

HOW DOES YOUR CHILD LEARN?

“My son knows his ABCs. Look how smart he is!”

“Show Grandma how you can count to ten, honey!”

Does this sound like you or anyone you know who is a parent of a young child? Chances are, the answer is “yes.” We are so proud to see that our children are learning; that they are capable of doing and thinking more than we thought they could. We want to share our delight with the world.

But what does it really mean to be “smart?” Are counting and reciting the alphabet really indicators of learning? Yes ... and no. While it is true that these are signs that young children are able to memorize numbers or letters taught to them, this is not yet the kind of learning or critical thinking that will carry them through their future educations and through life. The ability to memorize comes very early in life, using only the part of the brain dedicated to memory.

Critical thinking skills are developed a bit later, by living, through trial and error, by noticing cause and effect, and by making mistakes. These life experiences exercise many different parts of our brains simultaneously, giving us “whole brain workouts,” as it were.

Your preschool-aged (and younger) child may appear to benefit from flashcards and workbooks as they are storing more information, more rules and more facts. But if this is how they spend most of their time, then the true value of the earliest years of life has been underused. This is the time when little human beings build the cognitive foundations that last a lifetime. This is when your child learns how to learn, how to solve problems, how to think. Additionally, this is the time to begin practicing social skills, learning how to deal with emotions, figuring out how to use little finger muscles to hold a pencil and how to use bigger leg muscles to climb.

Most often, critical thinking or problem-solving skills are learned in the presence of a caring adult, like you or your child’s teacher. They are there to help your child use different parts of the brain; the parts that don’t just memorize but strive to make sense, to make meaning. Teachers also help by providing carefully thought-out environments, materials and activities through which your child may learn or discover. They are there to ask questions that assist them in thinking through their experiences.

But the process of discovering how things work, that words have meaning, that numbers have patterns, is your child’s journey to take alone. Grown-ups are simply there to encourage, to challenge and to facilitate their growing understanding.