



Child-Centered, Play-Based **INSIGHT** Noncoercive, Democratic

Sometimes we must demand, coerce, force our children. It's for their own good.

Children don't know what they don't know, so it is our responsibility to insist they learn the essentials, whether they like it or not.

Kids don't eat spinach, or clean up after themselves, so why will they learn grammar unless we make them? If they don't learn proper grammar, punctuation and spelling they won't be able to communicate. No one will take them seriously. We have to make them. It's for their own good. And near infinite variations of the above themes.

A case for non-coercive

What is the balance between freedom, discipline and boundaries? In terms of 'schooling,' the above fails to acknowledge neuro science and 'state-specific' learning and performance. Like Pavlova's dogs, the emotional feeling or charge of any learning experience is etched as a permanent feature along with the abstract content being learned. If one is habitually embarrassed by spelling, the act or even thought of spelling will trigger the feeling of embarrassment. If one is being judged, anxiety over reward and punishment fills the body, regardless of the exercise, game or experience. Appreciating this, we realize that some states encourage optimum learning and performance while others cripple it.

The state called "Authentic Play" is nature's agenda for optimum learning and performance. Free from failure, real play is completely absorbing. It demands complete attention, (no attention deficits), involves creative imagination, flexibility, testing, adapting, patience, repeated attempts, frustration, overcoming obstacles, intent, passion, drive, humor, joy and more. Rarely do we find all these qualities in other states; fear, being pressured, compared, anxiety, envy, or anger, for example.

Play is how children engage with and learn from life; building forts, surrounding themselves with fairy friends and stuffed animals, celebrating a wedding between Bear and Princess, listening to Little House on the Prairie for the hundredth time, jumping in the pool, pretending "I'm the big shark and she is a mermaid," and on and on.

We interrupt this optimum, entrained learning state to bring about the social conditioning we deem necessary, mostly to absorb and make sense of highly abstract, symbolic words and concepts, something she is already doing with every story, every book, every sentence we and she speak. We take her real learning, sit her at a desk, open workbooks and make her do what we want, which to her is not play. It is WORK. We dismiss her innate drive to play, and convert that energy and attention into a job, because that is what we have been conditioned to think school is, to stop playing, which is real learning, and get to work, preparing for the "real" world.

By insisting on abstract mechanics, to abstract means separate from real things and processes, we often cripple the artist in children, insisting they learn grammar and other mechanics, before they have anything to say. We abstract these important tools from a natural context, obscuring the value they hold. We sacrifice what really matters, finding their own voice, and the best ways to express that, for obedience and conformity to our agenda and schedule, and we do this during the most precious years of our child's development. Because that is what was done to us.

This does not imply or demand that we never resort to worksheets or sit our children down and focus on grammar, spelling or math. It means that optimum learning occurs when what is to be learned is embedded in lived experiences. Creating this lived experience with grammar, spelling, math and more, is demanding. It requires more imagination and creativity than neat desks and worksheets. We do our best to reach for the best in ourselves first, and then offer our "relationship with the subject" to our children.

It is worth considering that we expose children to a full spectrum of experiences, watch with wonder what catches their interest, nurture, add fuel to that flame, and when needed, the technical skills that will be mastered as part of the loved experience. In their own time, not ours.

Implicit in this innate love of learning is the simple fact that children are designed to learn. They do so in a special state called original play. To optimize what a child learns, at any age, our first priority is to create environments that evoke this special state, regardless of content. Compulsory, being authority driven, ignores this optimum state, replacing it with rote conditioning and conformity, justified “for their own good.”

Ask yourself; did you do best in classes that you liked the teacher? Liking or disliking a teacher has nothing to do with grammar or mathematics, which are simply data, but everything to do with how the child relates to the subject. Understanding this flips our priorities. Love what you do and do what you love.

Performance specialists, elite athletes, dancers, writers, musicians, anyone challenged at the highest levels, understand that “states” matter. What is a “state?” It is how we interpret and relate to the challenge, any challenge. Optimize one’s inner state, how we relate to any experience, and what is learned, along with outer performance, are optimized beneath our awareness, with great ease. It’s called being in the zone or flow.

If you love it, you will always do better than the person who is doing it for money or fame (parent approval or grades) ... The strongest energy in the world is love. And if you're doing it because you love to do it, then you've got a chance to hook onto a clear channel. Then you become energized. Your brain is alert, your body feels strong, your intuitions are there, you have clear thinking, and you can be the most that you can be. But if there’s fear, fear of failure, or you want it too bad, you want to force it to happen, (a clear description for what we call school), then it doesn’t happen.

Johnny Miller, PGA Hall for Fame

Tim Gallwey revolutionized sport psychology by introducing the concept of “the inner game.” As Miller notes; the inner (love of the experience), defines and transforms the outer. The applies to education. Seek to optimize the child’s relationship with any subject first, then, that state, Miller’s clear channel energy, defines what they experience and therefore learn lifelong. Impose the relationship called work for play and the entire process collapses.

Everyone who achieves greatness in their lives; artists, writers, CEOs, dancers, fashion designers, chefs’, entrepreneurs, do so because they love what they are doing, not because it is work. If you love building things, the math and related technical abstractions are part of the puzzle. Nobel Laureates in writing achieve greatness not because they can spell or studied grammar. They learn these things, as an artist learns to mix colors, because they have something to say, and do so in their own time. Not because Mrs. Vick or Schmidt passed out worksheets in the fifth grade.

A related issue is “age appropriateness.” Dyslexic as a child, I was ill equipped for reading, grammar and spelling, and yet, I have authored five books, produced and directed numerous international documentaries, founded a nonprofit and more than one successful business, plus I write every day, without keen spelling skills or knowing the difference between a past participle and a pronoun. My brain did not mature out of its dyslectic dullness until my late teens. Prematurely forcing a brain to process inappropriate challenges harms that brain, cripples the subject being forced, while simultaneously inflicting psychological pain, publically comparing and insisting that one size fits all.

Research demonstrates that an intrinsically motivated, non-schooled child can complete the Pre K-through Twelfth Grade curriculum in approximately three years, not a decade or more of a child’s most formative years. “Only 5% of lifelong learning occurs through formal training, including schooling, and of that 5%, most retain only 3% to 5% for any length of time.”

Appreciating this negates the pressure many parents feel for their child to excel every day in every subject. There is no rush for any given subject. There is plenty of time for nearly every subject to be embedded in intrinsically interesting challenges.

Every child knows that they are magnificent and can learn and accomplish magnificent things. And they can, given real interest, resources and time, some more quickly than others, given different challenges. Honoring this demands courage of parents.

It is the parents and educators challenge to recognize and adapt to these individual differences instead of forcing each unique child to conform to a given curriculum. The child shapes the curriculum, rather than the curriculum defining the child.

Our most important priority is to create play-based experiences, play being nature's agenda for optimum learning and performance. Upon this state-specific foundation our curriculum is drawn out of each child, rather than pouring into them an abstract identity.

Meeting this challenge demands that we create play-based forms and structures, that evoke, develop and expand empathy, altruism, how our body and its survival is intimately entangling with every other species, egalitarianism or social equality, intrinsic morality or goodness, emotional intelligence, empathic conflict resolution, what it means to be sovereign as a state of mind and being, to be completely free of comparison without hubris with its embarrassment and shame, to express how we feel and what we need clearly and with ease, to listen without judgment, to imagine like a laser, with creative passion and prioritize that dream in practical steps (vision and project management), to stand without aggression and face the actions of others that harm and how to perceive the same harmful intent in ourselves, to know what basic trust feels like and be absolutely clear when it is absent, and upon that, respond in the safest way possible for everyone, to know what ecstatic joy fees like, real happiness, to see and appreciate the miracle and beauty of being a unique human being at this unique moment..... Do that and math and grammar will take their proper place in their proper context and time.

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Weapons of Mass Instruction

School is such a devaluation of human experience and human hopes that it took a long time to pull the trick off. Today the stability of the school institution seems permanent, but not because it serves people. It's the largest single part of the economy. It employs more people, gives more career ladders. It's one of the bedrocks of middle class America and preserves all the other institutions.

The development of the critical mind is strictly forbidden in school. You're not allowed to learn how to think critically, period.

"Craig Ventner, the beach bum surfer who shared the laurels for producing the map of the human genome... cut class often to hit the boogie board and only escaped junior high because a teacher changed of his 'F' grades to a 'D' – so the school would be rid of him. George W. Bush had a 'C' average in high school and a 'C' average in college, but that was a higher 'C' average in high school and college that was earned by Massachusetts Senator John Kerry...

Al Gore flunked out of his first college and squeaked through his second with a 'C' average. Dick Cheney flunked out too. Legendary progressive Senator Paul Wellstone scored 800 on his combined SATs. Bill Gates and Paul Allen of Microsoft – no college degrees. Steve Jobs and Steve Wozniak of Apple – no college degrees. Michael Dell is another un-degreed immortal of the computer game, as is Larry Ellison of Oracle. Ted Turner, founder of CNN, dropped out of college.

William Faulkner's high school grades were too horrible to get him into the University of Mississippi. Warren Avis, the man who pioneered auto rental s at airports, decided that college was a waste of time and didn't even apply. Edward Hamilton, the nation's largest independent mail order book dealer, wrote me that the advantage he had was that he hadn't wasted his capital or time on college.

Paul Orfalea, the highly intelligent founder of Kinko's was not regarded as very bright by his high school. Lew Wasserman created modern Hollywood with his colossal MCA; he had no college and virtually no seat time in high school. Warren Buffet started business at the age of 6, selling iced Coca-Cola. By 18 Buffet had the equivalent of \$100,000 in the bank. Then applied to Warton Business School and was turned down.

George Washington, Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, Abraham Lincoln – someone taught them, to be sure, but they were not products of a school system. Through most of American history kids generally did not go to high school – and yet the unschooled rose to be admirals like Farragut, inventors like Edison, captains of industry like Carnegie and Rockefeller, writers like Melville and Twain and Conrad and even scholars like Margaret Mead.

Consider what society would look like if 65 million trapped school children learning to be consumers were suddenly set to actively imagining themselves to be producers instead of bored consumers?... Isn't that exactly what America needs at this sorry, sterile juncture in our history – not more well-schooled zombies on whose backs the few can ride.

*John Taylor Gatto
Weapons of Mass Instruction*