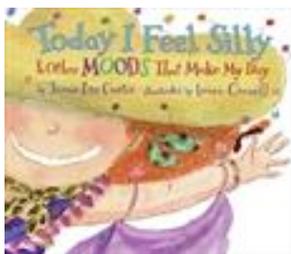
# RECOMMENDATIONS

In connection with her article on pages 4-5, teacher Elizabeth Stepankiw recommends these books and other materials which touch on the subject of emotions and can be helpful.



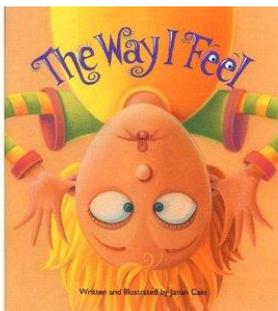
***Feelings*** by Aliko. Happy, sad, shy, excited – how do you feel? Sometimes it's hard to explain your feelings. In this book, pictures, dialogs, poems and stories portray emotions we

all feel: jealousy, sadness, fear, anger, joy, love and others. 32 pages, 1986.



***Today I Feel Silly: And Other Moods That Make My Day*** by Jamie Lee Curtis. Everyone has moods And this zany book of verse helps kids

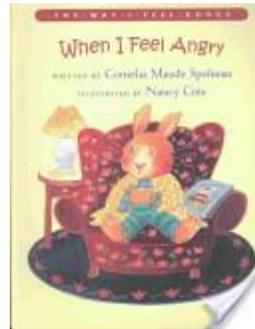
explore their ever-changing moods. Hardback; 32 pages, 1998.



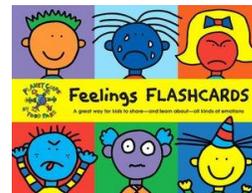
***The Way I Feel***, by Janan Cain. The zany characters who soar, sniffle, and shriek through this book will help kids understand the concept of such emotions as joy, disappointment,

boredom and anger. This book will also show kids how to express their feelings with words. 32 pages, 2000.

***When I Feel Angry***, by Cornelia Spelman. As an adorable bunny encounters things that make her angry, she learns to deal

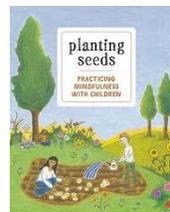


with anger in constructive ways that won't hurt others, in a charming story that helps children realize that it is a normal feeling and shows them how to cope with their anger. 24 pages, 2000.



***Feelings Flashcards*** by Todd Parr. Parr makes understanding feelings fun with 20 sturdy flash cards showing 40 different emotions in

words and lively pictures. Kids will learn what it means to feel silly and serious, calm and nervous, brave and scared, etc.



***Planting Seeds: Practicing Mindfulness with Children*** by Thich Nhat Hanh. Book and CD present wide range of thoughtful, fun activities for children, parents, teachers.

Relieve stress, increase concentration, build confidence, deal with emotions. Paperback; 230 pages, CD. 2011.



***The Ungame***, for the whole family. Players progress along the play board, answering such questions as "what do you think life will be

like in 100 years?" A non-competitive game created by communications therapist Rhea Zakich.

## What do children really learn from a Montessori classroom?

The question is often put: What do young children learn in a Montessori classroom that is not available in any other school?

The big answer is that a Montessori school is more than a classroom – it is society in a microcosm. Even from their youngest years, children learn how to be a contributing member of a community through the well-defined daily routines developed by Dr. Montessori. At the same time, they also learn the basics – self-care, reading, math, social responsibility, environmental awareness, etc.

All of this basic learning, of course, uses tactile and textured manipulative materials which can be handled, moved, rearranged repeatedly, and all of which were designed specifically to purpose by Dr. Montessori.

Dr. Montessori thought of Casa dei Bambini as a home, rather than as just a house. It represented a social and emotional environment where children would form an extended family where each child truly belonged and really took care of one another. Montessori described this process of emotional growth as “valorization of the

personality,” a strong sense of self-respect and personal identity.

While consciously devising the three-year-age grouping, Montessori classrooms allow a group large enough for two-thirds of the children to return each year. This promotes continuity and the development of a very different level of relationship between the children and their peers, as well as between children and their teachers. At School of the Woods, Early Childhood and Lower Elementary classes each have their own free-standing cottage-home classroom. The decision to develop the campus in a home style as it grew was made early on. The younger students often think of their particular building as their “school.”

The special relationship that is so common among Montessori children and their teachers and schools is very different from, and much more dramatic than, the experience most children have in school. Whatever else Montessori education provides our children, it definitely gives them the message that they belong – that their school is like a second family.

A more detailed answer to the question of this article is that

the Montessori methods develop lifelong benefits. These include personal traits such as -

Principles; character building

Freedom and accountability; choices and consequences

Grace, movement, respect, manners

Recognition of children’s sensitive learning stages

An appreciation of silence

Confidence, development of initiative, concentration, work ethic, success.

These attributes are learned by the students naturally through the processes of Montessori teaching methods.

Montessori schools are different, but it isn’t just because of the materials used in the classrooms. Look beyond the pink towers and golden beads and you’ll discover that the Montessori classroom is a place where children really want to be.

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Sources:

“An Education for Life: What Children Really Get Out of Montessori,” Tim Selden; *Tomorrow’s Children Magazine*, October, 1995;

“Getting Your Money’s Worth,” by Edward Fidellow