

Archived Article (originally appearing in JUST KID'N in October, 2000)

Parent-Teacher Conferences: Before, During and After

By Margaret Carpenter

Your student may be a high flier and you want to make sure she is adequately challenged. Or she may be struggling with math and you fear she's lacking skills for future success. Or maybe your son has convinced himself that the teacher has a grudge against him. All of these situations can be alleviated by a good parent-teacher conference. Preparation before hand, good communication during the conference, and follow up afterwards will produce results.

Everyone should prepare for a parent-teacher conference conscientiously. The Web site for the National Education Association (at www.nea.org/parents) provides a helpful set of questions to help you prepare. Also, ask your teacher ahead for a copy or check out the SOL's for your child's grade by accessing them and related information at k12.albemarle.org/Instruction/SOLs/standards.html. It is important to figure out (and even write down) what you want to accomplish and specifically what you want to communicate in your conference ahead of time. If the child's performance is in question, it is good to bring samples of work to discuss (so that the teacher can clarify expectations.) If particular areas of struggle are already apparent to you, if you send a note well before the meeting, you can ask a teacher to collect standardized test results, or samples of various students' work to share and compare in order to relate a sense of standards at the meeting. And depending on her age, think about requesting that the child attend the meeting if her participation would better ensure that all are "on the same page."

If the situation is that your child has come home feeling that the teacher has treated him unfairly, it's important that the parent suspend judgement and seek to understand the events from the teacher's perspective. So rarely, for such a matter, is it a good idea to dial the principal's office, the superintendent, or the Board of Education as your first course of action. These people are, after all, involved with a scope of responsibilities of vital importance to a huge body of students, teachers, staff workers, government officials and various public interests. You really need to hear the teacher's version of events first, and that is exactly what anyone higher in the hierarchy would ask you to do, anyway.

As any busy parent can certainly understand, teachers can get overwhelmed as they balance a thousand decisions every day while needing to be sensitive and nurturing to a great number of children, many of whom have acute learning and emotional needs. So avoid "taking sides" outright. Help your child to build bridges (and self-confidence!) himself by asking the teacher for some time to talk it over, share feelings and get clarity. If the child continues to be uncomfortable, a parent's call or note to the teacher asking to discuss a concern, showing that you wish to work together to make things better is your next step. An ongoing concern might require the help of the school's counselor. Always approach the matter in a cooperative, non-threatening way, or you'll risk a communications break down. If the version of events that your child has presented incites your "mother bear" instincts and you fear alienating a teacher, gain intervening assistance from the school's counselor.

Developing strategies:

Diagnosing a learning problem is a challenge. Problems paying attention can result from poor sleep, medication, a sugary diet, need for eyeglasses, lack of breakfast, or social distraction exacerbated by sitting next to a best friend. Is the student simply not spending enough effort on assignments and review, or might there be a true learning disability such as dyslexia, or ADHD? (Note: always check for sugar addiction before you assume the problem is ADHD.) Comparing a measure of IQ to actual test achievement scores can uncover a learning problem that sheer effort alone might not compensate for. And know that even "gifted" children can have learning disabilities that keep them from performing to their potential. What motivates the child to learn? Can your insights help the teacher tap into interests or understand whether the child is a visual vs. oral learner, or comprehends diagrams better than the written word?

Whatever the matter, at your conference, you not only want to understand the causes of the problem, but you wish also to develop strategies to help the child learn. Usually attacking the manner and environment in which homework is completed and new material is reinforced will help. But be ready to truly alter things at home if the issues are more serious. Life is stressful not only for adults these days, but for kids, too. It is helpful to share with the teacher a sense of the family stresses that may be affecting a child's performance- divorce, a recent move, or the birth of a new sibling. These are often a surprisingly significant part of the picture. Be willing to engage in professional counseling outside of school if a child's emotional state or social problems may be interfering with schoolwork; consult with the school's counselor for guidance. You may request follow-up meetings to gain insight from the school's Resource Teacher whose specialty is remediation and lesson reinforcement to meet children's individual learning style and needs. The counselor or Resource Teacher can provide recommendations for follow-up reading you can do. Books in your library labeled with Dewey Decimal

number 370 provide suggestions for parents. Books to guide parents of gifted children are located near DD# 649. And this Web site is a great resource: www.nea.org/parents.

Asking the teacher to follow up:

As conscientious as most teachers are, they also have large workloads and phones are not in the classroom with them, so be realistic in what you expect from their follow-up communication. It might not be reasonable to expect them to notice or communicate a child's slipping or improving performance any more frequently than every 4 weeks when progress reports or report cards go out anyway if the child is in middle school or older. A younger child's changes in behavior might be picked up more readily. Yet, it takes a while for patterns to become noticeable. Therefore, the best way to keep updated weekly on the child's performance is to make the child responsible for showing you his or her work. If you require weekly feedback from a teacher, Mary Susan Miller (in her book, *SAVE OUR SCHOOLS-66 THINGS YOU CAN DO TO IMPROVE YOUR SCHOOL WITHOUT SPENDING AN EXTRA PENNY*) suggests that you give self-addressed stamped envelopes to the teacher. Make a (short) list of the items you want communicated.

But the parent can keep tabs himself. Keeping a calendar on the fridge to note the big assignment due dates or tests is a good idea for several reasons: it helps the parent monitor completion of work, and it also demonstrates the importance that parents are placing on learning. Whether or not your child is struggling, you will be surprised at the dinner conversations it spurs when you track the various projects and topics being explored in school. All older kids should have a notepad or similar means for recording assignments, and parents should spot-check regularly that all the work is being completed and understood.

Finally, it's vital to ask, "is part of the problem that the child doesn't ask for help when she needs it?" Miller discusses how very important it is that parents impress upon a child the importance of doing so. Parents need to make it "safe" for the child to admit weaknesses and seek help without feeling ashamed. Making mistakes (or "learnings" as we teachers like to call them) and asking questions are vital to the learning process. If your child is a perfectionist and can't bear to appear other than completely on the ball, the parent might do a better job of modeling a healthy sense of humor and admit readily when she makes mistakes herself. It took a lot of experimenting and failed rocket launches before the astronauts could get to the moon, after all. The child that really knows that school is about the excitement of learning (and not just grades) is a child who will be self-motivated and a lifelong learner.

Margaret Carpenter has led or attended countless parent-teacher conferences as a teacher of social studies for middle school and high school students. She founded Parents of Preschoolers in Charlottesville to enable parents to share parenting strategies and conduct stimulating educational activities for their children. Reach her at 245-5232 or davidcarp@firstva.com.

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Families Focused on Service -- Building Community Concern within our Children

By Margaret Carpenter

We build a safer community when we raise our children to have concern for others. With the summer upon us, the time is ideal to promote within our families attention to community service. It begins at home with children picking up a few extra chores to help lighten the load for mom and dad. Tying their successful and cheery completion to a weekly allowance should be secondary to emphasizing the reward of the terrific way it feels to be a good helper. (The extrinsic reward system can be a trap; rather one should create experiences by which the child will feel intrinsically motivated to do good. It helps when the parent teaches the child to "pay attention" to how great it feels inside when their action has benefited others.)

Be aware that the development of truly outstanding character traits won't happen without conscious intention and follow-through, even using a calendar to schedule acts that reinforce values: thank you notes, sending letters or the child's "artwork" to grandma, paying attention to and following through on requests for volunteers at services for religious worship. A yard sale uniting the efforts of neighbors can be an opportunity to give to charity a "cut" of the profits. A child whose family begins early in her life to make a long term commitment to a particular charity will experience an uncommon sense of purpose.

What's your family's chosen cause? Charlottesville has a number of organizations in need of your support this summer, and clearly, it doesn't have to cost much time or money to make a difference. Virginia Blood Services and the American Red Cross are in desperate

need of blood donations, especially type O. Call either of the following to learn where you can donate, and to make an appointment: Virginia Blood Services: 979-2170 or The American Red Cross: 295-5433.

Habitat for Humanity will be building many houses for needy families in the Charlottesville area this summer. Prior experience in carpentry is not necessary as the organizers will teach the skills necessary on the day the work is to be done. Their work takes place primarily on Saturdays, and youths as young as 12 can participate. Calling 293-9066 at least 3 weeks ahead is best in order to get your family placed on a work crew. Volunteers are also needed for office work in 3 and 4 hour shifts during the week.

While taking a family nature walk this summer, you can take along bags to collect any trash you see along the way. The Rivanna Conservation Society (598-7576), Rivanna Trails Foundation (923-9022 or johnc@justice4all.org) or Rivanna Watershed Foundation (923-9078) can all suggest to you ways to volunteer to help maintain Charlottesville's natural beauty.

You can help a young person learn English as a second language; contact the Blue Ridge ESL Council at 977-7988. Or help bathe the animals at the Albemarle SPCA-- 973-5959.

And finally, in addition to non-perishable food donations, the Emergency Food Bank is in need of baggers, stockers, drivers, distributors and office workers. An average of just 2 hours per volunteer per month keeps the EFB going. Call 979-9180 to find out how to lend a hand.

This column is written to communicate and celebrate local efforts to strengthen community and raise our children to demonstrate character.

Archived Article

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Foreign Language Opportunities benefit C'ville's children

By Margaret Carpenter
(davidcarp@firstva.com)

Plug into your internet search engine the words, "second + language + learning + benefits" and you'll soon have access to a huge number of resources to read about the benefits your child will get from learning a second language early in life. Contrary to some parents' worries, learning another language, in most cases, actually improves the child's ability to learn English. Greater sensitivity to language structure and syntax and a larger vocabulary are just a start. Improved problem solving and listening skills, earlier development of reading ability, a more global attitude, better spatial awareness, higher SAT and ACT scores all are benefits associated with learning a second language, according to researchers. Language learning seems to "wire" the brain for enhanced memory and greater achievement in social studies, mathematics, and quite possibly the decoding of written music. Ultimately, a second language can give a person more self-esteem and communication skills that will enhance their college and career potential.

The research also indicates that the earlier in life a second language is learned, the better. Preschool years are a time when neural connections of the brain for lifelong learning form, making it the time of greatest potential and ease of language development. Exciting opportunities for both elementary school children and preschoolers are developing in Charlottesville to support this goal.

Charlottesville Public Schools offer at Burnley Moran Elementary School the area's only full day bilingual education for elementary school children. Parent Jenny Ackerman is excited about the Spanish and English program because it puts into action the findings that the last 15 years of research has proven about the ways the child's brain develops. The popularity of Burnley Moran's program for grades 1-4 is growing such that applicants from outside the school's district are vying for positions. Non-city residents will pay about \$500 in tuition to send their children there to learn in Spanish their science and social studies lessons, while Math, Language arts and other classes are delivered in English (with Spanish connections presented where appropriate.) For more information, contact Mrs. Mozell Booker, principal, at 245-2413.

Children who already have a background in either Chinese or Japanese find support for extending their learning through two programs, each serving about twenty students in our community. Participants range in age from 4-17 years at the Chinese school and meet on Sunday afternoons. Mr. Xioming Yu, the principal of the Chinese school, can be reached at 971-1682. Thursday afternoons from 4-6 pm, nineteen children aged 4-12 meet for Japanese instruction. Their teacher is Yasuko Kawasaki (978-1567) who welcomes also very young preschoolers and their parents to enjoy playtime with other Japanese speakers at the time the classes for the older children meet.

Also for elementary school children, the Alliance Francais offers cultural programs that include introductory vocabulary once a week after school at nine area elementary schools and at their office on Ivy Road (and Beupret preschool.) The Alliance Francais is organized to promote French culture and provides these group lessons at very reasonable rates-- \$7 per one-hour session. They also conduct other cultural programs for their members and can arrange advanced French instruction for an interested group. They run three summer camp sessions (3 weeks each) for children ages 5-15, as well. Telephone 434-973-8268 for more information.

The earlier the child learns the second language, the better. And full immersion programs are the most successful. That's why the big news is that the pros at La Petite Ecole, Charlottesville's French immersion preschool, are looking also to provide an immersion Spanish program in Fall, 2001 if enough parents of 3-5 year-olds express their interest. Their program in French will continue to serve children 2 ½ to 6 years old (which includes kindergarten, if desired.) Providing children a comfortable balance of play and thematic unit development in very small classes, the children develop their language abilities naturally and with remarkable speed. Their summer camp sessions are now open for enrollment and will be the school's first offering in their new and larger location at the Immanuel Lutheran Church on Jefferson Park Avenue. Can your child learn a second language even if it's not spoken at home? Ask John Hunter, teacher of gifted and talented children at Venable Elementary School. His daughter has attended La Petite Ecole for 3 years converses in French with ease. For more information about La Petite Ecole's offerings, telephone 984-2174.

Also for preschoolers, the central library has begun a story reading hour for Spanish-speaking children. It is conducted the 4th Friday of every month until May and it may be extended if there's sufficient interest. And mixing creativity with Spanish, Mrs. Hazael Garay who speaks fluently both Spanish and English is looking to offer an arts and crafts program on Tuesday and Thursday mornings next fall. It's for children ages 3-5, and no previous experience with Spanish is required. Telephone 975-6167 to learn more. Exposure to Spanish is also offered at University Montessori School where two Spanish speaking staff members integrate into their program Spanish, including one formal grouping each week designed to deliver a structured Spanish lesson.

What about German and other languages for preschoolers? Using the networking potential of the organization Parents of Preschoolers in Charlottesville (POPIC), a number of local parents have formed a German language playgroup. Together, their preschoolers sing songs, learn vocabulary, share resources and celebrate German culture. The group is beginning to investigate hiring a teacher to establish a formal program. (Call 296-7270 for more information.) Within POPIC, there has been interest expressed in forming such playgroups to learn Italian and sign language. To learn more about POPIC and how it facilitates networking and resource sharing for families in our town, send an e-mail message to newforestfarm@yahoo.com or call 245-5232.

Margaret Carpenter has a background in teaching and enjoys studying brain development and its implications for educators. She sends her preschoolers to La Petite Ecole. She founded Parents of Preschoolers in Charlottesville to enable parents to connect, plan and provide educational "field trips" and playgroups for their children.

Additional notes not appearing in original article:

Creative parents short on the language skills themselves can support their children's learning by using audio and videotapes and CD-ROMs. They can tape cable and direct TV programming which, for example, includes the Spanish version of Sesame Street (called "Plaza Sesame") and "Dora the Explorer" for Spanish learners. The International Center at UVA partners foreign exchange students with local hosts for language skills development, too. (E-mail inquiries to intlctr@virginia.edu). And internet resources can assist families looking to hire students from overseas as au pairs to bring the language into their home.

Following is a sampling of web sites that explore the research into the academic, cognitive and social benefits of learning a second language in early childhood.

<http://www.accesseric.org/resources/ericreview/vol6no1/langlern.html>

<http://epsb.edmonton.ab.ca/passport/Impact.htm>

<http://www.parentinginformation.org/second.htm>

<http://carla.acad.umn.edu/>

<http://www.soleil.com/english/fluencyinaforeignlang.htm>

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Emotional Development in our Boys and Girls

By Margaret Carpenter

What messages does our culture send its little girls? How will your daughter's self-image be shaped as she responds to the expectations that her peers place on her to look and act in an adult way? What behavior is "okay" for our boys? Do we allow them to experience their full range of emotions? Is your son supported to share his emotions in healthy ways?

I don't know if many of us would trade places with our children who will face adolescence in the 21st century. The media's mixed messages about what it is to behave as an adult are overwhelmingly complex and contradicting. Models of responsible behavior are scarce as Madison Avenue and Hollywood sell a carefree, money-spending, danger-embracing and highly sexual image of young adulthood. Physically, the bodies of adolescents are maturing at earlier ages, and "innocence" is short-lived as they race to adulthood. For so many children, their families require of them greater self-reliance at a younger age. Yet we know children's emotional maturation isn't keeping pace, and that can explain the growing violence, self-destructive behavior, depression and suicide among teens.

In an era when there's so much at stake, it's essential that parents tune in to the struggles their children will face so that they can help their sons and daughters to develop self-confidence and good skills for decision-making and communication. The following books are helpful guidance. I feel it might serve the interests of Charlottesville's parents to coordinate some book discussions for the coming fall. This incentive, along with the notion of us neighbors "being in it together" may help us to understand and apply their lessons. The goal is to build a more nurturing community for our boys and girls. Together, we can support them to develop abilities of discernment, and to discover and express their true selves without feeling the need to conform to expectations that can be destructive, especially during the vulnerable years of adolescence.

REVIVING OPHELIA: SAVING THE SELVES OF ADOLESCENT GIRLS by Mary Pipher, Ph.D. studies how Western culture impacts girls as they grow up (much too quickly these days.) The author suggests that the earlier onslaught of puberty, a very powerful media, and peers present girls with "lookism" (basically giving girls the message that that "the book is not as important as its cover".) Girls face expectations that sexualize them before they are emotionally ready. As a result of this pressure, girls are robbed of their self-confidence. They are harshly critical of their bodies and don't seem to measure up. Many develop eating disorders, an unhealthy willingness to do anything to "fit in" and anxiety that can lead to depression or even suicide. Ultimately, they may look for assurance and acceptance in all the wrong places, even relying on sexual involvement to "prove" their worth. If you have a daughter, this is an absolute "must read" before puberty for her hits. Use it to shape your parenting before you end up regretting that you missed opportunities to be there for your daughter, or worse, that you were part of the problem.

RAISING CAIN-- PROTECTING THE EMOTIONAL LIFE OF BOYS by Dan Kindlon, Ph.D. and Michael Thompson, Ph.D. is somewhat of a counterpart to **REVIVING OPHELIA**. It discusses the cultural expectations placed on boys that deny the validity and expression of their emotions. It analyzes the parenting styles, peer pressure and norms that shape our boys, and it demonstrates the difficulty faced by boys who have never developed an ability to express their emotions non-violently. Without "permission" by society to be anything other than macho and stoic, how many of our boys may potentially be ticking time bombs? How can parents support their boys in being emotionally healthy-- indeed, "whole" --in our culture?

My goal is to hold the book discussions at times convenient for participants in late September and October allowing folks to read one or both books. Register for the talks by e-mail (davidcarp@firstva.com) or by phone (245-5232) giving your contact information, and we'll arrange dates and times that work best for all. Please also forward recommendations of titles for future book talks.

ENDANGERED MINDS by Jane Healy, Ph.D. is one that will be on our list for the winter. So will **BEYOND THE CORNUCOPIA KIDS: HOW TO RAISE HEALTHY ACHIEVING CHILDREN** by Bruce A. Baldwin, Ph.D.

Find out how being a "Book Buddy" for a couple of hours per month from September - June can help a struggling reader in our public schools achieve improvements in learning and self-confidence. Be a hero! Call Eleanor Kett - 296-4005 or visit the web site:

curry.edschool.virginia.edu/curry/dept/cise/read/resources/bookbuddies/what.html

Before becoming an at-home mom, Margaret Carpenter taught history to middle and high school students. She founded Parents of Preschoolers in Charlottesville, which enables participants to share proactive strategies on educating and parenting our children.

