

# A Family Learning Roundtable Presentation

by Beverly Sheppard June 14, 2005

Last week I received a birthday card from one of my sons that I decided was all about family learning. Of course, it's the usual kind of affectionate card that one gets from adult sons - and I should note that Eric is a dad:

*"I'm always using the wisdom and advice you've given me, Mom. Sometimes I even do it using your voice and mannerisms. I'm pretty good."*

And I thought I was only teaching through my words! Clearly, as parents we take our teaching seriously, but the subtle lessons—the ones we aren't often aware of—or never intended to teach—can be the longest lasting. Our influence is profound in a myriad of ways. Whether positive or negative, we need to be conscious of the power of the family learning environment.

Let me tell you another personal story—this one about family learning in the museum. Only this time, I was the learner. Several years ago, I was visiting the New England Aquarium with my two very young children. We stood in front of the large central tank looking at a giant crab-like creature swimming directly towards us. With his long gangly legs, I thought he looked like a giant spider. I was just about to make a highly intellectual comment, like: "Isn't that yucky!" —when the person standing next to my oldest boy said, "Isn't that beautiful!" Billy—age 3—pulled on my skirt and looked back at me and repeated, "Isn't that beautiful, Mommy?" It was a personal epiphany. I realized instantly what I had almost done. The artist Henri Matisse once said that "the mind is the prejudice to the eye," and what could possibly have made that clearer than those few moments in Boston many years ago. We spent the remainder of the day looking for "beautiful things in the museum" and had a wonderful day. As I think back on that day, I am so aware of how easily parents can limit the potential of learning experiences, without even being aware of what might have been. As a museum professional, I have questioned how we might better enable the teaching power of parents and grandparents. Is there a way that we can help families take advantage of these moments? Can we help to head off the really awful thing I almost did?

How can we empower both parent and child in our environments and enable them to build conversations that share ideas and support self-confidence and mutual respect? The subject of my talk is **the learning bond** of families and I refer to all kinds of families, conventional or unconventional. My focus is on those special groups who are tied together by their unique relationships and defined by their multigenerational makeup. They may be parents and children, siblings of different ages, grandparents and grandchildren or any configuration that forms a family. **The learning bond** refers to both the setting and the unique nature of learning that occurs in the midst of our intergenerational family experience. It refers to both power of our influence as parents on children, as well as what our children have to teach us. Their sense of wonder, what they see, their lack of bias, their delight in discovery, even their height—all have the power to help adults renew their own connection with the world and their own spirit of adventure. Families are our first and our most important teachers. Within our families we are introduced to the world, learning everything from language to behavior, expectations to habits. We learn with our minds and our hearts—adding to our great wealth of factual and conceptual understandings at an incredibly rapid pace, and perhaps even more significantly, we learn values,

attitudes, and what we might call “dispositions.” Some of our most powerful learning will stay with us through our lives through those dispositions. How disposed are we—

- To learn
- To respect
- To be curious
- To be courageous
- To be open

Learning in the unique context of family is fueled by emotion, family history, bias, specific expertise, innate skills, genetics, and the world views that we will be aware of all of our lives—and it is powerful indeed. Families have by far the most significant role in shaping their children's learning from the outset. When learning shifts to peer influence and the outside world in the teen years, it will already be shaped in many ways by the learned dispositions of our early years. In an excellent report from the campaign-for-learning (UK) a set of statistics underscores the opportunities of family learning. A few stood out to me:

- The stage of life in which we learn the fastest is the first ten years
- The percentage of waking hours children spend in school is 15%
- The number of questions a four-year-old can ask in a single day is 400
- The amount of individual attention most pupils get in their twelve years of formal education adds up to between 3 and 6 days

That same report, by the way, also says that seven year olds who had been given books at nine months achieved results 20% higher than other children in national English, math and science tests. I doubt that these children begin cramming for those tests at an earlier age, but such statistics are reflective of how the value of learning is expressed within the context of the family. Another set of readings on family learning published by the U.K.'s National Institute for Adult Continuing Education is accompanied by a series of illustrations detailing the core benefits of family learning. At the heart of the intersection of children's, adults' and family's learning are two highly important outcomes: enhanced confidence and enhanced self-esteem. An accelerated list of outcomes follows, moving from improvements in parenting, basic skills and understandings of children's learning to very specific gains in children's educational attainment and improved family relationships. The diagrams establish benefits to everyone— the individuals, the family as a whole and even the communities beyond. So often what we think of as family learning tending to concentrate on asking adults to support children's learning, but I think, in this discussion, we must be equally aware of what children can and will teach their parents when both are engaged together in a learning process. This may mean we enlarge our definitions of learning. A few evenings ago I watched two young girls on the Common across from my house engaging in a typical child's game. They would twirl and twirl around until so dizzy that they would fall over and then dissolve in laughter, staggering back up to their feet. I laughed as well, remembering hours of such play with my sister years ago.

And then I thought about this talk today and what an adult might say about the learning going on. Would we be tempted to turn this moment into a lesson? Would we talk about equilibrium? The human brain? Would we offer a treatise on children's games? Or would we stop and think about what we are being taught. If we are being receptive, we would be watching lessons in joy and play and enthusiasm, revisiting the sheer pleasure of movement, the delight in the moment and the fun of sharing it with a

friend. And, I wondered a bit about how we build those kinds of lessons into our work in museums as well. A hallmark of family learning should indeed be about the discovery and rediscovery of play. And so I began listing the characteristics we need to be conscious of as we build family learning opportunities into our museums. I offer you a quick— but probably not complete list.

- **Empowerment for both parent and child** - where each can feel competent and contributing. To accomplish this we must pay attention to the provision of activities that respect the abilities and insights of all ages.
- **Instruction for both parent and child** - where each can learn something as part of the experience through multiple levels of learning. I often hear that parents will be happy if their kids are having a good time - but I think it goes beyond that. Parents will be even happier if they are both engaged.
- **Best of family learning should involve creative and purposeful play** - offering play that affords making, creating, experimenting, demonstrating or proving something. Activities should strive toward being open-ended, offering multiple interpretations or discoveries.
- **Should suggest positive learning behaviors** - take risks, ask questions, experiment a bit, try something out, without the risk of embarrassment.
- **Family Learning should have a degree of necessary collaboration** - the success of the experience is linked to the engagement of all. Cooperative learning leads to shared success and something you can talk about or simulate later.
- **Opportunities to reflect or celebrate - reward their work together** - let families know how great it is that they are learning together. Hold up their collaboration as a truly meaningful accomplishment.
- **Something you can take home** - consider ways to provide reminders of the shared experience, reinforcing the positive aspects of learning and doing together. Be creative about follow-up - whether a photo, an email, a packet of ideas, a reference to other similar experience, etc.
- **Transferable - a skill that can be repeated** - try to suggest a link between what activities families may engage in at home with similar skills.
- **Direct links to other resources** - consider leading families to the library, other museums or sites, the community, the school curriculum, or even television programs. Show them how learning opportunities are accessible everyday in our lives.

Sir Christopher Ball, the Chancellor of the University of Derby and an educational leader in England, suggests that successful learning is encouraged by the 5 C's:

- Choice
- Confidence
- Challenge
- Clarity
- Comfort

These concepts parallel those written about by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi in the book *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*. Mihaly writes about the influence of the family context in promoting a child's ability to have an optimal experience and lists five characteristics that are quite similar:

- **Clarity** - goals and feedback are unambiguous

- **Centering** - parents are genuinely interested in what children are doing
- **Choice** - children have a variety of possibilities from which to choose
- **Commitment** - the support that makes a child feel comfortable enough to set aside his shield of defenses and unselfconsciously become involved in what he is doing
- **Challenge** - children are provided increasingly complex opportunities or actions that enable them to grow.

Clearly, not all families are going to be optimal educators. In museums, however, we know that the families who have decided to come to the museum together most likely bring an inclination to learn. Our roles in supporting this inclination can take many forms—from simple, straightforward words of encouragement—“How wonderful that you are here together!”—to the conscious design, testing and fine tuning of exhibits and activities that support family learning goals. As museum teachers, we can also model the kind of behavior that illustrates good family learning—directing questions to both adults and children, acknowledging answers from both, encouraging the next level of observation, supporting good learning behaviors. By thus strengthening the very precious bond of learning between family members, museums have taken the first steps toward being centers for family learning—we have, ourselves, become very high order educators.