Here’s a useful suggestion you might have missed in the newspaper

Recently, the newspaper feature “Heloise” ran information about recycling old greeting cards for charitable purposes. The organization she cited was St. Jude’s Ranch for Children, which makes new cards from the old. Cards for all occasions are needed, but those manufactured by Disney, Hallmark and American Greetings cannot be taken (no explanation given).

Only the fronts of the cards are used, so they should be carefully checked to make sure there is no writing on the back side. The best sizes are roughly 5 x 7 in. or smaller. Cards are accepted all year long.

Card fronts can be mailed to St. Jude’s Ranch for Children, 100 St. Jude’s St., Boulder City, NV 89005. See also www.stjudesranch.org. There are no doubt other similar charity groups to be found online.

Coming this way: Wood for the Woods

When the original property on Westview for Woods High School was selected, School of the Woods was given a large and lovely specimen of fossilized wood as its philosophical cornerstone.

It was ensconced on that site and has been residing there since, awaiting further direction. Now that matters concerning the site for the high school have been finalized to be its current location on Bobbitt St., the log will very soon be moved to our Wirt Road campus until Woods High School construction is completed.

It will be right out there in plain view for all to see, in the middle of the parking area. The log is approximately 8 feet long and diameter varies between 2.5 and 3 feet.

An assessment of the log by a professional geophysicist revealed that silica was the main fossilizing substance. Its weight was calculated to be in the range of 4 to 5 tons.

A specimen of this type has previously been identified as Engelhardioxylon texana of a subfamily Juglandaceae (cousin to a walnut). It was common in the mid and late Eocene of the Texas Gulf Coast Tertiary period.

AREN’T WE FORTUNATE?

Happy Valentine’s Day
Dear Santa . . .*

Thank you for coming to visit us at School of the Woods on December 21. It was just great to meet you in person and everybody was so excited, please come visit us again next year.

Yours truly,

All us little kids

* a mystery guest
Learning to be Good at Doing Things

Recently I read an article by a father of a three-year-old boy discussing his son's prowess in the kitchen, and what a surprising amount of tasks his son could accomplish—washing vegetables, stemming mushrooms, cracking eggs and kneading dough. The dad observed, "I'm not pushing him. He's pushing himself."

Our under-sevens are in a developmental stage where they are absorbing information and skills from the people, objects and tools in their environments. Now that we know about mirror-neurons, it's perhaps easier to understand that children learn by watching people perform tasks.

If we give our children the tools and time to duplicate that task, they learn to do it quite well. A child with an interesting job to do will do it again, and again and again. Repetition is a learning characteristic of this age child. Our over-sevens get bored at doing the same task over and over, day after day, but not the younger child. They love the familiar of family, and are learning foundational skills for later learning. The young child's inner teacher directs the child to copy tasks he sees others in his environment doing. The will to do is very strong. And the will develops the skill. The will needs to be nourished by giving the child appropriate tools, time and a safe place in which to repeat and repeat an activity. That's one way a child learns to be good at doing things.

Another way is by being presented incremental challenges that enlarge a child's scope of activity. Once a child can crack an egg successfully, perhaps the new step would be to introduce a whisk or fork and show how to stir the eggs for scrambled eggs. Or perhaps show the child how to peel a boiled egg and slice it.

The key is the adult watching to know when the next challenge needs to be introduced, and making sure the challenge is not too hard or not too easy.

In the case of the egg, we can add more tasks until the child can cook scramble eggs independently, put them on a plate with sliced fruit and a piece of toast. I've known many five and six-year-olds that could prepare this type of simple meal for their entire family. And clean up afterwards! It all began with their interest in kitchen activities at age two or three.

The way we help our children learn to be good at doing things is by showing them and allowing them to do many activities, adding challenges along the way. It may seem simplistic, but our children learn by watching and then doing. Too many children, rich or poor, live their lives in homes and schools that offer little in the way of rich, interesting and life-affirming activities with the time and tools necessary to perfect a skill.

Let's offer our young children opportunities to develop practical living skills from learning how to care for themselves, others, the indoors and outdoors, as well as learning how to interact with others. From washing hands to washing windows, our young children want to learn how to do things well. As the dad said, "I'm not pushing him. He's pushing himself."

Let's make sure our children have a place to push themselves.

Maren E. Schmidt
www.kidstalknews.com
At the time Dr. Montessori lived, early childhood education was considered unimportant. Young children were thought to be "little more than small animals to be cared for and tolerated" (p. 2). The child's mind was not considered rational until about age seven, when formal education began. Even as late as 1970, many neuroscientists thought intelligence was exclusively determined by genetics. The importance of experience in the child's early years was still grossly underestimated. The sticking power of this attitude is reflected in the fact that, even today, the adults who work with our youngest children tend to be discounted in their value. As the child matures, those adults working with children gain in both stature and remuneration.

The information currently available tells us that daily interactions with children have a dramatic impact on their development. The younger the child, the more long-lasting is the impact. Dr. Montessori observed this, but the technology of her time was not able to create the hardcore research to back up her ideas. During her years of work, she always viewed herself as a researcher (p. 11). She "wanted to explore the idea that good health and living conditions were a greater factor than genetics or cultural exposure" (p. 15). Dr. Montessori's observations can be examined today with the advantage of recent findings in neuroscience. "Her interpretation of these observations [of children's learning] and the creation of activities for the children was truly Dr. Montessori's genius" (p. 11).

The 1996 Neuroscience Symposium, consisting of an eminent panel of scientists and educators, demonstrated a striking shift from the previous viewpoint concerning child development in its concluding statement: "Indeed, brain research is one of the most exciting and fruitful scientific endeavors of the last decades of the 20th century. But unless this research finds its way into our homes and health clinics, our early childhood centers and classrooms, America's schools and human service institutions will remain locked in a 19th century paradigm" (p. 17).

Helfrich reviews the five conclusions of this symposium that are written up in the book Rethinking the Brain: New Insights into Early Development by Rima Shore (1997). These "insights" parallel much of Dr. Montessori's thinking about infancy and childhood.

The first conclusion states unequivocally that human development has been found to hinge on the interactions between nature and nurture, genetics and environment. Next, early care has decisive and long-lasting effects on how people develop and learn, how they cope with stress, and how they regulate their own emotions. Early care will affect these capacities of the person as an adult.

Third, early experiences have a direct effect on how the brain is wired (the actual arrangement of neurons). The brain itself can be altered, or helped to compensate for problems, with appropriately timed and intensive intervention. In the first decade of life, the brain's ability to change and compensate is especially remarkable.

Fourth, there are optimal periods of opportunity, prime times, during which the brain is particularly efficient at specific types of learning. Dr. Montessori gave the name sensitive periods to these optimal times. And, there are times when negative experiences or the absence of appropriate stimulation are more likely to have serious and sustained effects.
The last conclusion emphasizes to us the importance of the fact that the younger the child, the more influential the experiences will be in determining the future of the person: "the potential for logical thinking, for planning, and for all later skill training is founded upon the neurological pathways built in the first three years of life" (p. 25). The first three years of life are the most active for the brain; they become the foundation for all later development.

Dr. Montessori created a framework for her observations on child development with what she called the "planes of development."

Each of the four planes is divided into six-year time periods going up to age 24, the age that we now think the final maturation of the brain is complete. Each plane consists of more active and less active times that are broken into three year age spans and points out the sensitive periods of each plane.

In the first plane from birth to age six, the "absorbent mind" takes the environment in as part of the actual construction of the person. The sensitive periods of this time are for order, language, refinement of the senses, and movement. The child wants to be free to work independently doing real activities with an intelligent purpose.

From age six to twelve, reasoning, imagination, and logic become prominent characteristics. Children are taking concrete learning and abstracting it. This is a time for intellectual independence. The child is forming her own ideas about the world. The environment should offer opportunity to gain knowledge about the world we live in. The child wants to know about the whole and his or her overall place within it.

The third plane includes the time we call adolescence, from age 12 to 18. During this time, the incredible neuronal growth that has previously occurred begins to be shaped into the social self by the individual using or "ignoring" certain pathways. Critical thinking and re-evaluation are hallmarks of this time. It is a transition period both physically and mentally and the person begins to find his or her place in the world. There is a desire for emotional independence.

Finally, the person moves from adolescence into adulthood in the fourth plane. We seek to find our place in the world, to develop the spiritual self, and a conscious discernment of right and wrong. This final plane culminates in financial independence.

On February 21 at 6:30 PM, School of the Woods will be offering a book group discussion for its parents to further delve into Helfrich’s book, Montessori Learning in the 21st Century. To ensure a lively discussion, we recommend that parents read this book ahead of time.

With the information learned, we can better help our children be active participants in this immense construction project, because

"It is the child who makes the man, and no man exists who was not made by the child he once was."

– Maria Montessori, The Absorbent Mind. 1995, pg. 15

This book was written for both parents and teachers. NewSage Press, 2011, 216 pages
MUSIC IN MONTESSORI EDUCATION*

The goal of Montessori education is to develop to the fullest the three aspects of the child’s nature – body, mind and spirit. Learning music happily involves all three of these dimensions and can therefore be a highly integrating force in development of the child’s personality. Music-making involves a physical activity (moving, singing, playing), produced by mental direction (matching a pitch or rhythmic pattern), to convey a sentiment or idea (a manifestation of the spirit).

Since music is language – the movement of sounds through time to express an idea – its assimilation by the child follows the same sequence as that of the mother tongue:
- Absorption through listening
- Mimicry/babbling/articulation of first words, phrases, sentences
- Written and read language

This sequence gives us a powerful tool, like a pedagogical outline for preparing the “musical environment” for the young child.

Because modern neurological research tells us that the ear begins to function in utero about the fifth month of pregnancy, an expectant mother can expose her developing fetus to music before birth through singing and rocking. The newborn needs a matrix of silence into which musical sounds are introduced (rhymes and ditties, repeated again and again) and stillness into which rhythmic movement is introduced (bouncing, pat-a-cake, rocking, clapping). The parents are usually the most effective persons to do these activities with the child, for they involve bonding (the touching of the infant’s skin, the sound of the familiar adult caregiver voice), thereby inducing security and health. Parents who sing and dance with their children are giving the message that music making is a natural daily activity – a tonic for the body, mind and spirit.

When a child enters a Montessori Early Childhood environment, the use of music as a spontaneous expression continues, and the teacher gradually introduces the “elements of music” in a more structured way.

1. **Rhythm**: Beginning with the walking on the line and progressing to other natural expressions of movement, such as running, skipping and galloping, the child begins to associate certain rhythmic figures with bodily movements. Also through the use of echoes, both verbal and rhythmic (clapping, tapping knees, snapping), children acquire a vocabulary of simple rhythms.

2. **Pitch**: Through daily singing of songs, children begin a sense of pitch. The Montessori bell material allow the child to hear musical sounds in isolation – to match, grade and name them. Work with both the pentatonic and diatonic scale patterns gives expo-sure to different pitch relationships, which are the building blocks of melody.

3. **Timbre**: Children are introduced to the instruments of the orchestra, with their various tone qualities, and learn the names and sounds of each instrument.

4. **Intensity**: Children hear pieces with different gradations of volume – very quiet to really loud.

5. **Form**: Children realize through listening to selected music that there is a form to music, just as there is a form (syntax) to language.

6. **Culture**: As teachers introduce Music. Whether vocal or instrumental, its place and time or origin is given so children begin to relate music to history and geography.

When the child moves into the Montessori elementary level, all the above elements are continued in more detail, with the addition of notation. Using the movable staff material and tone bars (transposer), the child learns how to make permanent the tunes he/she has invented. This notation material performs the same function in music that the movable alphabet does in language. Increasingly, music is allied to its cultural roots and is studied as an expression of ethnicity and as part of the fabric of a given culture at a particular time. The children study the heroes and heroines of music and make timelines of composers to discover how musical forms and styles have evolved through the ages.

What is the expected result of a thorough experience of music from birth through the school years? The philosopher Susanne Langer has said, “What discursive symbolism is to language in its literal use – does for our awareness of things about us and our own relation to them, the arts do for our subjective reality and emotion – they give inward experiences form and thus make them conceivable.” Concurrent with emphasis on the developing cognitive skills must go attention to the child’s affective life, the inner thoughts and feelings. Through regular exposure to the great music of the past and present, the child has touchstone with his/her own inner life of the spirit.

* American Montessori Society views
Books about the death of a loved one

**Everett Anderson’s Goodbye** by Lucille Clifton, is a touching portrait of a little boy trying to cope with his father’s death. In this moving poem we see him struggle through many stages, from denial and anger to depression and, finally, acceptance. 1983, 28 pages.

**Nana Upstairs and Nana Downstairs**, by Tomie DePaola. Tommy is four years old, and he loves visiting his grandmother, Nana Downstairs, and his great-grandmother, Nana Upstairs. But one day Tommy’s mother tells him Nana Upstairs won’t be there anymore, and he must struggle with saying good-bye to someone he loves. 1986, 32 pages.

**Kite Flier**, by David Haseley. A picture book with a sophisticated theme. A man began to fly beautifully crafted, highly imaginative, almost other worldly kites. When his wife died after the birth of their son, the man stopped making kites until the baby showed delight in a scrap of kite caught in the wind. Kites made then take on special meaning for both father and son. 1986, 32 pages.

**Lifetimes** by Bryan Mellonie is a moving book for children of all ages, even parents too. It lets us explain life and death in a sensitive, caring, beautiful way. *Lifetimes* tells us about beginnings, endings and living in between. With large, wonderful illustrations, A very special book that explains that all living things have their own special *Lifetimes*. 1983, 40 pages.

**When Dinosaurs Die** by Laurie Krasny, doesn’t tell a story but addresses children’s fears and curiosity head-on by answering very basic questions: “Why does someone die?,” “What does dead mean?” This approach makes the subject seem less mysterious and provides kids with plenty to think about and discuss with their parents. The brightly colored artwork will really enable children to relax with the concept. 1998, 32 pages.

**About Dying** by Sara B. Stein. This book is about everyday dying, the kind your child, every child, meets early in his own life—the kind he must learn to mourn. Children have a problem with this, because while they are little, they don’t believe a life can cease to exist. 1974, 48 pages.

**Help Me Say Good-Bye**, by Janis Silverman. An art therapy and activity book for children coping with death. Sensitive exercises address all the questions children may have during this emotional and troubling crisis. Children are encouraged to express in pictures what they are often incapable of expressing in words. 1999, 32 pages.

**The Tenth Good Thing About Barney**, by Judith Viorst. Barney was a cat. He died last Friday. And everyone was sad. They did what most people do when a cat they like dies. They had a funeral. And then they tried to think of good things about him. They wanted to remember him as he was. Whenever a pet dies, it can be a little like this story about Barney, since dying is as usual as living. 1971, 24 pages.