

Teaching in the "Key of Life"

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During the lunch break at a recent conference of early childhood educators miraculously keeping their spirits high despite low salaries, benefits, and prestige, a parent entered.

"Everyone who ever loved my children and gave them wonderful experiences is in this room. That's why I came. To tell them how much I appreciate them. Now, my kids are scattered throughout the grades and, let me tell you, they dearly miss these people."

While those words are gratifying, I, like that parent, am distressed about what happens to too many children in their elementary years.

We have the best research reminding us of healthy, happy, positive, holistic, active, interactive, playful, multifaceted ways children BEST learn. Despite this wealth of knowledge, plus the more powerful information from *our own hearts*, why are so many children still *learning* that *learning* is a grim, scary, closed-in, super-structured, silent process where failure, humiliation, alienation, and disappointment are present every day?

Once children learn such lessons, it is hard, often impossible, to reach them, to welcome them back, remind them of their worth, hallow their gifts. They are lost to us. They don't drop out. They *fall* out.

Why is play downplayed? Let's call play "work" and get on with it. Why

are there so many thorns in so many kindergartens — "gardens of children"?

Why should a boy who loves blocks better than any toys in the whole wide world run excitedly to his first day of kindergarten only to return at the end of that momentous day with slumped shoulders and teary eyes and angrily announce, "Mommy, there are no blocks in kindergarten! Mommy, you lied! You said it would be fun!"

I think there are new blocks in lots of kindergartens!

Why are some 1st graders active, energetic, verbal, and curious, carrying dittos home by the package? One child was out of school with the flu. Each day his sister carried his homework to him. His dad showed me the collection of almost 30 dittos. When the boy recovered, he begged his parents NOT to send him back to school. In schools that teach in the "key of life," sick children get healthy. In schools that teach in the "key of death," healthy children get sick.

Every time we use paper, we should remember that trees sacrificed their lives. When trees know they will be turned into nothing but dittos, they become weeping willows.

A tree wept for the kindergarten boy whose colors didn't stay in the dark lines outlined by his teacher. He added a few lines of his own. When he asked his teacher if she liked his picture, she didn't need to tell him. Her expression showed her disapproval. But in case there was any doubt of her feelings, she added, "I think you can do a lot better."

His face fell. After dragging around home for almost a week, he finally told his mom that he was a terrible artist, hated coloring, and didn't want to go back to school.

His mom's conference with his teacher was rocky. "Don't baby him. These children need to know it's a

harsh world. When children ask me something, I tell the truth. What would you have me do?"

Suggestions for alternative responses to a child's question, "Do you like my picture?"

1. "The important question is — How do YOU like the picture?"

2. "Let's look at your picture. Tell me about it."

3. "I see you especially like green — that cloud you drew looks to me like a little puff of cotton. How does it look to you?"

Probably, a child named Vincent asked his teacher how she liked his drawing of a starry night and she said, "I think you can do a lot better, Vincent. These stars are entirely too swirly."

And Vincent dragged himself home and cut off his ear. (Now you know the real story!)

A 1st grade teacher told me about this incident.

One day, early in the school year, at 11:30 in the morning, a child went to the closet, took his jacket and bag, and started for the door. Stopping him, the teacher gently asked him where he was going.

"Home," he said.

"Honey," she told him, "You don't go home now. You're in 1st grade now. You get to stay all day."

Placing his hands on his hips, with wide eyes, the boy asked, "Well, who the hell signed me up for this?"

A message was left on my answering machine by Barbara Selinger, who teaches in the "key of life" in New Jersey. She told about the 1st grader who raced home after

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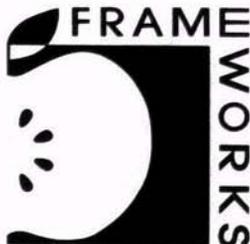
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"A framework for literacy and learning"



school and sent this alarming announcement throughout the house: "Mommy! We have a SPELLING TEST tomorrow! Mommy! Don't they know I'm only 6? I'm too young to have a SPELLING TEST!"

Who are the slow learners?

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