The Student Dance Recital is a Must-see: Never fails to please

School of the Woods dance/drama teacher Cindy Nevels and her students will present the end-of-year student dance recital in its traditional venue, Hamman Hall theatre on the Rice University campus. Performance time on Saturday, June 1 will be 7 PM and on Sunday, June 2, at 3 PM.

Here’s the scoop on this year’s recital. It is the classic story of “The Nightingale,” by Hans Christian Andersen. You remember that one – the emperor of Japan learns a valuable life lesson from an ordinary little songbird.

Dance students from three years old through high school will perform. Don’t miss it.

Last day of school will feature celebratory events

The last day of school is always a very happy day with many significant traditional celebrations.

What’s the big idea? First off in the morning, there’s the giant gathering of the entire school body in the gymnasium next door. Songs will be sung, African hand drummers will shiver the timbers, and lots of mingling will go on. Each student’s name is announced and each is acknowledged for completing their school year.

Saying goodbye until we can say hello again in the fall is another big idea. The next event includes all 1st through 6th grade students taking part in the International Luncheon. The luncheon is made possible through hard work by parents and teachers alike, preparing delicious foods from all parts of the world. Also, kudos to the Upper Elementary students who are in charge of service at the food tables.

Twenty-two graduates this year at Woods High School

Woods High School opened with 9th grade in 1999 and graduated its first class of seven seniors in 2003. This year there are 22 to add to the previous total of 136, making a grand total of 158 for all 11 senior classes.

This year’s senior class has a unique aspect, though: ten of them have been in School of the Woods for a tenure of ten years or more. We expect this trend to become the norm as School of the Woods becomes more widely-known.
On Thursday morning before the Good Friday holiday, all the Early Childhood tykes had the run of the campus looking for well-hidden Easter eggs.

Teacher Margi Dhruv had suggested to the egg dyers that it would be a fun thing to use natural colorings made in the kitchen instead of the usual commercial limited range of colors.

It was agreed. Here we present some of the photos of the finished products, and egg dyers at work -- plus a scattering of snaps of egg collectors.
"Let the wild rumpus begin!"

Where the Wild Things Are, by Maurice Sendak
Discussed by Elizabeth Stepankiw

In his children's classic, Maurice Sendak shows he understood children's rowdy play and how it mixes with imagination. The main character in his book gets sent to bed with no supper for terrorizing the family pet and running through the house wildly. The wild things in his fantasy help him work out this need to "rumpus." *Big Body Play: Why Boisterous, Vigorous, and Very Physical Play Is Essential to Children's Development and Learning* by Frances M. Carlson gives the adults responsible for supervising children's play an understanding of the importance of what she calls "rough-and-tumble" play and how to keep it safe.

What is big body play good for? Plenty, according to researchers. "From birth, children use their bodies to learn." (Carlson, p. 5) With big body play children can practice and develop a variety of physical skills, derive health benefits similar to those of sustained physical exercise, as well as build cognitive skills. This kind of play may include rolling, running, climbing, chasing, tagging, falling, play-fighting, fleeing, wrestling, and acting out. It may involve other children or be done alone. It may be spontaneous or planned with an elaborate set of rules for the action in the play.

A child's development of movement is connected to the development of cognition. During rough-and-tumble play chemicals affecting the mid-brain, lower forebrain, and the cortex are released. The areas of the brain affected include those responsible for decision making and social discrimination. These growth chemicals positively affect development. "There is evidence that severe deprivation of such play is associated with a failure to adjust behavior to idiosyncrasies of a partner's social status and movements" (Carlson, p. 27).

Researchers have observed that children engage in rough-and-tumble play throughout history and in all cultures around the world. Although rough-and-tumble play may be more physical in some cultures, depending on the standards for adult behavior that children mimic, it is universally "adaptive, evolutionarily useful, and linked to normal brain development...and researchers believe there is a connection between the very physical, rowdy play style and critical periods of brain development.

The rough play between peers appears to be critical for individuals to learn how to calibrate their movements and orient themselves physically in appropriate and adaptive ways" (Carlson, p. 27).

If we know the natural progression of rough-and-tumble play in childhood, we can make informed observations that will help us strike an appropriate balance between safety and the risks involved in big body play. Rough-and-tumble play begins in infancy. Most adults will notice that babies enjoy being bounced or jostled up in the air. A toddler develops body awareness through mastering acts of jumping, pushing or kicking a ball, splashing in puddles, carrying armloads of objects, or running. At the toddler stage, children will engage in parallel play or mimic each other more than playing physically with each other.

Most of any aggression in big body play will peak between the ages of 2 and 4. By the time a child is 4, cognitive and social emotional skills needed for using language, taking turns, setting boundaries, and collaborating are developed enough to make interactions with others more rewarding.
By kindergarten, children are intensely interested in making friendships and getting along with others. The improved balance and stronger bodies of this age, along with continually growing social abilities, make it a prime time for interactive rough-and-tumble play.

Between the ages of 6 to 8, children's physical skills have become more fluid and physical growth is not as rapid, even though growth spurts still occur. Time spent in rough-and-tumble play usually doubles at this age.

As children mature, they continue to refine their ability to control gross motor skills and become more purposeful and controlled in their movements.

Children who are elementary age thrive on independence and risk-taking, which may put them slightly more at risk for harm as they make determinations about their own strengths and weaknesses relative to their peers. However, throughout the elementary years, big body play has the benefit of increasing more sophisticated communication skills, both verbal and non-verbal, and helps children develop empathy and self-regulation.

How can we keep it safe? Three main factors involved in big body play will help the supervising adults make a determination of its appropriateness:

1. During acceptable rough-and-tumble play, children will be smiling or have relaxed facial features. A true aggressor will have a face displaying a rigid, stressed, and controlled jaw with the expression of a grimace, a scowl, or staring.

2. All children will participate willingly as their intention is to have fun; the context is one of collaboration. In real fighting, the aggressor uses force to harm; the intention is to inflict pain and the aggressor coerces or controls the other child.

3. When children are willing to return to the rough-and-tumble play repeatedly with the goal of extending the play, when they describe their play partners as friends, then it is not aggression. When children flee the situation and refuse to play, especially when they name a particular person they don't want to play with, then they are avoiding inappropriate real fighting.

Researchers have found that children enjoy using their imaginations to create make-believe people or transform objects in their acting out roles. In only a very small percentage of cases does rough-and-tumble play end up aggressive. If the supervising adult is not sure whether the play is real fighting or sees something that doesn't look safe, Carlson advises us to ask the children what they are trying to do and assist or make suggestions that will keep the play safe.

When rowdy play leads to real fighting, it is usually because one child misread the other child's social cue. In this situation, an adult can intervene and help with problem solving. If a child continues to be physically aggressive to his peers beyond this point, then it may be a sign of developmental language delays or poorly developed social skills for which the child needs professional intervention.

It is often stressful for adults to watch children involved in rough-and-tumble play because we are focused on keeping them safe. Adults may be concerned that rough-and-tumble play will lead to more aggression.

Researchers have noted that they may enjoy mimicking aggression, but that it doesn't typically lead to actual aggression in children. They tend to protect the pace and flow of big body play. During the time after big body play, they are calmer and more focused than if they had no chance to be rowdy and boisterous. If we watch the faces of the children when they are playing and we see joy, then we can know it is healthy play that we are witnessing.
A
nn effective, yet, counter-intuitive teaching and parenting suggestion took me a while to understand and put into use. The idea? "Don't just do something; stand there."

Our first inclination when we see things that we think we need to stop is to jump right in and fix it. One of the interesting discoveries of not doing something and watching instead is that usually within two to five minutes the child will figure out the situation and self-correction will begin without us having to say a word or lift a finger. (Of course, I'm talking about things other than running into the on-coming traffic or jumping into the river.)

Sometimes that self-correction begins as the child realizes that perhaps there was a reason for "don't get into the cookie jar." The lid may be too heavy to get back on, or you might be perched on the counter top with no easy way to get down, among many other reasons.

If we stop, look and listen when we find our child into the proverbial cookie jar, versus resorting to punishment or lecturing, we might gain some insight into our child's actions.

Susan looked out her kitchen window and found most of the bricks gone from her new flowerbed. Around the corner of the house came four-year-old Caleb, running to get a brick and then disappearing around the corner again.

Susan calmed her initial reaction to run out of the house, yelling and making Caleb stop destroying her new border that she had spent the past Saturday building.

Instead she walked to the living room window on that side of the house to see what Caleb was doing.

What she saw was that Caleb had built some steps up a trunk of a tree and was now climbing in the fork of the tree, a tree that his father usually gave him a hands-up to reach these limbs. Caleb was eye-to-eye with a robin's nest. From his shirt pocket he delicately took out a blue egg and placed it in the nest.

Caleb sat in the fork of the tree for a few minutes until a robin flew up and squawked. Caleb made his way back down the tree.

As soon as his foot touched the last step Caleb picked up a brick and headed back to the flowerbed. For twenty minutes Caleb carried each brick back to the border, lining up the bricks in the same manner he had watched Susan place them on Saturday. Not perfectly, but he worked with effort.

What did Susan discover by using, stop, look and listen? Susan saw her four-year-old son as a problem solver, a bird lover, a respecter of life, and a worker who would finish a job he began.

That night at dinner Susan made a comment about how many birds were in the yard since it was spring. She settled in to listen as she asked, "Caleb, what do you think about the birds?"

Remember, don't just do something; stand there.

*Maren Schmidt, M.Ed.*
Places to go, things to do

Let’s go a-birding

The word “birthing” came into general use as a verb in 1918. The word “birdwatching” is seldom used by serious birders. If you are a birder, anywhere on a scale of 1-10, you are in one of the best parts of the world to pursue this recreational activity. It should be noted that birding can be done with the naked eye, through visual devices or by listening for bird sounds. Some bird species are more easily detected and identified by ear than by eye. Reminder: start your life-list now.

THE GREAT TEXAS COASTAL BIRDING TRAIL. This is a state-designated system of trails, bird sanctuaries and nature preserves along the entire length of the Texas Gulf Coast. It was begun in 1993, after an analysis by the American Birding Assn. showed that Texas was the top bird watching designation for its members. The Black Skimmer has been adopted as a symbol of the trail system. It is part of the Texas Parks and Wildlife Dept.’s Great Texas Wildlife Trails, which also includes nature trails in upper parts of the state.

Texas hosts more bird species than any other state, more than 450. The Coastal Birding Trail is actually 43 separate hiking and driving trails that include 308 birding sites with boardwalks, observation decks and other amenities. This trail network was the first of its kind in the U.S. and many states have since followed. Below, the first map of Texas shows the counties included in this particular trail. The trail counties are divided into three major sections (second map): the Upper Coast, Central Coast, and Lower Coast regions. These sections total 367 linear miles of coastline.

THE GULF INTRACOASTAL WATERWAY. The Gulf Intracoastal Waterway is a coastal canal from Brownsville, Texas, to the Okeechobee waterway at Fort Myers, Florida. The Texas portion of the canal system extends from Sabine Pass to the mouth of the Brownsville Ship Channel at Port Isabel. It is part of the grand concept of a canal system that would eventually connect Boston harbor with Brownsville harbor.

The Waterway is difficult to define as it crosses, converges and combines with other bays, rivers, estuaries, and inlets throughout its course. The famed Aransas National Wildlife Refuge is located on Matagorda Island, a barrier isle lying parallel to the Waterway where it crosses San Antonio Bay. In maintaining the waterways, a main purpose has long been to create and continue to provide habitat for untold numbers of birds, waterfowl and small animals. That includes planting marine grasses to create fertile marshes for habitat.

The Waterway is used extensively for recreational purposes, including birding.

THE KING RANCH. In the not-too-distant past, the 825,000 acre King Ranch was noted for its downright hostility to the outside world. Strangers were closely watched and those attempting to visit were dealt with harshly. But times change. Today, due to accession of younger generations and a global business world, the King Ranch is a new entity. The Running W brand has even adapted itself to “Stewardship & Education”, a lot of eco-friendly programs, including birding.

Vast tracts of habitat are home to a variety of South Texas specialty birds, including ferruginous pygmy-owl, tropical parula, northern beardless-tyrannulet, Audubon’s oriole, Botteri’s sparrow, green jay, white-tailed hawk, olive sparrow, and much more. Over the years, the ranch has also hosted a large number of rare birds including double-striped thick-knee, jabiru, Eurasian wigeon, masked duck, aplomado falcon, and garganey. Named as a site on the Great Texas Coastal Birding Trail and as a Globally Important Bird Area by the American Bird Conservancy, the ranch boasts a bird list of 365 species. If you’re lucky, you might find your visit includes a Cowboy Poetry Reading, too.

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