Evening Learning Programs Continue

In January, School of the Woods will continue its get-acquainted evenings for anyone interested in learning about Montessori education. The events are open to the general public, as well as parents whose children are already enrolled here. These programs are structured as full-evening events.

The first two were held in November for Middle School and High School. The Evening Learning Program for Upper Elementary level will be held on January 12; for Lower Elementary grades on January 19; and for Early Childhood ages on January 26. Reservations are not required.

All programs begin at 7 PM.
Two more studies in substantiation of this premise have been reported recently. Both were conducted at the University of Illinois.

An article in the New York Times describes a study in which researchers were permitted to recruit 8- and 9-year-old students from schools near the University for an after-school exercise program.

They chose 200 boys and girls because children typically experience a leap in their brain’s “executive functioning” – the ability to impose order on the thinking process – in that age group.

The children underwent a series of tests to measure their aerobic fitness and current executive functioning. Then they were divided into two groups of 110. One group would continue as they were and would serve as the control group. The other 110 were bused every afternoon to the university campus.

Dr. Charles Hillman, professor of kinesiology and community health, who led the study, said “they wanted the children to play.” They wore heart rate monitors and pedometers participated in structured bouts of frequently changing activities designed to improve both aerobic endurance and basic motor skills.

The children played in two-hour sessions, moving at a moderate or vigorous intensity for about 70 minutes and covering more than two miles per session. The program lasted for a full school year, with sessions available every day, for nine months.

Final analysis showed that the exercise group had substantial improvements in each of the computer based tests of executive function. The children in the control group also raised their test scores, but much less, meaning that both groups’ brains were developing but more rapid and expansive in the active group.

A second study by University of Illinois researchers found a link between physical fitness and better mathematical skills.

According to the researcher team, led by Laura Chaddock-Heyman, the thin gray matter that layers the brain cells in the cerebrum is associated with better mathematical skills.

Thinning of the gray matter is part of the normal brain development in children – a part of the natural sculpting of the healthy, fully-formed brain.

The team worked with a group of 48 children, 9- and 10-years-old, who had passed a treadmill test. They then divided them into two groups – those who had scored over 70th percentile in terms of aerobic fitness and those who had scored below that.

The research team then analyzed the brains of the children using MRI and also asked them to complete an analytical test which assessed their spelling, math and reading skills.

They noted a difference in the cortical structure of the high-fit and low-fit children and discovered that those who had the thinner gray matter scored greater in mathematics assessment.

These findings suggest that cardiorespiratory fitness in children leads to thinning of gray matter. The team suggests that schools are best institutions to promote health behavior practices, as they see the children on a daily basis.

Sources:


HALLOWEEN WHOOPEE!!

October 30: This year’s panoply of our Early Childhood students masquerading as “other” beings was impressively imaginative.

Halloween costume day is one of the year’s high points for the Early Childhood classes. Everyone on campus watches as the young ones parade around showing off their costumes.

Naturally, as any celebration does, the elementary party included boundless snacks and goodies, and even Middle School students got to share in that.
Studies on how to age well site certain factors for well-being: have a close circle of family and friends, stay active and laugh often. Amazingly these ingredients for a good life are what the developing mind of the young child under the age of six years also requires.

Positive social contact serves as a buffer between the young child and the ups and downs of life. The people in our life can cushion negative experiences and amplify positive experiences.

Children need a mediator, a guide of sorts, to keep and hold relationships together for the long term.

Young children need people around them who will promote, practice, point out, protect and enjoy the adventure of life with them. Children should have someone who will explain the nuances of culture. This help is essential in a young child’s development, as the child has no ability or experience in shaping what influences individual brain development. The young child needs a person to make sense of life and serve as a protector of brain development.

Brain research supports a new connectionist model of brain development that suggests that sensory input into the brain creates the neural pathways based on life experiences. The pathways that get the most input grow more complex. Those pathways that don’t receive sensory input disappear.

This is part of the nature or nurture question. Are we born with natural gifts or do we absorb our gifts through the learning we do in our environment? Research shows that we may be born with natural tendencies, but if those leanings are not supported in our environment, we lose the ability to tap into those talents. For example, adopted children who had musically gifted parents and grandparents and were not raised in a music rich environment did not show above average skills or interest in music.

Positive experience creates positive learning. If a child’s experiences are negative the brain is not growing in a positive manner, but is being deprived of life-affirming experiences. We should not protect our children from every bump and bruise as other research shows that we learn from our mistakes, but we want to protect our children from trauma and abuse.

Trauma and abuse are characterized as physical punishment, bullying, teasing, or harassment. Children do not have the experience to understand the intricacies of safety, manners, or cause and effect, and need a social guide to help them navigate these culturally turbulent waters.

Young children are vulnerable and are building resiliency through positive experiences in their lives. We need to provide the environment for positive interaction for our children and protect them from the stress and distress of trauma and abuse.

The young brain needs positive social support from family and friends to develop in healthy life-affirming ways. Depression and violence in later life seem to be correlated to early adverse experiences.

It shouldn’t surprise us that research shows that we retain information longer when we laugh. Laughing relieves stress, helps form positive relationships, and helps the brain grow.

So...laugh every day with your children. Guide and protect them through healthy brain development for a lifetime of well-being.

The brain seeks to control stress

Brain researchers believe that a newborn’s brain creates neurons at a rate of over a quarter a million per minute. The young brain grows and absorbs information without evaluating, filtering or giving priority to the information. The brain receives each event with the same import as every other experience.

The young brain hasn’t learned how to filter critical information for survival, as true or false, real or fantasy, or good or bad. The brain receives violence, disrespect, hurtful language and physical abuse with the same sense of reality as calmness, kindness, positivity and gentleness.

Loud noises, harsh lighting, disruptions, irregular schedules, though, are among the activities that create stress in the young child and communicates to the brain and body to be on danger alert.

The brain seeks to control stress in the young child and begins to create a brain structure based on acceptance or avoidance of the stimuli in the child’s environment.

During the first six years of life the child is in a sensitive period for learning about human relationships and what it means to be human.

When the environment is such that the brain perceives the child’s surroundings as hurtful, brain structure begins to reflect that perception by pruning down neuron development for hearing, touch, hunger, etc. to compensate for the stressful sensory overload. Likewise, if the environment is calm and nurturing, the brain develops to accept and grow in response to that life-affirming presence.
Our electronic babysitters may contribute more to children’s misperceptions of what it means to be human than the actual experience of living with people.

**Some facts to consider:**
36 percent of all children have TV’s in their bedroom  
50 percent of households have 3 or more TV’s  
49 percent of households have video game players  
73 percent of households have computers  
99 percent of children live in a home with a TV set  

The pervasive nature of electronic media in our children’s lives is substantial. Children’s Saturday morning programs have averaged 20 to 25 violent acts per hour. The content of the media—violence, abusive language—affects the stress level of a child and thus the development of the brain and personality.

The brain during the first two years of life is absorbing information as if everything experienced were normal and brain development responds accordingly. If normal is loud, violent, or abusive, and not the expected loving interaction with adults, the child’s brain development begins to incorporate defensive mechanisms that work against the child’s natural tendencies to be curious and seek out new, challenging and meaningful experiences, the core of true learning.

We need to minimize the amount of distress in our young children’s environments. Noise levels, lighting, abrupt disruptions, and the threat of violence from television or others needs to be managed by the adults in the child’s life in order to maximize healthy brain growth.

If you have a television in your home, step outside sometime today while the television is playing, and look through a window at the television screen.

Imagine that you are a newborn, a two year old, a three-year old. What are the lighting, the changes in images and the type of images conveying to a child’s mind?

Think about how your child’s brain is reacting to these stressors, and how you can minimize these stressors. Remember, a child’s brain grows in response to its environment.

**The brain craves clear and precise information**

During the first six years of life, the child’s natural development includes the formation of language, with the most intense activity occurring during the first two and a half years of life.

It seems like common sense to say that the more words a child hears during those first two years of life the larger the child’s vocabulary and aptitude for language will be.

Research proves that intuitive deduction showing that children whose parents spoke to them an average of two to five thousand words per day started kindergarten with an excellent vocabulary.

Multiply 5000 words per day by five years and you have over 9 million words. For the child who is exposed to only 1000 words per day, this five-year number drops to around 2 million words, and language skills usually lag behind for a lifetime.

To get a handle on what a thousand words looks like; this page is about 850 words. A normal rate of speech is 120 words a minute, so a thousand words is about eight to nine minutes of speaking. A flood of language does not guarantee optimum language development, though.

Children say the names of things first and we are a help to our children if we name things in a clear and precise way in order to avoid confusion.

I once spent a delightful hour with a six month-old handing him three pieces of fruit and giving him the name. After he held the banana for about thirty seconds, I would say “banana.” This activity mesmerized him. I’d hand him another piece of fruit and say the name. Apple. Orange. Banana. He’d hand me back a piece of fruit, smiling and confident that he would get another piece, along with a name. On we went for an hour, interrupted only by the fact that he had a plane to catch. His dad laughed as they left the boarding area, “I think you had him at banana.”

This experience with the six-month old emphasizes the ways in which we as adults can enhance language development before a child begins to talk:

- Speak clearly
- Name things one at a time
- Whenever possible hand the child the object being named
- Speak using real words—no goo-goo-duckie-poo baby talk
- Read aloud for at least ten to fifteen minutes per day
- Speak in whole sentences, slowly, kindly and respectfully for example, “Orange. This is an orange.”

**After the child begins to speak:**

- Ask questions to encourage and help the child to begin to form sentences.
- Read aloud for at least ten to fifteen minutes per day.
- Show words as well as say them as you read.

Research show that perhaps the biggest help to a child’s language development we can provide is acting with loving-kindness. Talk, read and listen to your child every day with loving kindness. You can’t talk to or love your child too much. And a smile may be worth a thousand words.

Maren Schmidt  
[www.kidstalk.com](http://www.kidstalk.com)
Our mission to be a community of life-long learners applies to faculty and staff as well as students.

Each year our faculty and staff participate in at least 24 hours of professional development to keep their skills fresh, learn new methodologies, or to prepare for new responsibilities.

At the start of each school year the faculty and staff share with each other the different types of classes, seminars or programs they experienced over the summer or during the previous school year. Here are a few of the highlights:

John Branch, High School math and science teacher, has been working on his doctorate in education at Stephen F. Austin State University. Every other weekend, he travels to Nacogdoches for 8-12 hours of class. June marked the end of his first year in the program, and his courses this summer consisted of a synthesis class (which was very Montessori friendly) and an internship.

The synthesis class provided an opportunity to review and summarize the major work he completed over the past year. This included creating a portfolio of over 350 pages of major papers he wrote, and giving a 30-minute presentation on his own personal growth as both a scholar and a practitioner.

For the internship, he had the opportunity to work with the Houston Montessori Center, helping adult learners prepare to teach in Montessori secondary classrooms all over the world.

Mr. Branch wrote, “Combined, these experiences presented many opportunities for self-reflection. It is through such self-reflection that we can integrate our past experiences, our current efforts, and future possibilities into one cohesive whole. This is how education transforms and empowers us, it is how we become lifelong learners; it illustrates how the educative process never ends.”

Two journal articles written by Mr. Branch have been accepted for publication and he has been asked to serve on the editorial board of the Journal of School and Society. The articles are titled:

*Equity Audit: Texas Schools System of Accountability in an Urban Independent School District*

*The Story of AJ: A Case Study in Critical Perspectives of Leadership*

Lise Lawrence, Elementary Art Teacher, continued her ceramics classes at the Glassell School of Art. Working with clay is a great love of hers and working in a fully equipped ceramics studio is like heaven to Ms. Lawrence. The class focused on hand building with low-fire clay and various glazing techniques including under glazes, stencils, stamping and masking.

Ms. Lawrence said of the experience, “I am very inspired by these classes and look forward to bringing aspects of these techniques to the School of the Woods students.”

Teachers Jenny Sornson, Eberle Knight, Dorothy Lord, Gloria Lutzel, Karen Sands, Maria Dowgun and Liz Shpata attended a workshop by Frank Leto on teaching music to young children.

Ms. Sornson said they learned some rhythm-based games, fun songs for the line times and transition
times in the classroom, and found ways to teach music theory to children through exercises and instruments.

Jessica Terry, Lower Elementary Teacher, began the Dyslexia Therapist training at The Neuhaus Education Center. She is working with Book 1 of the Basic Language Skills curriculum with students this school year.

She says, “I have seen the benefits this program has for all students as well as the need for language therapists. I am so happy to be able to now work with students in this capacity.”

Ms. Terry will be returning to The Neuhaus Education Center next summer to continue her course work for certification.

Val McAvey, Debate Coach, math and science teacher, attended debate camp at the University of North Texas with three high school students. While the students were busy learning about their specific areas of interest, Mrs. McAvey was meeting with three of the top coaches in Texas and 20 other coaches in workshops.

In the coaches workshops they shared strategies for mentoring a young group to varsity standard, broadening the scope of events that students can participate in, and managing teams to compete in state and national level events.

Mrs. McAvey said, “It was a great opportunity to work with coaches who have 20 to 30 years’ experience and who have squads both larger and smaller than ours. Woods was unique in that our squad represents about a third of our total high school enrollment.

“I am very grateful to have the opportunity to coach this amazing group of young people. It is very energizing to be around them when they are competing at a tournament. Our team members stand out because they truly care about each other and how we can be our best as a whole team, not just as individuals. When they are not competing, the students go watch and encourage each other in their events. In between events, they practice with each other and work on improving their cases.

“The single most important factor in our success with Speech and Debate at Woods is the passion our students have for their events. There is a wide variety of events in which they can compete ranging from debate to acting. Students choose the events they will compete in. If it is an acting event, they also choose their piece. Several students have reached semi-finals in their very first tournament.”

The School of the Woods website has links to the National Speech and Debate Association website where videos of last summer's national competition events show the wide variety available.

Mrs. McAvey adds: “Our entire squad is excitedly looking forward to the State finals in Pfluggerville in April.”

These few examples will serve to show the kinds of continuing education our entire faculty pursues to strengthen their skills in the classroom.

Quote/unquote

"The whole art of teaching is only the art of awakening the natural curiosity of young minds for the purpose of satisfying it afterwards."

..... Anatole France

(1844-1924)