

# Seeing Children Find Endless Possibilities

by Deb Curtis and The United Way Bright Beginnings Toddler Teacher Cohort



TODDLER TEACHER COHORT — TOP ROW LEFT TO RIGHT: TANEIKA MORRIS, ALBERTA GUERRERO, ELSA M. ANARIBA, STEPHANIE WEST BURTON, PATRICIA HERNANDEZ, LA COURTNEY RATTIFF, MICHELLE PATE, AMBER SAVAGE, JOI PENDLETON  
BOTTOM ROW FROM LEFT TO RIGHT: KASONDRA BROWN, TABU MULIMBI, HSIU-YIING (JOYCE) CHANG, DEB CURTIS

We have been observing toddlers for several years now, and each time we are more astonished with the brilliance we see in these very young people. We gather together quarterly in each other's classrooms, offer children interesting materials to explore, then we observe and document what unfolds as they play. After the observation, we meet for several hours to study our notes and photos and think together about the significance of what we have seen for the children's learning and our own.

We feared that the ice balls with objects frozen inside that we offered recently would have limited potential for engaging the children for very long. We wondered aloud what the children would do after the ice melted and there were only a few objects left to play with. The children quickly showed us that we were greatly mistaken in our assessment of their capacity to see possibilities. The investigations and discov-

eries that unfolded over the next hour were beyond anything we could have predicted.



## So Many Possibilities

The ice balls were large and heavy so they attracted the children immediately. The children were drawn to the chal-

lenge of lifting and carrying them around the space and transporting them back and forth between the containers. The ice was cold to touch and taste and the children lingered while licking and chewing on it for quite a while.

One of the children discovered that when he dropped the ice balls they broke open, shattering into smaller pieces. The many different-sized ice pieces now became the center of attention. Some children filled up the containers with them and still others kept throwing the pieces to the ground, eager to see them break into even tinier bits. The children worked diligently to find



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every piece, large and small, to toss to the ground, watching the exhilarating transformation.

The ice was transforming in another way: melting from a solid to a liquid and puddles were forming all over the mat. The puddles became an action-packed new adventure. The children sat in the puddles, slapped the water with their hands, and ran through the puddles, splashing up and down in them, causing water to fly through the air.



Even after all the ice melted and the puddles dispersed, the children still weren't done. The red buckets captured their attention and they began to use them in many ways. Some children happily put them on their heads, laughing together about this comic discovery. Others found a way to sit inside the buckets, manipulating their arms and bodies to get them to spin around and around like an amusement park ride.

Last, but not least, the buckets became a launching pad for energetic jumping. Children with different comfort and







There was constant change, but it was not frenetic. The children were intensely focused, yet peaceful, with an easy flow to their activities. One child would start an idea and others would take it up. Then another idea would spring up and



that would spread with ease and delight throughout the group. The growing of ideas unfolded continuously throughout the playtime. The children recognized their camaraderie, satisfied with their ability to see and share each other's ideas.

This experience reflects the concept of 'flow' as described by psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (1990). His famous investigations of 'optimal experience' have revealed that what makes an experience genuinely satisfying is a state of consciousness called *flow*.

During flow, people typically experience deep enjoyment, a sense of timelessness, focused creativity, and total immersion with learning and life. We have come to believe that when toddlers are given time together, enough space and open-ended materials, 'flow' comes naturally to them.

## The Role of Adults

As we observed the children, we were quickly drawn in to their mood and interests. While we supervised for safety, we mostly let things happen. It never seemed necessary to jump in to stop anything. Instead we marveled at the children's abilities and the way they approached their explorations like scientists. Their shared pleasure and interests charmed us. We found ourselves smiling and laughing at the surprising endeavors they took up. Perhaps we joined the children in a state of 'flow' by merely watching them.

## Seeing Brain Development and Learning Theory

The children's work revealed the brain development and learning theories we have been studying. We saw strong evidence of the flexibility of the children's brains as they pursued never-ending possibilities for exploring and learning with the materials. The children were powerful learning machines as Alison Gopnik (2009) describes them. They used the best skills and dispositions of scientists as they initiated and tried out their theories, noticed cause and effect, and built from one discovery to another.

We also saw Piaget's schema theory magnified. The children's play showed repeated patterns, which represent threads of thought that they are pursuing to learn about the world. The descriptions of schemas matched the children's actions. We saw:

■ **Transformation:** The children engaged with watching and making changes to the ice and water.


■ **Trajectory:** The children were engrossed with throwing the ice, spinning in the tubs, and jumping off of the buckets again and again.

skill levels took up this activity. Some were able to launch themselves high and far. One child felt challenged, yet proud, and successful as she gingerly stepped off the bucket. The children made a collaborative, thrilling game of it, taking turns jumping together, over and over again.

## Optimal Experiences

Needless to say, we left this play session filled with pleasure and awe with what we had witnessed. Along with the stunning number of possibilities for exploration the children came up with, the mood of their play was just as striking.

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- **Transporting:** The children enjoyed moving the ice from one container to another, and carrying the large balls all around the room.
- **Enveloping and Enclosing:** The children used the buckets to fit over their heads and to skillfully get themselves all the way into the buckets to sit and spin. (van Wijk & Christie, 2008)

### Reflections on Our Own Learning

The nature of our work with toddlers keeps us busy. We spend our days keeping the group moving, eating and sleeping, changing diapers, wiping noses, planning activities, and keeping the peace. Slowing down to notice and marvel at the details of the children's ideas and abilities is not an easy task. Our work in the cohort has helped us realize the importance of pausing to

see the children's ideas because we always see rich experiences grow:

- We have come to know that children have many ideas and often really don't need ours.
- We understand that we can keep children safe while giving them more opportunities to be challenged and joyful.
- We are in awe when we take time to see the amazing brilliance of children. We never want to lose sight of the natural wonder and innate drive young children have to explore and learn deeply.

We are also inspired to see the power of reflective practice and thinking together as a cohort for our own learning and the affirmation of the bigger meaning of our work with young children.

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