

TOP

Tips on parenting



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What Parents of Young Children Should Know About the No Child Left Behind Legislation

by Gary L. Carlston and Martha T. Dever

At a recent conference for teachers of young children, I (MD) was struck by the outrage expressed about the federal No Child Left Behind (NCLB) act. Since that time, it seems conversations with teachers quickly hone in on some aspect of NCLB. This federal policy is commanding the attention of teachers and administrators in an almost all consuming manner. It has changed the educational landscape regarding accountability for schools in historical proportions. Many teachers are concerned by the potential for abandonment of best instructional practices, particularly in kindergarten and the primary grades, as they strive to meet the requirements of the law.

The purpose of this article is not to argue the merits of the law's intent; rather, we hope to raise parents' awareness of some important considerations related to it. In general, the law requires each school in the nation to be assessed on its annual yearly progress toward meeting established achievement standards, primarily in reading and mathematics. The goal is admirable and holding schools accountable is certainly appropriate. So what could be the problem? The problem lies in: 1) the tendency to ignore teacher's expertise, 2) accountability narrowly defined by culturally biased, standardized achievement tests, 3) potential consequences for not measuring up, and 4) failure to embrace the collaboration between teachers and parents as essential to children's success.

Following are two scenarios that depict the tension teachers are feeling about government mandated testing, whether directly or indirectly connected to NCLB. This is followed by some considerations regarding the NCLB legislation, and the article ends with recommendations for parents.

Teachers' Voices

I (MD) was talking with a kindergarten teacher recently who kept insisting she was a "good teacher" but noted, "I had dramatic play in my classroom until January because I know it supports children's development in so many ways (socially, emotionally, academically). But, now I have to prepare the children for the end of level test because they will print my scores in the newspaper." Although testing is not required in kindergarten and the primary grades under the NCLB legislation, most states mandate some type of testing at each level. Teachers of young children are feeling the same pressure that others are with regard to accountability and performance on state mandated tests. In addition, schools deemed failing will be failing in all grades, not just those where testing is mandated by NCLB. Most formal standardized tests now have life altering implications

"Many teachers are concerned by the potential for abandonment ..."

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(e.g., loss of funding) causing many teachers to abandon best teaching practice for inappropriate teaching practices. In the kindergarten case above, dramatic play was abandoned for excessive drill and teaching to the test.

I (GC) was talking with a 3rd grade teacher about her class. It wasn't long until we were discussing NCLB and what it might mean for her students, especially those who are struggling to learn important concepts in a timely manner. This teacher is a successful veteran teacher and has always been able to make significant gains with struggling learners. The school is one that usually performs well and the teachers are generally self motivated to take students' achievement seriously.

She shared that, at about the mid point of the school year, the principal called a meeting with the teachers in all grades in the school. The focus of the meeting was on students' progress and the subject areas that would be tested under the requirements of the state and NCLB. At the close of the meeting, teachers were warned that they must be prepared to explain why any student did not successfully reach grade level. This message should not be misinterpreted; it makes good instructional sense for teachers to know what students need to be successful. The problem here was the tone of the message and the seeds of doubt that were planted. The principal seemed to have an urgency to say something about the tests students were going to be taking, but lacked the insight or experience to add to the message the importance of following sound instructional principles, and of developing partnerships with parents.

In this usually well-performing school, the principal's concerns about whether students would meet the standards left teachers questioning what they had been doing in their classrooms, and searching for some wonder program to meet the newly legislated expectations. While teachers need to continuously self-evaluate, these teachers seemed to doubt their own successful experiences.

What Parents Should Know

This is powerful legislation and is probably here to stay; but, clearly, some teachers are experiencing tension over it. Following are some considerations for parents related to the NCLB legislation that are worth examining:

Consideration One: Implication That Teachers Do Not Know What They Are Doing. There is an implication in NCLB legislation that teachers must be directed by government policy to use appropriate instructional programs. To be in compliance with NCLB, schools will need to use instructional programs in the areas of reading and mathematics that receive the stamp of approval from policy makers. One really cannot take issue about wanting teachers

to use programs, materials, and methods with a strong research base. However, policy makers don't have the requisite skills and knowledge to make decisions for teachers about appropriate programs for children in their classrooms. Teachers' past experiences and knowledge of the individual children in their classrooms must be a factor as they plan appropriate curriculum and instruction. They need the flexibility to make adjustments based on their experience and knowledge of the context and children in their classrooms.

Consideration Two: Accountability. The NCLB legislation calls for school accountability, a worthy goal. Teachers and schools must be accountable to taxpayers and most of all to children; but for what should they be accountable? Teachers must be accountable for aligning instruction with what best supports the achievement of the children in their particular classrooms.

One of the challenges teachers face is that there is no "one size fits all" answer to teaching children. Rather, one might say "one size fits none" in the educational environment. Children have individual cultural and developmental backgrounds and thus, deserve to be considered individually with regard to their educational needs. High-quality, effective teachers engage in daily observation and careful reflection in order to determine the instructional needs of each child. Then, they adjust the learning environment to best meet children's needs.

Test scores are one source of information about children's achievement. However, a single test cannot measure everything children know and can do or provide enough information to adequately assess children's progress. Furthermore, young children are inexperienced test takers which may impede their ability to do well on a test. Test scores must be considered along with other information about students that only parents and teachers can provide.

Consideration Three: The Consequences. Because schools are primarily funded by state and local revenues, there is a wide funding disparity in schools across the nation. While there is no precise correlation between monies invested and the success of schools, it remains a fact that it is difficult to implement some improvements (e.g., decrease in class size, additional professionals to assist with struggling readers) without adequate funding. The NCLB legislation exacerbates this issue, because the consequence for inadequate yearly progress will be denial of some financial resources. Thus, the struggling schools, perhaps the ones that need resources the most, may be the ones that will be denied needed funding.

"We have great faith in the skills of good teachers to know what their students need and how to successfully teach their students."



No Child Left Behind

Consideration Four: Parents as Partners. Schools serve the needs of students and parents in the local community, not those from afar. It is the work and vision of those closest to the school that make the greatest difference. Schools will find success if they recognize the power of working as partners with parents. The importance of collaboration between teachers and parents and its impact on student learning must not be underestimated. It is disconcerting that the focus of parents and teachers working together may be lost to the external policy forces of NCLB. Where this partnership is truly working, test scores will take care of themselves.

Recommendations

Following are some recommendations for parents – things you may already be doing. They are ordered by importance and from fairly private to public activities.

1. Get to know your children's teachers so you and the teachers understand each others' goals and expectations.
2. Talk with your children's teachers and principal to learn ways you can support your children's progress in school.
3. Speak to policy makers with your vote.
4. Through your Parent Teacher Organization, get involved in decision making in your children's school and district.
5. Policy makers are well-intentioned; but, there is no simple formula for meeting the needs of all children in our nation's schools. As federal or state policies emerge, examine them; decide what their implications for all children might be by talking with your children's teachers, administrators, and other citizens. Then, communicate your joys and concerns about educational policy to your legislators.

We have great faith in the skills of good teachers to know what their students need and how to successfully teach their students. We have equally strong faith that the

activity corner

Straw Painting!

Materials:

- 1 straw per child
- Non-toxic watercolor paints in assorted colors
- White paper

Directions:

Show the child how to put a drop of watercolor paint on to the white paper. Put the straw in your mouth and demonstrate how to blow through the straw. Explain to the child that you don't suck on the straw, you blow. Put the straw in your mouth again and ask your child to watch as you blow the paint around on the paper. Then give the child a chance to blow the paint around on the paper with a straw. Allow the child to use different colors to create designs and experiment with how colors change when they are mixed together.



partnership between parents and teachers is absolutely key to student success and now is the time to publicly remind ourselves to make this partnership stronger than ever. Children are our greatest natural resource. Consider what you can do to support your local teachers and to help federal and state policy makers implement policies that reflect what is best for children.

~Gary L. Carlston, is a former elementary principal, superintendent and deputy to the

governor and is an associate professor, Utah State University, 2805 Old Main Hill, Logan, UT, 84322-2805. phone: 435-797-0370, fax: 435-797-0372, e-mail: gary.carlston@usu.edu

~Martha T. Dever, former primary grade teacher, is an associate professor, Utah State University, 2805 Old Main Hill, Logan, UT, 84322-2805. phone: 435-797-0394, fax: 435-797-0372, e-mail: martha.dever@usu.edu





No Batteries Required

by Christine Bryngleson, Blake Halliday, & Julia Torquati

How much would you pay for a revolutionary product that has the power to transform your child? A product that promotes intellectual development, attunes creative and artistic abilities, promotes physical and kinesthetic health, nurtures social skills, self-concept, and spirituality? Read on, because you are about to discover a product that will captivate your child's imagination and stimulate healthy development in all areas. It is non-toxic, adaptable, and upgradeable. It is easy to use, readily available, neatly packaged, and fully recyclable. It is pure, 100% natural, biodegradable, and absolutely free. Click your heels together three times and bring yourself home, because this miraculous product is nature.

Any parent can share nature with their children. You don't need to be an expert, and opportunities abound in your own home and in your back yard or neighborhood. Children who are connected to the everyday wonders, mysteries, and beauty of the natural world retain their creativity and curiosity, and are less likely to complain of being bored or needing to be "entertained" (Carson, 1956; Wilson, 1995). Such children are more likely to value and cherish life in all its diverse forms (Basile & White, 2000). The natural world inspires the imagination. Exploring the natural world together is an opportunity to nurture your relationship and create lifelong memories. Discussions about the natural world offer the opportunity to reflect with your child about our connections to the past and future. Doing so will instill a

"sense of wonder," interest, and curiosity about the natural world and your child's place in it.

Unfortunately, today's children are increasingly disconnected from the natural world. They have fewer direct experiences in natural places and have less knowledge of the myriad ways that they are connected to the natural world, resulting in an "extinction of experience" (Nabhan & St. Antoine, 1993; Pyle, 2002; Rivkin, 1995). For millennia, children have been intimately involved in cultivating, harvesting, and preparing food, for example. Sharing a meal with family was a sacred and life-giving experience that nurtured body and spirit. Today, children may know that food comes from "a farm," but they have not experienced the miraculous process of seed germinating and growing to fruition with the support of soil, sun, and rain. Knowledge is more than factual, and when knowledge is acquired through direct experience – by touching, smelling, hearing, doing – it is much more powerful.

Early childhood educators have known for decades that multi-modal and sensory experiences promote learning, and recent research on brain development confirms that the more ways children are permitted to explore a phenomenon, the more areas of the brain are stimulated to grow (Jensen, 2000; Shore, 1997). Therefore, a child who sees, hears, and moves something, builds a model of it out of sand or clay, and represents it with paint or crayons is busy developing more elaborate and sophisticated concepts. Digging in the soil, planting seeds,

discovering worms and insects, caring for plants, watching in fascination as bees pollinate flowers, and picking and eating fruit is just such a multi-modal and sensory experience. What's more, children who grow and prepare their own fruits and vegetables are more likely to eat them. Interestingly, children who spend more time outdoors have fewer symptoms of attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder (Grahn, Martensson, Lindblad, Nilsson, & Ekman, 1997, cited in Wells, 2000).

Environmental education involves providing experiences that support the development of knowledge, attitudes, and skills to interact with the natural world and with others in ways that promote and preserve the well-being of people and the planet we share. According to the North American Association of Environmental Education (NAAEE), "Environmental education is rooted in the belief that humans can live compatibly with nature and act equitably toward each other. Another fundamental belief is that people can make informed decisions that consider future generations. Environmental education aims for a democratic society in which effective, environmentally literate citizens participate with creativity and responsibility." (www.naaee.org/npeee/learnerguidelines/)

NAAEE has outlined core concepts that can be used by parents and educators in promoting children's environmental understanding:



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science corner:

Gardening With the Three Sisters

by Rebecca Monhardt, Ph.D.

When you garden, you are growing plants. You are also growing your child's understanding of the world around them. Gardening is a great way to teach your child about science, math, and history. It is also a great way to spend time together and enjoy the outdoors. Gardening can be a fun and educational activity for children of all ages. You can start with simple plants like tomatoes, cucumbers, and beans. As your child grows, you can introduce more complex plants like corn, squash, and pumpkins. Gardening is a great way to teach your child about the importance of taking care of the earth and the plants that grow on it. It is also a great way to teach your child about the importance of working hard and waiting for your rewards. Gardening is a great activity for children of all ages. You can start with simple plants like tomatoes, cucumbers, and beans. As your child grows, you can introduce more complex plants like corn, squash, and pumpkins. Gardening is a great way to teach your child about the importance of taking care of the earth and the plants that grow on it. It is also a great way to teach your child about the importance of working hard and waiting for your rewards.

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What Is a Three Sister's Garden?



The Three Sisters garden is a traditional Native American planting method. It involves planting three different types of crops together in a single hole. The three crops are corn, beans, and squash. The corn provides a natural trellis for the beans to climb. The beans provide nitrogen for the corn. The squash provides shade for the other two crops and helps to suppress weeds. This method is a great way to grow a variety of crops in a small space. It is also a great way to teach your child about the importance of working together and helping each other grow.

"Theme gardens are especially fun for children to plant and grow."

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No Batteries Required

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Interdependence: All living things are connected, and human life cannot sustain itself without connections to plants, animals, earth, water, and air. We influence all life forms and Earth elements, and they also influence us.

Roots in the real world: Children can best learn environmental concepts through direct experience. Planting and cultivating a garden is one example of a real life opportunity for environmental learning.

The importance of where one lives: You don't need a rain forest or an ocean to experience nature. The most effective environmental education starts close to home as children explore and connect with their neighborhood and community.

Lifelong learning: Learning is a life time process that is essential to the continual development of mind and body, and it begins when parents model their own quest for knowledge.

You can use everyday experiences to nurture your child's environmental understanding. Take frequent walks around your neighborhood and invite your child to look more closely and listen more carefully. Compare the sound of the wind in pine, oak, and cottonwood trees. Get to know the songs of the neighborhood birds. Gather treasures, such as seeds, sticks, and leaves. Talk about the smells of rain and snow. Take your time. Explore whatever wild places are available in your neighborhood, and wonder together what animals might be nocturnal. Winter is a great time to get to know the night sky, because it is dark long before children go to bed. Invite your child to enjoy the beauty of the night sky, and help them to wonder why and how it changes with the seasons. You don't need to spend hours out in the cold, and it is more important to frequently spend a few minutes, perhaps as you are coming home in the evening to explore the night sky. Why does it get dark so early? Is the moon waxing or waning? What do they imagine about the stars and planets?

Indoor experiences can also enrich environmental understanding. In the grocery store, explore together where produce comes from. Look at the boxes in the display to find the state or country of origin of various fruits and vegetables, and have a conversation with your child about climates and places. Even preschoolers can appreciate that California stays warm in the winter and that oranges come on a train or in a truck from Florida. Salad is much more fun to eat when it comes from three states and two different countries. Invite your child to wonder what those places are like and what children do there. Routinely talk about the parts of plants they are eating during meals – roots, stems, leaves, seeds, fruits, and even flower buds (broccoli and cauliflower).

Experiences in the natural world with a caring adult can also nurture children's spirituality (Hutchison, 1998). Helping children to appreciate the wonder and mystery of the natural world and their place in it promotes a sense of belongingness, meaning, and order in creation. Be amazed with your children when you find bulb shoots pushing through the snow, and when a delicate spider web graces a shrub. Ponder together the similarities and differences between humans and other animals. For example, baby birds, squirrels, and rabbits all have mommies and daddies who take care of them,

and they all need to eat and take naps.

There are many resources available to aid in your exploration of the natural world. Field guides are available on a wide range of topics: insects, birds, plants, mammals, reptiles and amphibians, and the night sky, for example. Some field guides are even tailored for a specific region, to further aid in identifying and understanding local wildlife. *Ranger Rick*, *Your Big Back Yard*, *National Geographic Kids*, and *Discover Kids* magazines are factual as well as inspiring for children. Share high quality literature that celebrates nature. Explore local nature centers, your neighborhood, and your own backyard. Give your child the gift of nature, and connect them with the Earth community past, present, and future.

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~Dr. Julia Torquati is an associate professor at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, where she teaches courses in child development and conducts research on child care quality.

~Blake Halliday graduated from Brigham Young University and is completing his Master's degree in Marriage and Family Therapy at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln.

~Christine Bryngleson earned her Bachelor's degree at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln and works for Family Service as a child care provider.



Three Sister Garden

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Planting a Three Sisters Garden

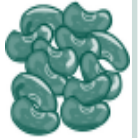
After deciding where to situate your garden, measure the size of your plot and outline the garden on a piece of paper. Allow about 4 feet between the centers of the corn mounds. Next build up your corn mounds. Each mound measures about 18 inches across at the base and 10 inches across the flat top where the corn will be planted. Mounds are about 4 inches tall. Keep in mind that these measurements are just guidelines.

CORN Whatever kinds of corn you plant, the seeds of each variety should be planted close together in the garden so they can pollinate themselves. Use the sun or a compass to find north, south, east, and west. Orient the corn seeds to the four directions as you plant them on top of the mounds if you want to follow tradition. Make four holes on top of each mound about 6 inches apart when measuring across the center of the



mound. Plant one seed in each hole. Plant the seeds about 3 inches deep or as deep as the instructions on the seed packet indicate.

BEANS A total of four bean seeds are planted in four separate holes made about one-half of the way down the sloped side of each mound. These seeds may also be aligned with the four directions.



SQUASH Plant the squash at the same time as the beans. Build up some rounded mounds in the open spaces between the mounds of corn and beans. Each mound should be about a foot across at the base and 3 inches high. Squash should be planted four seeds to each rounded mound, and can also be aligned to the four directions.



Allow about 8 inches between the seeds as measured across the center of each mound.

Selecting Seeds

Choose seeds that are suitable for your climate and soil conditions. Consider the maturity of the seeds and the amount of space you have available. Select seeds that are healthy and free of damage.

Choosing Corn Seeds:

- Choose seeds that are suitable for your climate and soil conditions.
- Consider the maturity of the seeds and the amount of space you have available.
- Select seeds that are healthy and free of damage.
- Choose seeds that are suitable for your climate and soil conditions.
- Consider the maturity of the seeds and the amount of space you have available.
- Select seeds that are healthy and free of damage.

Choosing Bean Seeds:

- Choose seeds that are suitable for your climate and soil conditions.
- Consider the maturity of the seeds and the amount of space you have available.
- Select seeds that are healthy and free of damage.
- Choose seeds that are suitable for your climate and soil conditions.
- Consider the maturity of the seeds and the amount of space you have available.
- Select seeds that are healthy and free of damage.

Choosing Squash Seeds:

- Choose seeds that are suitable for your climate and soil conditions.
- Consider the maturity of the seeds and the amount of space you have available.
- Select seeds that are healthy and free of damage.
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- Consider the maturity of the seeds and the amount of space you have available.
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For more information, contact the author at the following address:
 10888 762 7333

Phone: (520) 622-5561
 526 N. 400 S.
 Phoenix, AZ 85705-8450



In the Three Sister's Garden: Native American Stories and Seasonal Activities for the Curious Child written by JoAnne Dennee. ISBN 0-7872-2175-9.

~Rebecca Mohnhardt is an associate professor in the Department of Elementary Education at Utah State University.

