

PART ONE

FLOW

THE OPTIMAL STATE
FOR LEARNING





WHAT IS FLOW?

Children in flow—Adults in flow

*The great Tao flows everywhere.
All things are born from it,
yet it doesn't create them.
It pours itself into its work,
yet it makes no claim.
It nourishes infinite worlds,
yet it doesn't hold on to them.
Since it is merged with all things
and hidden in their hearts,
it can be called humble.
Since all things vanish into it
and it alone endures,
it can be called great.
It isn't aware of its greatness;
Thus it is truly great.*

—Verse 34 of the *Tao Te Ching*

With everything I do, I just try to be myself.

—Kevin Durant

“FLOW” EMERGED AS A TERM for “optimal experience” out of the ongoing research on happiness. Under the lead of professor Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (ME-high CHEEK-sent-me-high), some central questions have been asked anew in modern psychology and human science: *Why aren't more people happy? When exactly are people happy?*

Studies with over a hundred thousand individuals around the world from many different walks of life have revealed that happiness is not something that just happens, but neither can you go looking for it. Even though family, friends, success, money, and other circumstances contribute to happiness, research indicates that lasting happiness is an individual state of consciousness that must be cultivated internally.

Happiness is determined by how much delight we can derive from mundane or extraordinary experiences. It is our ability to enjoy our own activity so much that nothing else seems to matter. It is being fully involved with our present moment, thereby letting go of worries and self-consciousness. It is what many adults crave in their lives and what children naturally experience during self-chosen play.

In Csikszentmihalyi's words: “It is what a painter feels when the colors on the canvas begin to set up a magnetic tension with each other, and a new *thing*, a living form, takes shape in front of the astonished creator. Or it is the feeling a father has when his child for the first time responds to his

smile.” In these moments, we feel alive and in charge of our fate. Indeed, flow is directly connected with a feeling of being in command of our own experience, as opposed to feeling pushed in one direction or another. When we decide what, when, and how we do something, when we are motivated from within, even strenuous activities can give us happiness. As Csikszentmihalyi describes: “Optimal experience is thus something that we *make* happen. For a child, it could be placing with trembling fingers the last block on a tower she has built, higher than any she has built so far; for a swimmer it could be trying to beat his own record; for a violinist, mastering an intricate musical passage. For each person there are thousands of opportunities, challenges to expand ourselves.”

Flow is the energized focus that naturally arises when someone is fully satisfied with their activity. It is the optimal state for learning, because during flow activities people stretch their limits at their own personal pace. In this self-chosen state, life force can flow freely. It is simultaneously instructive and healing because it speaks to our innermost need for discovering the world from an authentic place within.

Flow contains all that makes life worth living: deep, satisfying focus; personal goals that give meaning; a lifelong joy of learning; and a rich inner world that feels purposeful. Flow contains awe and magic. It elevates us. Maybe it takes us beyond what’s human; maybe it makes us *more human*.

THE ELEMENTS OF FLOW

Below are 14 basic elements of flow, and how they relate to a child’s natural way of learning. Not all elements need to be present for an activity to become a flow experience.

The self-chosen challenge: A feeling of being in command, of having a choice, is crucial to flow experiences. Life force is fueled when we feel interested in an activity and empowered to pursue it.

Focus and concentration: Flow requires the ability to concentrate. Children and adults naturally focus on activities they genuinely enjoy even when they are strenuous.

Absorption: This term relates to a completely open mental state when one is ready to learn from an activity. The educator Maria Montessori (1870-1952) started using the phrase “the absorbent mind” at the beginning of the 20th century to describe children’s ability to deeply engage while learning and absorbing concepts quickly.

Lack of self-consciousness: During flow, one can be free of self-doubt and self-criticism in order to trust and relax into an activity. Young children are naturally self-confident and unworried.

Clear goals: A self-chosen goal is the guiding light during a flow activity; it gives each moment direction and purpose. During children’s play the goals may change and adapt to the flow of an activity.

Balance between skills and challenge: Flow experiences emerge from an ideal balance between what one can do and what one wants to achieve or learn. Children naturally choose activities that correspond to their inner world, meaning that flow activities allow them to practice what they already know, and learn new things at just the right pace.

Feeling of timelessness: During flow children and adults experience timelessness; an hour can feel like a few minutes. Children still have easy access to timelessness, so they need help with knowing how long something may last or when a timespan is over.

Embodied experience: In flow, our minds are in tune with our bodies—we *become* an experience; we are fully in it. Children naturally learn best when they can move as they wish. Activities learned in flow become body memories and are rarely forgotten.

Intrinsic rewards: One of the most important markers for flow is a feeling of deep fulfillment during and after a flow experience. There is no need for prizes, gold stars, or other external rewards.

A lack of awareness of bodily needs: As adults we have enough life experience to know what our body needs, when it is time to drink water, eat, or rest. When children are in a state of flow, they need our help with this.

ADDITIONAL FLOW ELEMENTS FOR CHILDREN

Emotional safety: For children to deeply engage in their play they need to feel emotionally safe. Children aren't able to give themselves emotional safety yet; they need adults to provide them with truly safe and respectful environments. Learning cannot be separated from feeling.

Physical safety: Young children often don't yet know when they are in actual physical danger. When we provide them with supervised freedom, they can remain safe and focused while learning to handle "risky" objects such as needles, glassware, or scissors or when they develop important vestibular skills such as balancing, climbing, and jumping.

Imagination: If an activity is invented and planned by a child, there is usually an element of bright imagination. A child doesn't merely climb a playground ladder; in their imagination they climb the ladder to a sailboat, a ladder to their home, or a ladder into a magical land.

Playfulness: Children love to play. When they are emotionally safe, they are lighthearted. The outcome of an activity is often not as important as the mere joy of the process (especially for young children). *How* children learn is as equally important as *what* they learn.

TRY THIS

Notice your own moments of flow

Remember times and activities in your life when you experienced flow. What stands out for you? Over the next week, notice when..

- ☆ You choose your own activity because you love it.
- ☆ You feel intrinsically rewarded by an activity.
- ☆ The activity allows you to lose all self-consciousness.





THE SCIENCE OF PLAY AND FLOW

Research on child development

FLOW STATES NATURALLY ARISE repeatedly during children’s play, because as children our brains are wired for playing and learning in flow. Scientists have found that the benefits of play are not only visible in a child’s psychological well-being and cognitive development, but also traceable in a child’s biochemistry.

An extensive body of research confirms that unstructured, free, spontaneous play is extremely beneficial for children and crucial to their healthy brain development. Research on flow and play has emerged primarily from the fields of developmental and cognitive psychology, as well as neuroscience, using CAT scans (Computerized Axial Tomography) and MRIs (Magnetic Resonance Imaging) to measure anatomy and brain chemistry under different circumstances.

A NOTE OF CLARIFICATION: This book uses “flow” as a term initially coined by Mihaly Csikszentmihaly, who describes flow as the psychology of optimal experience. For Csikszentmihaly, flow refers to profound happiness, focus, and fulfillment in the present moment experienced in many different ways, including but not restricted to outstanding performance. Flow can be the happiness of smelling a flower, the fulfillment of feeling the wind on your skin, the joy of a well-cooked meal, and, especially for children, it is the joyful focus during their self-guided play.

Csikszentmihaly’s research, starting in the 1970s, sparked great

interest and has since been applied and adapted to many different fields, including business, virtual reality, and sports. Especially in sports, flow has become popular referring to the science of peak performance, measuring and describing the extreme focus and physical endurance needed to reach outstanding goals such as free-climbing a steep rock wall. These states are connected to a fight-or-flight response in the body that leads to acute present moment awareness and optimal “brain plasticity” (the ability of the brain to change and adapt instantly according to circumstances). This kind of flow differs from the deeply relaxed flow of childhood, because children naturally experience the kind of flow states that originate from trust, curiosity, and a drive for play and exploration.

The childhood brain is wired for flow. Extraordinary, intense experiences aren’t needed to activate it. As Sir Ken Robinson puts it in his book *The Element: How Finding Your Passion Changes Everything*: “[Flow is] a way of feeling deeply connected with our own sense of identity and curiously comes about through a sense of relaxing, of feeling perfectly natural to be doing what you’re doing.”

In addition to Csikszentmihaly’s work on flow, many other researchers, including Dr. Joseph Chilton Pearce, Dr. Stuart Brown, Dr. Joe L. Frost, and Dr. Dan Siegel have studied childhood play and learning as it relates to psychology and neuroscience. Below are some of the most important scientific insights about flow and play.

NEUROSCIENCE IN A NUTSHELL

The brain consists of several billion brain cells that communicate over a network of trillions of connections called synapses. Neurons are the specialized type of brain cells that send messages across the synaptic connections via electrochemical and neurochemical signals such as dopamine, serotonin, and endorphins. Each of these neurochemicals carries specific information that changes emotions, moods, thoughts,

reactions, and responses to events. During children’s spontaneous play, especially during the state of flow that frequently occurs during play, many feel-good neurochemicals are transmitted that make learning in flow a highly rewarding experience. While more research needs to be done, the following neurotransmitters are known to be released during flow:

Dopamine: Increases attention and focus, regulates body movements, motivates healthy risk-taking, orients us toward rewards, helps us deal with stress, and contributes to feelings of pleasure, excitement, and satisfaction.

Endorphins: Also called the “hormones of happiness,” relieve pain, produce a pleasurable, even euphoric experience, activate naturally during self-chosen movement.

Anandamide: Known as the “bliss molecule,” relieves pain, increases experiences of reward and pleasure, and reduces anxiety.

Serotonin: Regulates moods and anxiety, helps with emotional stability, and promotes a positive outlook on life.

Oxytocin: Motivates social connections and increases trust in others.

LEARNING AND FEELING CANNOT BE SEPARATED

When children play, neurons communicate (called firing), connections are made, and the self-organizing network of intelligence grows; but when they don’t fire frequently enough, the neural network shrinks and communication possibilities are lost. Each moment in flow and play is meaningful and helps to both reinforce existing synapses and to establish new ones in the brain. In Joe L. Frost’s words: “The casual observer does not grasp the profound relationships between achievement and the endless games that the very young play—the patty-cake, peek-a-boo, and sing-song rhythms that are in reality storehouses or machines for programming the brain for language, art, music, math, science, kinesthetic, and interpersonal abilities and intelligence.” By the age of three, children have trillions of synapses in the brain, estimated at twice that of an adult’s brain. Some synapses are reinforced through a child’s environment; others are pruned due to lack of use.

There is scientific evidence that suggests there can be too much or too little stimulation in a child’s environment. Merely filling a child with information is of no use; the information has to be absorbed in a warm, emotionally safe context, and in alignment with the child’s will and readiness. Every child has different needs in this regard. Environmental input, combined with genetics, is what can either support or hinder a child’s growth and development.

In addition to stimuli in the environment, children are informed by and react to the internal, emotional states of other people, especially of their significant adults. A special type of neuron, the so-called mirror neurons, pick up, for instance, if another person feels safe or anxious, present or distracted, benevolent or judgmental. In this way, an adult’s emotional state often co-determines that of a child, including whether the child feels safe and relaxed enough to learn and thrive.

Healthy children continue to play throughout their childhood, into adolescence, and even into adulthood, yet the ways children play change as they grow. Spontaneous play meets children’s current genuine needs and equips them for skills they need later in life; in so doing, children learn and refine basic life skills such as communication, flexibility, inventiveness, and versatility, as well as motor, language, and negotiation skills. Spontaneous play helps build and maintain a stable identity and inner resources that support the individual in times of crisis.

PLAY IS CRUCIAL FOR MENTAL HEALTH

Research and anecdotal evidence suggest that much of the violence committed by adults is directly related to a lack of play and nourishing attachment with a caring adult in childhood. If children aren’t allowed to play of their own volition, then they don’t develop the neuroplasticity (flexibility and imagination) needed to imagine alternative solutions to life’s setbacks. The constant carrying out of orders against one’s own will limits thinking to a narrow box of fear, isolation, anxiety, pessimism, sarcasm, and even sadism.

One of the first and most revealing studies on this topic was conducted under the lead of psychiatrist, play researcher, and founder of The National Institute for Play, Stuart Brown. He investigated a dramatic incident that occurred in 1966 known as the Texas Tower Massacre, where Charles Whitman barricaded himself inside the top of a university tower and shot 44 people. Brown found that Whitman had a brutal father who did not allow him to play; hence, he never developed typical child play patterns. Following this insight, Brown's research continued with 26 convicted Texas murderers, and revealed that 90% lacked typical childhood play, and participated in inhumane acts such as bullying or cruelty to animals.

Many more studies have been conducted that confirm the utter importance of spontaneous childhood play. In their 2019 recommendations on children's health, the World Health Organization (WHO) states that children need to sit less, sleep more, and play more. In the Declaration of the Rights of the Child (1959) and again in the Convention of the Rights of the Child (1989) the United Nations Organization (UNO) recognized that it is "the right of the child to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities." There are countless organizations of pediatricians, teachers, and parents who advocate for childhood play. There are grassroots movements that create play-based, child-centered schools, and political efforts to create policies that bring playgrounds, nature parks, and gardens back to urban communities. Everyone who cares for children can participate in these efforts and help "wire" children's brains with positive experiences, emotions, and healthy social interactions to keep those healthy connections "firing" in the brain.

CHILDHOOD TRAUMA CAN BE HEALED

If you had unstable or abusive childhood experiences, or for other reasons, did not get enough play during childhood, please know that with conscious

intent our brains can and will keep changing, growing, and learning. Childhood trauma and conditioning can be healed, but consistent effort must be made to help the brain rewire.

There are many ways to heal and even transform the pain of negative childhood experiences into wisdom and compassion. Respect yourself as a survivor and learner and allow yourself to rest and recuperate. Give yourself kudos for your extraordinary efforts. Eat a healthy diet. Re-learn to play, which can be done side by side with children. Feel your emotions and let yourself mourn.

For additional help, I suggest the "Emotional Freedom Technique" (EFT), a powerful healing technique that has helped many war veterans heal from trauma and can be applied to all forms of anxiety. As introductory reading, I suggest *Wired for Joy* by Laurel Mellin, an associate clinical professor of family medicine and pediatrics. *Wired for Joy* is a simple, practical guide to rewiring your brain toward joy and a positive outlook on life.

TRY THIS

Tinker and create without expecting results

Playing without pressure is healing for the inner child. Choose play activities for yourself that lack a specific goal and let the process of playing be more important than the result. When we experience how much can be learned during free play, we will feel comfortable and excited watching children play. If we don't understand the value of free play, it might be difficult for us to watch children "only playing" instead of sitting at the desk studying or being guided in their activities by a grown-up. In many professions where creativity is required, adults let themselves play freely with the subject before results are expected. Since we are mostly conditioned to show accurate or attractive results, activities like the ones

proposed below will free your creative spirit. This part of the process is needed for us to understand both children and ourselves. Even if an exercise feels awkward in the beginning, keep on playing until something lights you up. That light is your inner, very personal creativity, a precious aspect of human consciousness that is all too often buried. Every activity is more delightful when you remove pressure and add an element of play. Here are some ideas for your free play with or without children:

- ☆ Take apart an old camera or other gadget you don't need anymore just to see what's inside.
- ☆ Experiment with a musical instrument, with sound-makers, or simply your voice, in your own way, just for yourself.
- ☆ Make noises and sounds—melodic, gibberish, whatever comes out.
- ☆ Dance or move in a way that feels good.
- ☆ Take leaves, pebbles, and branches you find outside and create patterns that the wind will blow away.
- ☆ Draw anything on paper knowing you will throw it out.
- ☆ Create something ugly on purpose.
- ☆ Play dress-up, or “put on” a silly character or voice.
- ☆ Pretend to be an animal or a tree.
- ☆ Talk with yourself and state affirmations, perhaps even in a joking manner, “Great job, buddy!”
- ☆ Show yourself some love. It takes self-love to make something fun for yourself when you are alone. Entertain yourself; make yourself giggle because you are doing something weird or funny.



FLOW AND MENTAL HEALTH

From deep focus to life purpose

DURING FLOW, CHILDREN ESTABLISH emotional, mental, and behavioral patterns that support their mental health throughout life. For instance, let's look at simple, flow-friendly activities such as building a block tower or knitting a scarf. While creating something tangible, children develop skills that are crucial to mental health. They experience themselves as genuine learners; they learn how to learn. The activity gives constant feedback on what is working and what is not, so they learn to quickly adapt to changes and the requirements of a situation; they learn flexibility. They learn what it takes to reach a goal; they learn self-discipline. They learn to do something meaningful for themselves and they learn what it means to be autonomous. They learn that mistakes are part of every process. Self-chosen activities call them back to try again; they learn patience and perseverance.

Hands-on and whole-body experiences help children create a healthy identity, and over time, find meaning and purpose in their lives. In flow, they get closer to finding out who they naturally are and who they want to be. Flow provides opportunities to discover what motivates them to be active and what fuels their life energy. On the go, children discover their innate talents and preferences; they experience what nourishes their spirit, and, eventually, what kind of contribution to society might come naturally to them. As you bring more flow experiences into a child's life, you will witness how the child becomes increasingly intelligent, not just

intellectually, but as a well-rounded personality. There is something about a fulfilling activity that calms our nervous systems at any age; it is a feeling that we are in the right place at the right time. In flow, we are doing something meaningful that renders us more capable, more confident, and more energized.

Young children have a natural inner emptiness; they are free from the thought-clutter that most adults experience. For the average adult, it is an achievement to get one's mind to calm down enough to enjoy the innocence of an activity. But once you get the taste of learning in flow, nothing compares. It's the ultimate comfort for being a separate individual, for being alone. It's how you can have fun with yourself. It's self-comforting and self-uplifting. It's the capacity to find joy by yourself.

In your flow, "in your zone," you don't need anyone. You are completely happy with just being you, alone in your comfort zone that you stretch at your own command, whenever you are ready, with no pressure whatsoever from outside. Just you and your own willingness to grow and learn; to achieve what seems worth achieving to you.

For a young child this is their normal way of life. Until it is not. Sadly, in most schools, especially in standardized education, this individual state of learning goes undervalued or unrecognized. Instead of being encouraged to learn in flow, children learn to suppress their inner impulses. They learn to sit still and focus on something they did not choose, which is often something completely disconnected from their experience. They learn to study using only a fraction of their potential—the intellectual mind. The whole rest of their learning capacity is disengaged.

This disengagement impacts not only intelligence but also mental and emotional health. It creates anxiety and tension that come out in many ways, such as mistrust of adults, disease, and aggression. Not only

do children find themselves disconnected from their natural interests, but also from the adults they would love to trust. In most schools, a child's world is greatly reduced from the first-hand experiences of active learning to a second-hand, abstract world where they memorize information out of books. The joy of flow is gradually forgotten and buried under a load of homework, exam preparations, behavior control, and worries.

Most children, at school and elsewhere, are continuously exposed to a harshness inherent in our current society, whether from well-meaning adults or peers dealing with a deep loss of agency over their own lives. These children experience pressure, criticism, data-overload, and unrealistic beauty and performance standards. They are trained to be consumers instead of creators. Moreover, the human mind has a natural negativity bias developed out of a primal need for survival. Positivity and a life-affirming mindset need to be actively cultivated in order to limit anxiety and depression, and avoid addictions.

In today's culture, it takes effort to create time and space for children to learn in flow, but so many parents and innovative schools show that it is possible. And it's worth the effort. Flow has to be invited; it has to be practiced and cultivated to keep shaping a child's inner landscape toward meaning and purpose. Flow needs what children should ideally have as long as possible: time for timelessness, no (or very little) worry, inner quiet, self-esteem, time for play without pressure, curiosity, and a basic love for life itself.

Mental health and well-being are ongoing practices. A young mind must be supported to anchor itself in flow experiences, in the tangible world, and in nature, so the mind can become an ally in navigating this world, instead of one's own worst enemy.

CHILDREN'S MENTAL HEALTH MARKERS

We often talk about mental health only when a child already shows heavy signs of mental illness such as depression, anxiety, aggression, and other behavioral challenges that create an inability to fit into school. Often children's mental health challenges can be remedied before medicating them by changing their environment. Look for the below simple, yet powerful mental health markers to make sure your child is doing well now.

- ☆ Likes to play.
- ☆ Laughs with you.
- ☆ Moves and is curious.
- ☆ Has a vivid imagination.
- ☆ Is eager to explore nature.
- ☆ Tests your boundaries and their own limits.
- ☆ Enjoys loving touch and rough and tumble play.
- ☆ Recovers relatively quickly from sadness and upset.
- ☆ Feels safe to share with you when they are sad or upset.
- ☆ Experiences moments of flow during a self-chosen activity.

NOTE: Limited ability to be flexible and empathic are age-typical (as explained in Week 21), and will naturally mature in a loving environment with healthy boundaries. Rebellion and frustration are normal responses when children don't like the one-size-fits-all strategies in schools. Not being able to fit into standardized education is often a sign of great mental health because it reveals the willingness of the individual to defend their self-motivation and authenticity. Support your child with loving conversations, regular opportunities to play, and a plan of action to mitigate any long-term negative impact the situation may have.

TRY THIS

Three mental health anchors for your child

A child needs various points of stability in their life in order to be anchored in good mental health and find comfort during challenges.

Anchored in healthy relationships: Even one significant adult who genuinely cares for the child can make a huge difference in a child's well-being.

Anchored in nature: Regular access to outside time, running, and exploring freely in a nature place such as an urban park, the forest, or the beach. Playing with pebbles and sticks, listening to the sounds around them, discovering plants, animals, and insects—all of this nurtures a child's mental health.

Anchored in flow experiences: Flow offers an invitation to claim one's life and to own one's experiences. Flow in art, music, and movement helps us to express and consciously feel what goes on within and thus transform and heal it. This can have a positive ripple effect that helps to heal other parts of our lives and establish a strong and healthy core rooted in sanity and self-love.





THE SELF-CHOSEN CHALLENGE

The ultimate game-changer

CHOOSING A CHALLENGE fueled by inner necessity and intense self-motivation is where a child's life force resides. A self-chosen challenge is the ultimate game changer because it goes hand-in-hand with a drive for learning self-discipline, patience, and resilience. We can and should offer children many different invitations for learning, but even though it may be tempting or it may seem like the responsible thing to do, we should never push an activity. Invite, inspire, make enticing, but don't force a child. When *we decide for a child*, we deprive them of many crucial learning opportunities.

The self-chosen challenge is the beginning of true self-discipline that does not need external pressure to be sustained; it is the sweet spot where a child is fully engaged in life and will not only learn but mature. In the Rebeca Wild based (RWB) schools, I supported many children who set their own goals. Often, these goals were hard to reach—such as crafting a complete chess set in the woodshop or sewing long poems on a pillow.

It's fascinating to see how children develop patience when striving for something they really want. There is a struggle between frustration and the desire to achieve; a tug of war between giving up and continuing. These inner dynamics lead to important maturation processes and inform children for the rest of their lives. They learn that positive and negative feelings are a natural part of almost any creation process; they become

familiar with comfortable and uncomfortable feelings and they learn to persist during challenges. They discover what it feels like to be frustrated, to give up, to hang in there, to continue even though it's hard. And what it feels like to achieve a goal, to celebrate that moment of success. It is empowering to be able to follow a self-chosen challenge (no matter what it is) and it provides a child with a feeling of command over their experience that is deeply fulfilling.

Children choose their challenges for various reasons. First, as long as they are able, they learn because they are curious about life, and they are willing to expand, explore, grow, and discover. They have a spontaneous joy of life and act from a place of inner contentment and self-confidence.

Second, a challenge is often chosen to fulfill a personal genuine need and improve one's own quality of life:

"I must know what these letters mean!"

"I want to write a message for my friend."

"I would like to make a dollhouse out of this shoebox."

"I made a gift for you!"

Finally, there is learning to prove to oneself and others that one can do it and thereby experience the excitement of a self-chosen competition. Living up to a challenge through self-discipline feels exquisite: "You weren't sure if I could do it . . . there, I counted all the rice kernels in the bag!" or "I knew I could jump higher than you today; maybe you will jump higher than me tomorrow."

Finishing self-chosen tasks, completing a project, or keeping a commitment or promise becomes increasingly important as children get older, when they naturally develop increasing genuine interest in the results of their activities and a deeper understanding of linear time. Young children need not be forced to develop self-discipline prematurely. As young children, we are not interested in the result of our activities as

much as we take delight in learning profoundly from each activity and experience *just as it is*. If the idea that the value of an activity is based on its tangible results is introduced too early, children often develop anxiety, which keeps them from enjoying their learning processes in the moment. Children have an inner compass that guides them to appropriate activities in alignment with their current learning edge. “Come on, try a little harder!” can be equally distracting as our fearful comments, “I’m worried about you. Be careful!” Within boundaries that feel safe to you, lean back, admire and trust your child’s self-chosen challenges, and you will be surprised at their ingenuity and competence.

TRY THIS

Help your child with an ongoing practice

When children have the opportunity to experiment with a variety of activities, they may find a practice they would like to deepen. Children don’t know yet that mastering anything involves time and commitment, so be patient with them and receptive to their feedback. Adults can lovingly help children reach their goals, but not at the cost of their joy and never without their consent. An ongoing practice could be anything that needs a long-term commitment such as growing plants, playing an instrument, crafting a wooden toy, tending to a pet, or learning to ski. Here are some ways in which you can help your child reach a self-chosen challenge:

- ☆ Provide everything the child needs for practicing, such as equipment, a quiet place, and uninterrupted time.
- ☆ Leave the instrument or materials needed out, visible, and within reach, so your child can practice anytime they want.
- ☆ Watch the child practice, if that helps them.

- ☆ If needed, in agreement with your child, find the right amount of practice time; maybe 30 minutes a week is enough, maybe 15 minutes a day feels right. Adjust the practice schedule to your child’s needs over time.
- ☆ Create rituals around practice time. For instance, children love helping set timers, lighting a practice-time candle, or reciting a poem connected to their challenge.
- ☆ Be a role model and participate in your own way.
- ☆ Offer ongoing help and support.
- ☆ If a child wants to give up, inquire what is happening: Is it too hard? Is the teacher intimidating? Do they just need a break? Feel free to ask open-ended questions as well.
- ☆ If the commitment creates too much tension, let them take a break, come back to it later, or find a more suitable practice.



The Self-Chosen Challenge at Home

Giving children agency over their learning process is not to be mistaken for a “laissez-faire” or a “free-for-all” approach, which assumes a lack of boundaries that can be frightening for children and adults. At the RWB schools, we use very clear boundaries and prepared environments within which the learner’s self-chosen challenges can happen. Similar conditions are needed at home. Susanne, FLOW TO LEARN’s parenting advisor shares her experiences:

There is a common misconception that allowing a child to make independent choices results in an overly permissive environment or even in giving up our role as parents. Children need to feel safe within the healthy boundaries we set as their grown up, trustworthy leaders. As their parents, we maintain the responsibility to help them meet their needs when we recognize they cannot do so themselves.

It’s an ongoing practice for me to discern what can be my child’s choice in a given moment (learning decisions, play decisions, creative process decisions, self-care decisions, and so on), and when I should choose for them. For example, I might observe that my three-year-old is quite tired, and that she needs to take a nap before she can return to her innate flow state. I have seen that her ability to be in safe command of her environment drops significantly when fatigue sets in. However, if asked, “Would you like to go rest?” she might insist she isn’t tired and doesn’t need to rest. Perhaps she’d rather keep playing, or she might not yet understand what ‘feeling tired’ is, so her choice at that moment would not be in her best interest. In this example, it’s clear to me that she needs my guidance to go rest, so asking if she would like to do so is offering her a false choice, since her choice would necessarily be overridden by my responsibility to keep her safe and well.

From the RIE (Resources for Infant Educarers) approach, I have learned that giving my children a controlled choice will increase the level of trust they

have that I always mean what I say when offering them options. A controlled choice in this instance could be: “You seem really tired, so I am going to help you go rest in your bed. Would you like to walk or be carried?” In this way, I calmly set the caring, respectful boundary and provide a clear, controlled choice designed to keep my child safe while allowing her to feel autonomous.

I let her know what is happening before engaging in any physical touch so she can prepare for being carried or led to her napping place (or she may very well choose to go on her own!). Of course, there are times when an adult must scoop up a child who is in danger or is so fatigued that they can no longer manage verbal comprehension. When this happens, I might lovingly say things like: “I hear you are upset. You wanted to keep playing. I picked you up to keep you safe and I’ll take you to nap now. I’m so sorry I startled you. It’s okay to cry. Would you like me to lie down with you for a while?”

If a child feels emotionally safe throughout a challenging transition such as the one I just described, they become increasingly able to trust the benefit of their caregiver’s decision, for example, understanding that the adult they trust helped them to rest, and now they feel much better. All caregivers know that requiring a child (or an adult!) to stop before they’re ready to do so will usually result in opposition, and understandably so. Naturally, disagreements between us and our children about what is best for them happen often, which is all the more reason we try to ensure that they feel validated in their experience. This is one of the greatest balancing acts of respectful caregiving: encouraging children’s self-led choices and independent thought while we simultaneously maintain our responsibility to keep them protected and healthy.

In our case, meeting these moments with honesty, firm boundaries, and respect for our children’s emotions and desires has deepened the bonds we have with them. They know we still love and respect them as individuals, even as we set limits on their self-chosen challenges.



RECOGNIZING FLOW

Train your eyes to see children differently

LEARN TO SEE CHILDREN as *young masters of flow* so you can support their emotional well-being, creativity, and superpowers. Children's superpowers include skills such as crystal clear focus, open-minded presence, boundless self-motivation, and deeply devoted, genuine interest in their own activity (refer to Week 14 for more details).

When children feel emotionally safe and can spend time in prepared environments, they spontaneously create flow-experiences for themselves. During flow, children are enthusiastic, open, and focused; they experience their mind at its best, as an ally and supporter. *If there is one thing we can learn from children, it is how to be playfully focused in flow.*

However, no one has ever told us this is so. "The kids are just playing," is what we commonly hear. But numerous studies from learning psychologists, educators, and pediatricians confirm what many of us intuitively know: children's play is their natural way of learning about their world. During spontaneous play, such as pretend play, playing with blocks, or tinkering away at something, children drop in and out of flow continuously and effortlessly when given the freedom to do so.

During the moments, minutes, or hours in flow, when children are fully focused on their activity and their body and emotions are on board with their mind's focus, that's when whole-body learning happens. The child learns something that they never forget, such as using scissors,

riding a bicycle, or reading. Once you can read, you never go back to not being able to read. It is in these moments when a child's whole being is most receptive to absorbing all they can learn from an activity.

Let's say you see a child tinkering at the table with paper, scissors, and glue. You find out that their goal is to craft a paper airplane, not any paper plane, but an exciting, perfect paper plane that will fly from the window all the way to the squirrel on the tree in the backyard and deliver a walnut. How are you going to react?

Most people are not aware that such a complex child-chosen activity allows for countless new pathways to be formed between creative and logical thinking. It provides an enticing, steep learning curve from having an idea to realizing it, as well as the chance to hone practical skills like learning how to fold, cut, and tape paper. For the child, these are all just means to an end, and for the trained eye, these are effective exercises for creativity, coherence, and fine motor skills.

The child willingly chooses these exercises, without any pressuring or caregiver orchestration. Children love to learn in a child-friendly, playful context where they can follow their own process. The child doesn't consciously plan to learn. Rather, lasting learning happens as a result of intense interest in their self-chosen challenge.

Of course, we adults play a crucial role in the basic psychological imprint upon this child. Will the child find a supportive voice and the space and time for experimenting and discovery? Or, will the child be interrupted, ignored, or swooped up to do something else? Will the child get doubtful, patronizing looks, admonishments to be careful, or unsolicited help and advice? Will the child get too much praise, diverting them from flow to external rewards? Will they find our support to fully experience their own joy or disappointment when their plane finally flies? That's up to us.

TRY THIS

Watch a child play

Now that you know more details about flow, observe your child during the day or watch the learners in your classroom and notice if there is any span of time, even minutes, when a child is in flow. Become a quiet, friendly observer; when they look at you, return a friendly smile to signal you are not going to interrupt them and what they are doing is fine. Some children may be in the habit of expecting encouragement or approval in order to continue with their project. If this appears to be the case, it may take a while for a child to realize they are free to drop into flow without interruption. As they begin relaxing into their own process, limit your verbal feedback (if any is needed) to warm, short narration of their choices, simply reflecting their actions. Often, a few exchanges of this nature will give children reassurance that they are indeed safe to drop into a deep state of flow. Look for the elements of flow:

- ☆ When is the child fully concentrated on their activity?
- ☆ When can you tell the activity is intrinsically rewarding?
- ☆ What are the conditions that helped this child get into flow?
- ☆ How can you bring in more of the beneficial elements that helped this child to be in flow?
- ☆ What abilities might the child have improved?

Choose from this list: Gross motor skills
 Fine motor skills
 Logical thinking
 Creativity
 Others:

**THE CHILD MASTER IN YOU***Constantly return to your beginner's mind*

WE ARE BORN WITH what Zen Buddhism calls a beginner's mind—an open mind, full of curiosity and wonder. As children, when we feel safe, we eagerly explore our surroundings. In our minds, everything is possible. Over the course of a day, when we find something interesting, as children we naturally and masterfully drop into the state of flow.

It's our beginner's mind that gives us easy access to flow and allows us to become fully absorbed in an activity we love. And it's our beginner's mind that leads us to reap the ultimate benefit of flow in childhood—learning deeply and permanently about our world. We don't forget what we learn in flow. It becomes our body memory.

Dropping into flow requires the childlike quality of looking at an activity with an open mind. It is a mind free of preconceived notions, doubts, and judgments, that sees clearly and directly instead of being filled with thoughts such as "I will never be able to do this" or "I already know I won't enjoy this." Young children have no doubts that they are capable. They trust their personal process of learning. A beginner's mind is receptive and allowing. It opens a doorway to flow states for yourself, and it enables you to understand the mindset of a child. Have you ever experienced a young child asserting, "Let me do it myself"? How outraged they get when you do it for them! That is why Maria Montessori, one of the first educators to value the state of flow, translates for children by stating, "Help me do it myself!"

Children are telling us to “be my companion on the learning path, but don’t do it for me.” Often, simply narrating their actions can be enough assistance to reinforce their intrinsic desire for hands-on, autonomous learning. Motivated by a genuine need for growing independence as well as belonging, children naturally return to the beginner’s mind to ever so eagerly start new explorations. Think of a toddler’s first attempts to open a door. The child sees other people using the handle. As soon as she is tall enough to reach it, she begins experimenting. If allowed, she will play with it until she is able to open the door or decides on her own it is time to ask for help. After some practice in deep focus and flow, opening a door handle becomes easier, and eventually it becomes a body memory—there is no need to practice this anymore. Onward to the next learning experience!

As we see in the RWB schools, this kind of learning, if allowed, happily continues as children grow. This is how humans naturally learn how to read, write, or play an instrument. As long as we are supported in doing so, we naturally keep returning to our beginner’s mind—and we return with more skills each time. We integrate what we learn and start a new learning cycle from a more skilled perspective. Each new mastery becomes woven into the interconnected, complex web of knowledge that lays the groundwork for more difficult learning experiences. The deeper the learning, the more solid the foundation for next learning steps.

Let’s use drumming as an example. While at first a child may randomly beat a drum following no special rhythm, over time they may discover various ways to play it. They initiate and develop new rhythms. When the child is fascinated by it, they naturally continue to practice drumming in flow. You might ask to join the party and through your own play provide suggestions for new rhythms or techniques and see how the child responds. They may not be ready to play with others or receive feedback and suggestions, if they are still deeply engaged with their own flow process.

As a flow companion, you will learn when to respect those healthy

boundaries set by a child, and how to recognize a genuine invitation into their sacred space of learning in flow. In this way, the child’s motivation for learning the task at hand is preserved, and the practice is likely to avoid the pitfalls of obligation or lack of ownership that can lead to abandonment of the process.

If we are supported to learn in flow, our beginner’s mind is constantly being refined with layered and more important information about the world. In fact, as adults we can return to our beginner’s mind with many additional treasures that we (ideally) have learned growing up: as adults we are more aware of dangers, we know how to take care of our physical and emotional needs, and we have the social skills needed to integrate our flow states into social environments.

BALANCE YOUR BRAIN’S NEGATIVITY BIAS

As infants and young children our heads are often free of busy thoughts. At this young age, a serene mind tuned in to a healing stillness feels natural to us. Young children’s thoughts are almost always in direct connection with a present moment event. Though they might stretch to include a longer story, not much worry or anticipation is present yet (both are thinking activities disconnected from the present moment.)

As we gather more life experience through interaction with people, places, and items, we start to think more. Thoughts pop up in our inner reality that nudge us to evaluate events, assess risks, judge, like, and dislike things based on how they make us feel. Our brain begins to serve as a kind of protective device trying to help us avoid discomfort, stay safe, and feel more pleasure. As we grow up, we become increasingly used to scanning for problems, and expecting the other shoe to drop. For instance, as children it’s easier to have a completely positive experience and to feel fully uplifted by its memory. As adults, our brain’s learned negativity bias filters the memory, all too often getting hung up on the one upsetting

detail that happened that day. While your child remembers the fun and connection of your day together on the beach, you might be stuck focused on the moment when you snapped at them for getting sand in your bag.

If an event feels scary enough, a child's negativity bias may very well kick in. For example, if they fall into cold water and experience great shock or fear, combined with their parents' reactions, that event may stand out as the most salient memory of their day at the beach. Consequently, a child's whole being will focus on this traumatic experience to process, transform, and release it in many ways, and mostly by "playing it out" (as explained in Week 17). As adults, this function can become an impairment—instead of processing to release, our brains tend to overthink and make things more complex and disturbing to our inner world than they are in reality. Most of us need to put effort into rebuilding positive thinking habits—otherwise our brain's negativity bias can tarnish even the most innocent, sweet experiences we have with children, with others, or for that matter, even with ourselves.

This negativity bias most likely developed as a survival mechanism and served a good purpose throughout human evolution. Those who survived then passed on the brain training genetics to detect danger soon enough to avoid it, which reinforced it over millennia. In this day and age, there are large swaths of humanity that do not need to reckon with regular, life-threatening danger. Yet, the negativity bias remains a strong part of all our wiring.

Constant thought feels normal to most adults, and if we are unaware of it, this constant thinking tends to be negative; many of us have forgotten what it feels like to have a peaceful mind, to think less, worry less, and simply trust an experience. And often it is exactly this overactive mind that keeps us from finding more pleasure and flow in the present moment.

With a little effort, it is possible to retrain our brain and relearn to enjoy, trust, and relax into life experiences. For instance, at night, when you lie in bed, before dozing off, create a new habit of listing at least three positive things that happened that day. You might find your body relaxes

and you fall asleep more easily. You can also start a gratitude journal, by yourself or together with your child, where you take daily notes of things you are grateful for. Simple habits such as these make a big difference for your brain circuitry, and gradually, perhaps without noticing at first, your ability to think positively and fully enjoy sweet moments with your child will increase, and so will your ability to drop into flow.

Find out more on balancing the brain's negativity bias in Loretta Graziano Breuning's book *Habits of a Happy Brain: Retrain Your Brain to Boost Your Serotonin, Dopamine, Oxytocin, and Endorphin Levels*.

TRY THIS

How to encourage the beginner's mind

Experiment with reawakening and using your beginner's mind, especially when you find yourself in new circumstances, but also in daily life. Support children in trusting their own initial impressions of an item or an activity and you will observe how the joy of discovery increases.

FOR ADULTS

USE YOUR NON-DOMINANT HAND TO DO FAMILIAR TASKS

Try to experience your beginner's mind by letting the hand you always use rest, and by using your other hand to do mundane tasks you need to do anyway. This may slow you down, and perhaps bring up some impatience, but if you keep going, you will reap the benefits of re-wiring your brain and expanding your habitual view of how you do things. This week try this:

- ☆ Brush your teeth with your other hand.
- ☆ Write your name with your other hand.
- ☆ Use the computer mouse with your other hand.

FOR CHILDREN
USE NON-INVASIVE LANGUAGE

One way to keep the beginner's mind alive in children is to use non-invasive language. Instead of answering children's questions with words and labels right away—"This is thyme," "That's Da Vinci's Mona Lisa"—we can allow a child to have their own first impressions of novelties with questions like "What do you see?" or "Tell me more about that." Instead of pointing out elements in the environment, we can allow a child to make their own discoveries, for instance, instead of saying "Look at the beautiful butterfly!" we can say, "I can see something special right now, can you?"



THE POWER OF HANDS-ON ACTIVITY

Bring joy back to learning

CHILDREN NATURALLY USE THEIR HANDS and their whole bodies in flow. This is what makes learning attractive, lasting, and joyful for them. It is awkward and painful for a child to use only their thinking mind and disregard their emotional and physical impulses during the learning process. They need to see, touch, hear, feel, smell, and play with something in order to learn about it.

It is during hands-on activities that children are most likely to experience flow, the deepest, most suitable inner state for learning. Natural, relaxed focus allows the brain and heart to absorb new information and integrate it seamlessly into the child's being. Whatever is learned in flow remains in a child's long-term memory. It becomes a reference point in their internal world that helps with all abstract thinking and theoretical contemplations, as well as allowing for the development of increasingly complex hands-on skills and coordination.

Everything children learn in preschool and elementary school can be taught with hands-on learning materials in playful ways. The most impressive example of this is math. Many children have extremely negative feelings toward math in its traditionally taught forms. Many adults cringe when they think back to math lessons and have concluded that they're just not smart enough to understand it. But how can something so magical, perfect, and splendid as math, a sacred language for the multi-dimensional

world around us, become so abhorred? It is because it was reduced to rote memorization, pen and paper, and a complete lack of meaningful, creative connections with our world; the life was literally taken out of it. It was diminished to an isolated, abstract subject that seemed to have nothing to do with our vibrant and colorful reality.

In my mid-twenties, I relearned math during my Montessori teacher training with hands-on learning materials and had a stunning revelation: I wasn't too dumb for math! It was the theoretical way that it was explained to me that didn't work. For the first time, I saw math as a descriptive language, a tool I can use to better understand the world and myself. There is a huge difference between scribbling fractions in a book, and their practical counterparts: slicing a pizza or an apple into halves, quarters, and eighths; sharing game tokens equally among friends; or creating a budget for a school trip. The latter hands-on experiences are needed many, many times in childhood so the concept of "fractions" can be incorporated into our whole-body knowingness. Then, when we calculate fractions on paper, math merely becomes what it is meant to be: a language for what we know firsthand; a language that helps us perceive the reality we know in more complex and evolved ways, even allowing us to imagine things far beyond the everyday tangible experience.

Rebeca and Mauricio Wild were especially fond of Montessori and other hands-on math materials. A few years before Rebeca passed away in 2015, I asked her what she would most want to communicate to parents in the U.S. She responded with the following message, translated from German:

"Since in our culture, most people are guided by external information, many of our internal networks are blocked. But if we dare to go new ways with our children, they can begin to perceive the difference between what they heard from others and assumed to be true, and what they have learned through their very own experiences and have gradually understood. One way to reactivate internal authentic understanding is to

interact with hands-on math materials. But only if we give up our agenda to teach children 'better' and 'faster,' and instead let them make new discoveries to share with others who are curious about what they learned. For us [Mauricio and Rebeca], it has become increasingly clear that hands-on math is not simply a different way of 'doing math,' but that there is much more to it. Through interactions with the various counting boards, beads, and cubes, a learner's internal understanding builds structures that connect their reticular system with the limbic system as well as with the various other areas of their brain – it truly is a visceral experience. Often adults or adolescents would share with us that during their work with these materials, they suddenly understood why, for example, they have difficulties with their partner or their parents. This is definitely more than mathematics!"

TRY THIS

An example of child-directed learning

Joy, a public school teacher from California who visited the RWB school I helped create in the Italian Alps, remembers the following experience she made in the school:

Every morning yoga was offered in the theatre. It was a lovely way to start the day. Sometimes it would be just Anna, me, and Renate, and other times there were quite a few of us. But, every day, without fail, two young boys waited rambunctiously outside the theater door, eager for us to finish. Once our mats were packed up, and we opened the doors, the boys rushed in and began building forts. I quietly observed their process, one special morning, doing my best not to intrude on their learning space. They went to the corner where large geometrically-shaped stuffed objects were stored and began flinging them into the center of the room. They then dragged out a couple of

ladders and pulled different colored cloths from the shelves. I observed as they went on to systematically and with great fervor build the most intricate and well-balanced ‘buildings.’ I was fascinated by the way they worked together to adjust certain pieces, learning what did and did not work, what would stay up and what didn’t have enough support, how each edge could fit into certain nooks, and so on. The creations they made were forts suited for royalty. They then climbed in and began to enjoy the fruits of their labor...so determined, and in flow, learning in pure joy and concentration.

This day of witnessing such a scene made a huge impact on me. Just three weeks before, I had taught my 3rd grade students back in public school in Oakland about 3-D shapes. It was a struggle for them. We were using small wooden pieces of each shape and worksheets that required students to count the sides, vertices, faces, and so on of each piece. The kids were compliant and ‘did their best,’ but the lessons felt flat and without real meaning.

And then fast forward, here I was sitting in this schoolroom in Merano, with no ‘teacher’ to guide, only two six-year-old boys and an inspired environment, and these boys were learning on such a deep level the intricacies of 3-D shapes. They were not only ‘learning about’ them ... they were experiencing them, holding them, touching them, turning them, building with them, revising their plans, creating, and enjoying their ‘work.’ In this moment, I really got how play and work are one and the same, and why it is a huge disservice to our children to teach that they are separate.



LEARNING HOW TO THINK

Flow skills prepare for academic skills

THERE IS AN ALARMING TREND in education to push academic skills on children even before preschool, at a time when they are unable to comprehend what is asked of them, or even physiologically capable of the task. A child-centered approach assures children the right to learn at their own pace, on their own terms, when they are ready. Reading, writing, foreign languages, and basic math might be exciting for some children at an early age, but should never be forced at the cost of spontaneous play.

During playful discovery and thought experiments that include natural learning curves based on trial and error, children form the mental and intellectual abilities needed to develop academic skills within an optimistic growth mindset: “I can learn this! I couldn’t do it last week but today I can do it!” Many hands-on experiences ensure that fundamental thinking capacities are being practiced and reinforced for permanence. These foundational experiences are best acquired in flow.

Teaching children primarily through spoken and written words separates them from the direct experience of their environment. Children learn that they need another person in order to interpret and interact with the environment, so this approach can be quite disempowering. Furthermore, verbal teaching leaves much room for misunderstanding. For example, when children learn division using only numbers on paper, they usually do not realize that the result of a division equals what “one

person” receives. When division is experienced by a group of children evenly dividing a basket of apples, children understand division with their whole bodies and minds. They see that the result of division is “what one gets.” Such holistic experiences are the most natural, efficient, effortless, and fun ways to learn.

In flow, children learn how and when it is best to think and when it is better not to think. Being in flow shows children that there is a higher intelligence in us than our thoughts; an intelligence anchored in our bodies; an inner, organizing, and integrated intelligence that can be trusted. They learn that practicing and trusting oneself are the avenues that repeatedly lead to success. Below is a list of intellectual skills that most children learn with ease during their spontaneous play (by themselves and with others) in prepared environments; these skills are needed *before* academics can make sense to them:

- Focusing on a chosen topic
- Problem-solving and planning next steps
- Estimating and anticipating results
- Spatial thinking, developing the capacity to know what something that is not present looks like
- Developing a strategy
- Envisioning and dreaming of what is not yet materialized
- Calculating a risk
- Discerning between real and imagined
- Perceiving the environment with all senses
- Recognizing patterns and varieties in nature, such as the growth of plants and movement of insects or clouds and patterns in human and animal behavior
- Allowing the mind to rest from thought in order to open up to the “lightbulb” or “sudden knowing”

- Cultivating positive thinking versus negative thinking habits
- Being encouraged and encouraging oneself with positive thought
- Contemplating the present moment
- Contemplating what happened in the past
- Using the mind as a tool to relax the body and nervous system

The following are core academic skills most children can learn once their intellect is ready:

- Critical thinking
- Listening and learning through discussion
- Reevaluating assumptions
- Speaking without fear
- Researching data and information
- Memorizing
- Taking notes, summarizing and extracting information from texts
- Writing essays and articles
- Preparing and presenting about a subject
- Math and science
- Basic technology and engineering
- Civics, government, and economics
- History, geography, computer science
- Taking an exam
- Time management
- Digital skills

In well-prepared, flow-friendly, educational environments, such as RWB schools, children can learn the following skills, playfully, and at their own pace:

- Sorting, adding, subtracting, dividing, and multiplying with real-life objects
- Communicating thoughts and emotions clearly

- Expressing oneself with clarity and ease
- Simplifying complex content
- Prioritizing tasks and information
- Deducing important information from random facts
- Remembering chosen content
- Memorizing chosen songs, poems, texts
- Associating personal, relevant content with our instructive, collective stories and myths

UPDATING OUR UNDERSTANDING OF INTELLIGENCE

Conventionally, we think of intelligence in the context of an IQ score. Yet, neither academic nor intellectual skills completely determine a child's intelligence. Harvard psychologist Howard Gardner helped us expand our traditional notion of intelligence with his theory of multiple intelligences. Beyond a child's intellectual potential, he and his team scientifically developed ways to identify and measure nine different kinds of intelligences:

Linguistic: Fondness of and talent for spoken and written words

Mathematical-logical: An affinity for reasoning, analysis, and numbers

Musical: Deep understanding of rhythm, song, and sounds

Visual-spatial: Advanced comprehension of the world through images and visualizing things

Bodily-kinesthetic: Strong learning skills through movement and hands-on activities

Interpersonal: Skilled at communicating, and interacting with others

Naturalistic: Sensitivity to and high interest in the natural world

Intrapersonal: Drawn to self-exploration and adept at self-awareness

Existential: Ability to see the "big picture" and ponder the profound questions of life and death

In order to deepen our understanding about a child's (and our own) intelligence, we need to go even further: A child's intelligence is determined also by their ability to connect and to feel connected. In fact, children develop high intelligence through feeling connected. Intelligence is generated with the heart as well, and considers all sides of an issue in the context of genuine interest for what one is learning, while caring for all people, nature, and oneself.

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In his books and interviews, Joseph Chilton Pearce, (1926-2016), professor of humanities and visionary author, summarized and interpreted the research on the intelligence of the heart, which has influenced many educators and parents around the world from the 1970s onward. In simple terms, he explained what had already been proven scientifically: Our heart is not only a physical pump, but also highly intelligent. Our heart's reactions, feelings, and emotions are an important part of our brain and nervous system. The degree to which we listen to our heart's reactions determines our capacity for joyful, self-directed learning, flow, relaxation, and clear, balanced thought.

SILLINESS, PLAYFULNESS, AND LEARNING

As a ground rule, children learn anything more easily in a playful, warm, and even silly context. Playfulness, silliness, and lightheartedness allow a child's nervous system to feel safe and at ease. This doesn't necessarily mean adults should come up with ways to be silly with children (even though that may be wonderfully fun at times); instead, allow children

to be silly with you when it naturally arises for them. Don't force them to focus when they need to chuckle and giggle. Whenever you can, let children tell you their jokes and stories and receive them with a smile that says, "I see you and your brilliant mind!" I feel it's an honor if a child trusts an adult with insights into their world. Once this dialogue, this back and forth, is allowed, children will also be more likely to and listen to what a parent, teacher, or tutor has to say.

Learning and feeling cannot be separated. Feeling respected, loved, and supported while learning is a catalyst for more advanced learning processes. The mind can get in the way of performing well because it can be fearful and full of doubt. Through flow, children learn that the intelligence they sense from their gut feelings can be trusted.

TRY THIS

How to create intellectual safety

Intellectual safety is a nurturing foundation for creativity and flow. Creativity starts hiding when it feels judged harshly. So many people have lost the joy of painting, singing, creating, or experimenting because they encountered one or more adults who inhibited their joy in childhood and beyond.

Some examples of how adults do this, often with good intentions, is by judging a child's creative process negatively *or positively*; overtaking the creative process by regulating how it should proceed; superimposing the "ideal" method before a person is interested in learning it or telling them their way of creating is the "wrong" way; or reducing the creative process to an end-product goal, and often then judging it by supposedly objective metrics, which are by nature generated by someone other than the original creator.

Contests and performance can be a wonderful celebration of creativity, but not at the expense of the inner motivation and joy of the process itself, which is the most meaningful part for anyone who creates from a place of flow. Here are some suggestions for creating intellectual safety for children:

- ☆ Foster an environment where everyone's perspective is welcome.
- ☆ Talk to children with respect and appreciation for their own knowing.
- ☆ Show children it is okay to have different opinions; it's okay to disagree. You can "agree to disagree," still respect each other, and get along.
- ☆ Reframe mistakes as valuable, essential steps for learning.
- ☆ Never laugh at a child's question or answer that was given in a sincere manner.
- ☆ Avoid comparing learners with each other.
- ☆ Avoid judging children's expressions in art, language and other disciplines; instead, ask if your constructive feedback is welcome or simply express neutral observations (You used a lot of purple!).
- ☆ Celebrate a child's achievement together with them.





EMOTIONAL SAFETY

The quality of relationship is up to you

IN RELATIONSHIP WITH CHILDREN we become archetypal mothers, fathers, teachers, and companions. Our presence, our voice, and our advice become a child's inner voice in adolescence and beyond, when children become increasingly aware of themselves. The quality of our bonding with a child will become a model for their bonding with significant others and their own children throughout life. It is well worth taking the time for deep, authentic bonding with a child, as this genuine need, when fulfilled, can change the course of a child's life.

For a young child, it doesn't really matter who *you* think you are, as long as you are kind and patient. A young child looks at you with the eyes of innocence, and since you are tall and grown up, they trust you know your way around, and hope you will genuinely listen to them and give them what they need. Children live in their own world, and we are the ones who have the capacity to understand *them*—they cannot yet understand our adult ways. So, please, always remember: Whatever a child does, you never need to take that personally—never, ever. Children never act *against you*; children instinctively always act *for themselves*. Much of the time, they cannot control their reactions and emotional expression, until the appropriate parts of their brains related to impulse regulation literally are formed. Remain kind, remain patient, and provide stability as much as you can. A child must be able to rely on at least one significant adult

in order to feel emotionally safe. On a primal level, this is a child's urgent need to constantly know that they will not be abandoned, no matter what. This primary need is to be bonded with adults, not with peers. Children are not yet ready to provide emotional safety for each other, because they are in an egocentric stage of life in which they must learn to take care of their own needs first.

Take responsibility for an emotionally safe environment through remaining kind and connected with children including during challenging situations. For children, feeling safe with you means knowing *they are always okay*, and they don't ever need to be "perfect," or "up to grade level" for us to respect them, always. They need to know we regard them as learners on a path. They need to know from you that *it is okay* to feel their feelings, cry, laugh, be upset, have a conflict, ask questions, or play alone. When we allow children to be upset, release tension, and process emotions, while gently holding firm boundaries to ensure everyone stays safe during these times, they relax on a deep level, and learn social skills over time, by our example. In psychology, this is known as "secure attachment." A parent's message to their child and a flow companion's message to a learner is always:

It's okay to be you. You are okay the way you are. There is nothing wrong with you. It's okay not to know yet. It's okay to ask. It's okay to make mistakes. You will learn everything you need to know in your own time.

It's okay to feel what you are feeling. It's okay to be sad. It's okay to be upset. It's okay not to like something. It's completely normal, and I will stay with you until you're feeling better.

It's natural to have conflicts sometimes and I will help you to solve them. It's human to hurt someone sometimes, and I will show you how to say "I'm sorry" and make amends.

For children, feeling emotionally safe means knowing they will always be cared for, fed, and sheltered. It means feeling protected and knowing that no other child can hit them, scare them, or take their things away. It means knowing they won't be left alone to solve conflicts with peers. When children feel genuinely safe, they will surprise adults with their intelligence, empathy, and willingness to cooperate.

Always, as best you can, remain bonded with a child who is entrusted to you. Be one team with that child. Don't withdraw your loving attention when you or the child gets frustrated or when there is conflict. Believe in the child's good intentions. Even when the child displays egocentric behavior and is hard to deal with, remember that this behavior is a stage of childhood development that naturally softens if it is not suppressed (as explained in Week 21).

TRY THIS

What do You need to feel safe?

In order to help children feel safe and to take responsibility for your relationships with children, it's important that *you* feel safe first. Feeling safe is largely determined by your nervous system, which is directly connected to your breath. If you breathe at a fast pace even though you didn't run, or if you breathe very lightly as opposed to breathing deeply, your nervous system might be in the "I feel threatened" mode, which is known as the sympathetic state that regulates our fight-or-flight responses (as explained in Week 15).

You can calm yourself, intentionally switching your nervous system over to the "I feel safe" mode, the parasympathetic state of rest, by consciously breathing slower and more deeply. This gives a signal to your nervous system that you notice your body, that you are caring for your

own well-being, and that you are safe. Notice how you feel in different environments, with different people, or after different foods. Within the same environment, some may feel safe while others feel vulnerable. Become aware of tension in your body, and situations where you feel uncomfortable. Try to find out why without pointing fingers or blaming anyone or anything. Just notice and inquire what could be changed in the tangible environment or within yourself to calm your nervous system, feel safe, and thus improve your quality of life.

As you continue practicing this self-observation, you may find there are issues from your own childhood relationships with adults that come up. The better we understand ourselves and consciously make loving efforts to heal wounds we may carry from our experiences, the more patient, kind, open, and aware we can be as we care for the children in our lives. Make notes about your own feelings as they arise and ask yourself these questions..

- What makes me feel safe?
- What gives me inner peace?
- What thoughts create tension in me?
- Which thoughts give me happiness?
- When am I naturally grateful and relaxed?
- What brings about a sense of vulnerability for me?
- What makes me feel uncomfortable?
- What can be changed in my home or classroom environment to make me feel more comfortable?

Helping your child through big emotions

Strong emotions are age-typical for young children. When young children see they will not upset or drive away their adult leaders with big emotions they can't yet control and that often feel scary to experience, it builds in them a fundamental sense of safety. Challenging interactions can become important moments for developing trust between children and their caregivers. This allows them to fully integrate strong emotions in healthy ways, building more confidence that they can undertake the kinds of self-chosen challenges presented in this book. Susanne, dedicated mother of two young masters of flow and FLOW TO LEARN's parenting advisor, shares how her family strives to make it through emotional exchanges in their home:

Like most parents, it can be challenging for me to experience my children's big emotions, the rapid shifts of mood and demands, and eruptive crying commonly known as the terrible twos (and threes, and fours, and fives!). Yet, early on in my parenting, I realized intuitively, and found confirmed by other parents and researchers, that a child having a 'meltdown' is not trying to manipulate; in fact, they've lost control of their response to the situation, and they need help.

All children have a genuine need to be met with acceptance, so the adult should never take a child's emotions or reactions personally. Practicing the act of self-expression when emotions run high strengthens children's self-knowledge and trust that they can become fully capable of making the right decisions in their best interest. Like any skill developed over time, it takes repeated practice and learning by example. When I committed to providing a safe "container" for my children's authentic expressions and release of emotion, it became easier for me to handle these moments from a place of acceptance. I keep reminding myself that as children grow, knowing they are okay to express themselves and learning how to be with their big emotions will certainly help them develop self-regulation more easily.

Here is an example from our lives, based on the RIE model for handling

emotionally charged interactions with young children. As a three-year-old, my son is playing with his food and throwing spoonfuls of his dinner onto the floor. I say: "Oh, I want you to stop throwing soup on the floor, please. (He continues.) Remember, the place for your food is in your bowl. (He continues.) We need to clean up the soup before leaving the table. Here are two washcloths. I'm going to clean it up now. You may help me if you like." (He throws the bowl on the floor, yelling in anger.) Staying as unruffled as I possibly can, I continue narrating his actions: "You threw the bowl on the floor again, and you seem upset. You're showing me that you're done eating, and we can try again at breakfast. I am going to help you go upstairs for bath time. Would you like to walk by yourself or may I help you? You aren't answering so I am going to help you go upstairs. I see you are angry!"

Rather than becoming annoyed by my son's actions, taking them personally, or allowing a power struggle to develop, I am training myself (it's always a work in progress) to remember that their brains are not yet capable of impulse control. In moments of overload for their system, my children are physiologically and psychologically unable to sit down, handle their food according to house rules, express themselves with words, or whatever the case may be. To verbally repeat the boundary until I do get frustrated at their apparent disregard, or to ignore their call for help (as outbursts usually are) would be unkind to both of us. When I can stay calm and embrace my supportive, loving role while also holding firm to a boundary right away before I become irritated, my terribly upset child feels comfort in my guidance.

This practice is certainly not perfect, but the goal is that my children know on a deep level that they're safe with us even though it's scary for them when they lose control of their emotions and actions. In this way, they know I've got them, I love them, and it's going to be okay.



REALITY CHECK

What does my child naturally do?

TAKE A FEW MINUTES and assess what your child naturally does at home. If they already have many hands-on activities they enjoy, you can enrich their natural interests with additional materials. Ask yourself, what are the activities my child currently does in our home? Use this checklist:

- Block and toy play
- Drawing, painting, crafting, tinkering
- Reading
- Outdoor activities: sandplay, ball play, movement games
- Homework
- My child likes to do what I do
- Screen time (which specific games or videos)
- Other activities: _____

Ask yourself, where does my child currently spend most time at home? Number the places with 1 for most time, 2 for second most time, etc.

- _____ In the kitchen
- _____ In the living room
- _____ In their playroom or bedroom
- _____ In the backyard
- _____ Other places in our home: _____
- _____ Wherever I am

Ask yourself: Why does my child spend a lot of time there? Underline what applies.

- Because I am usually in this area
- Because my child is undisturbed in this place
- Because it's sunny/shady/cool/warm
- Because there are specific toys and places for activities
- Because it's comfy, beautiful, clean, chaotic (a wonderful mess), orderly, exciting, safe
- Other reasons: _____

Finally, ask yourself: Where would I like my child to spend a lot of time? Look around your home and decide where you could create places for flow experiences.

TRY THIS

Schedule a day of rest and play

If your family lives a busy life, try to schedule at least one day of rest per week for you and your children. On that day, turn off the screens, including your phones when at all possible. Resting does not necessarily mean doing nothing. It simply involves taking a break from the often hectic routines of daily life. This can be a day where you nurture yourself, cultivate being a family, and do things that make your inner child and your children happy.

If your child spends most of their time at a screen, you can consider (with the help of this book) slowly weaning them off screen time, and gradually introducing more time for hands-on activities, movement, and nature. Letting go of screens, can feel intimidating at first. Meet resistance with

kind but firm positions that this will be the “new normal” for your family. Getting a pet for your child can be very helpful in this process. Animals are immune to the addictive effects of screen time and have a pure and dependable grounding effect in children. A bridge to the natural world that is fluffy, funny, or cuddly, pets can be quite healing to children and adults. Your day of rest can include time when everyone individually does what they most love and time when you all come together to share a meal or other activities. When you come together, share what you each have done individually. Here are some suggestions for your day of rest and play:

- ☆ Do a crafting project, such as creating a decoration for the house.
- ☆ Go for a nature walk.
- ☆ Play a family board game.
- ☆ Cook something special together.
- ☆ Paint a big picture together.
- ☆ Write postcards or letters to extended family and friends.
- ☆ Various self-care activities, for instance, meditating, stretching, and taking a long, relaxed bath.
- ☆ Create a photo album.
- ☆ Decorate a shelf or window.
- ☆ Create additional comfortable spots in the house.
- ☆ Create a fun spot in the yard.

Giving permission to play

Taking the time to play with children can be challenging for modern households with overfull schedules. Parenting advisor to FLOW TO LEARN, Susanne, shares what happens in her home when she, her husband, and children come together in play:

One Saturday morning at home with our children, I was at my desk after breakfast, trying to fit in some work to meet a deadline. The kids were independently in flow and I was glad to be dropping into my own. They began to touch base with me often, and each interruption felt more jarring. I suggested games, promised I'd play later, and even gave them the firm confirmation that I was unavailable. However, it was clear that their genuine need was to connect with me. I decided to be present with them for a few minutes, knowing that shortly I'd return to my work.

Our three-year-old daughter wasted no time once she felt me engage, effortlessly diving into a role-play game: It was time for me to go to bed in the “Calming Corner,” a space where we have our Generation Mindful posters, along with books, blankets, pillows, cushions, and a colorful rug on the floor. “You have to lie down and go to sleep, Mama. Tomorrow we are all going to the playground. Okay, please lay your head on the pillow.” I complied willingly, amused by her enthusiasm. Her eyes sparkled with delight. “But first you need to drink some water.” I sat up. “Okay, good, now it's time to sleep, go ahead, I'm right here.” I lay back down. Suddenly, we weren't alone. “Oh no! Do you hear that?! It's a monster! Quick, hide under the covers!” I quickly hid, a little startled by the sudden turn of events. Our five-year-old son happily joined in, now a monster, now bringing a delivery, now a dad, now a silly dog. I reveled in their creativity and their gentleness. We danced, hid, slept, made music, and pretended. It was so much fun that I easily chose to embrace this chance to simply play with my kids, uninterrupted.

When lunchtime came, there were no arguments. We were content and

filled with a sense of satisfaction. It was a wake-up call for me: this was so easy, compared with how it goes when the to-do list comes first at all costs. I often find myself slipping into a “logistics” mindset around our routines—using our time together to check off the list as efficiently as possible. It’s completely understandable, and at times it’s necessary. Still, I was grateful to be reminded that a small investment of quality time with the children is well worth our while. Even 15 minutes of being fully present with each other calms everyone’s nervous systems. It helps us remember how to slow down and just be together.

Another way we use play in our home is to break up tension. If I notice I’m feeling tense, I might start talking silly talk or singing a funny song, literally releasing tension out of my body through movement and song. One of our favorites is sung in a gravelly voice and minor key: “Mama’s in a baaaaad mood/ Who spilled this milk on the floor?! / Mama’s in a baaaaad mood/ Get yourselves right outta that door!” We know it well and raucously take turns making up rhyming verses. This turns the moment into a fun bonding experience while acknowledging that I was, in fact, in a terrible mood.

Our children readily share their own playful approaches to life’s routines whenever they can. Asking their Dada to toss bottlecaps into the intricate traps they create is one of their favorite pastimes. Another favorite is “opposite day,” in which a parent must sternly instruct them they’d better not do a task on their own, like put on their clothes or brush their teeth, or they’ll become extremely disobedient children! They laugh in response and say defiantly, “Oh yes, I will!! Look at what I’m doing!” It’s incredibly efficient—they get everything done, flip authority on its head, practice doing lots on their own, and have a blast in the meantime.

If I’m just too worn out to play, I try to remember that’s okay, too. I know it’s good for our children to see us set authentic, healthy boundaries for ourselves. Each parent or caregiver must determine where the balance lies for ensuring that their needs are sufficiently met, giving themselves permission to fill their own cups by scheduling activities that replenish their reserves. I notice how

much more willing I am to play with our children when I’m reasonably rested and taken care of.

Playing together is healing, for children and adults alike. Through play, we connect with our kids from a non-hierarchical place—where they can call the shots and make decisions. The precious gift of permission to play is a safety net we can fall back on when life gets scary or overwhelming. It reinforces children’s natural lightheartedness, engages their “I feel safe” mode, and it exercises our abilities to create and enjoy our own play, without needing to be entertained by external sources. I feel that being invited into a child’s flow space is one of the holiest ways to spend my time as a parent. Play is one of the best ways to say, “I love you.”





HEALING NEGATIVE SCHOOL EXPERIENCES

Tension release is healing

TENSION RELEASE IS A SIGNIFICANT part of self-healing in children and adults, and it is unavoidable when we become more present with ourselves in flow experiences. Children who go to a less than ideal school are in a daily reality that doesn't respect their most pressing genuine developmental needs for movement, exploration, spontaneous play, and connection. Of course, this creates inner tension. During the many school mornings of sitting, listening, and trying to focus, children increasingly lose touch with their genuine needs and curiosity. Their parents or significant caregivers are often the only ones they can turn to when they need support.

Most of all, children need adults who are true allies, whom they can trust to love them exactly as they are. If they have this deep bond with at least one significant adult, parent, teacher, grandparent, or friend, children will develop a strong inner core and the skills to face all challenges. Younger children naturally release tension during spontaneous play, self-talk, and time in nature. If your child still plays and talks during play—no matter how old they are—that's a very good sign that their tension release mechanisms still work well.

Older children often stop playing and need different forms of tension release to express their frustration. Allow them to vent and complain, while you listen with patience and understanding. (Computer games and other screen time aren't ideal forms of tension release. Due to the

screen's addictive potential, and the passivity of the body during screen time, it may create more tension). Stay with a child until they feel better. You can offer ways of tension release as described below.

NINE WAYS TO HELP YOUR CHILD RELEASE TENSION

1) Allow children to cry.

Crying as part of feeling sad, disappointed, excluded, or treated unjustly is the most direct way to process uncomfortable experiences. Shedding tears is one of the most powerful ways of healing. Tears release emotional stress and physical toxins from the body. Usually children feel completely renewed after a good cry, especially in the safe presence of an understanding adult. Sometimes children cry even when there is no apparent reason, or for seemingly unrelated reasons to be able to feel the relief of crying.

2) Allow children to laugh and laugh with children.

Children love to laugh. Uninhibited laughter is a joyful, effective way of tension release. When children laugh together with peers or adults, it is a powerful bonding experience, as long as all involved understand the reason for the laughter, and don't feel insulted or hurt by it. You may have noticed children have a different sense of humor than adults; nevertheless there are plenty of opportunities for children and adults to laugh together as long as the adult's heart is open to the world of a child. For instance, adults may not find the repetition of the same knock-knock joke as funny as a seven-year-old, or they may not giggle as much about the poo-poo joke of a three-year-old. However, as adults, we can still open our hearts to a child's light-hearted happiness and perceive it as what it is: an attempt to connect, release tension, and restore inner balance. Children's laughter can be healing for both children and the adults around them.

3) Support children in resting.

Resting is a natural way of replenishing energies and releasing muscle tension after a period of intense physical movement or intellectually strenuous tasks. Let a child cuddle up in pillows or stretch and move on the floor as long as they want to without any pressure to do anything. Children find their own perfect balance between activity and rest and naturally restore their energy when needed.

4) Offer places for pretend play.

Pretend and role-play are natural avenues for children to release tension. (Read more about healing play in Week 17).

5) Provide places for movement.

Most children are in constant movement. When they play a game on the floor, they stretch and frequently change position. When they sit at a table, they sway back and forth and move their legs. They are what adults sometimes call “fidgety.” All these movements release inner tension. Allow children to move as much as they wish. Wherever possible, provide areas and safe opportunities for movement with hanging ropes, swings, climbing walls, boxing bags, jumping ropes, hula-hoops, and the like.

6) Help your child physically feel their emotion and let it go.

We can heal mind, body and heart by becoming deeply aware of our feelings and how they manifest in our bodies. When a child is upset, sad, or scared, you can try to lead them through a simple process.

Ask: “Where are you feeling this in your body? Is it in your throat, belly, or jaw? Point to where you are feeling this. Now, gently lay your hand on that place and let’s breathe deeply and feel this.” Then, see what happens. Often acknowledging a feeling is enough for a child to let it go.

7) Offer art supplies to draw, paint or craft.

Arts and crafts aren’t only for play and learning, but also for healing. Children release tension through creating something and tearing it up, drawing out scenes from their imagination, dreams, or memories, or painting on large surfaces with big brushes with the fulfilling attitude that it doesn’t matter if the painting can be displayed in the end. You can lead your child to a tension release art project with questions such as “What would your feeling look like if it came through the door?” and “You could paint how you are feeling now, and then how you would like to feel.”

8) Let the child talk and simply listen.

As children get older (sometimes young children, too), they have increased verbal skills to reduce tension. Just like adults, children speak about challenges they face and just like adults, they are mostly not seeking answers or someone who solves their problem for them. Instead, they need someone to listen, someone who simply accepts and witnesses what they are going through. Listen with your heart when a child speaks and detect their genuine needs behind their words. Empathize honestly, “I’m sorry you have to go through this, and I’m here for you through all of it.”

9) Allow screaming where it’s appropriate.

Screaming is another effective way of tension release. Think of places where it would be okay for your child to scream. Perhaps at the beach or in nature with not many people around. They might scream into pillows to dampen the sound. A friend allows her child to yell all the four-letter-words she isn’t supposed to say into the pillows, so they don’t “get stuck inside.”

TRY THIS

Temper your child's negative school experiences

Here are a few ways you can stand up for your child's rights in standardized school:

- Opt your child out of state testing.
- Help teachers understand your child.
- Kindly ask teachers to reduce or stop your child's homework.
- Request that your child may go to the restroom according to their needs.
- Request that your child be able to drink water anytime they are thirsty.

More ways to support your child's school experience:

- ☆ On the evenings together and on days off, give your child a voice in decisions that affect them: let them choose their clothes, food (from only healthy choices), and room arrangements.
- ☆ Reduce or eliminate unnecessary appointments.
- ☆ To avoid rushing, ensure the whole family gets up early enough to allow ample time for getting ready for school.

**RECLAIMING GENUINE ACTIVITY***From dull routines to a mindful life*

OUR LIVES ARE FILLED WITH repetition. We are used to our daily routines and can do most of them on automatic pilot. Every day we need to get dressed, eat, drink, walk, wash our hands, and so on, and we are used to our own ways of doing all that. However, as soon as a young child is in the mix, especially for parents, it may become hard to keep doing daily routines as usual. Being with a young child feels almost as if a Zen master were to slow down our every move, forcing us to pay attention to things we haven't deemed important in a long time, and then throw in a healthy dose of chaos for good measure.

If we allow it, a young child helps us notice the subtle differences and changes, the textures, flavors, and smells of daily life that have the power to comfort and delight us. Everything we do offers a new opportunity to become present, to respond with interest, to learn on deeper levels, and to become aware of the miracle and mystery of being alive.

Suddenly, when there is a young child, you can't just get out of the door quickly to rush somewhere. Young children couldn't rush or multi-task if they tried. They focus on one thing at a time, and it takes as long as it takes. We can fight that fact and struggle every day with that young child, creating tension and upset, or we can surrender our agenda, allow ourselves to relax into the slower pace as much as possible, and adapt to what life is asking us to do: *slow down and become present.*

As young children we still instinctively know that it does not only matter what we do—what matters most is *how* we do it. There are many different ways one can do the same thing. All our daily activities can be done either with care or haste. Think of drinking tea: one can do it inattentively, risking burning one’s tongue or being surprised when the cup is suddenly empty, or one can enjoy a cup of tea by mindfully relaxing with each sip after a long day. Or, one can elevate serving and drinking tea to a ceremony and make it the center of attention, as has been a longheld cultural tradition in Japan. For many young children it is a pleasure to serve pretend tea and cake, perhaps even with a slice of mudpie. The same activity can be a dull routine or an act of celebration.

This insight is also reflected in the Buddhist teachings on mindfulness that are being used increasingly in psychotherapy, business environments, and schools. Experiencing something consciously is an act of self-comfort and self-love that over time can heal our inner world. Although it may feel stressful at first, one key to being present along with children is to let go of getting to the “next task” as quickly as possible. This is a cultural habit that can be changed as we practice reframing what a successful day, or afternoon, or weekend looks and feels like. We might still accomplish many tasks, and the likelihood of having enjoyed those tasks is exponentially increased through the practice of mindfulness. Children do this naturally, as real-life masters of staying present.

Focusing on our own activity, even on the most mundane task, is a skill that can be practiced and we can learn it from young children. Yet, it takes our own initiative, courage, and willingness to cut out unnecessary appointments and slow down enough to create time for mindful activities. Even though young children are prone to the state of mindfulness, this skill must be nurtured by their environment in order to mature. When children never see role models of mindfulness, they forget and start treating things carelessly. This is why Maria Montessori, at the beginning of the

20th century, provided classrooms filled with precious, beautiful items that were freely accessible to her young students. Learning materials were made of smooth wood, delicate glass, and fine china—items that break if mishandled, which is an important learning experience on how to treat delicate items. Montessori patiently, repeatedly showed children how to treat things mindfully, with care and respect. She never rushed children. She confidently trusted her students to mature their natural tendency for mindfulness at their own pace.

We can’t avoid that children also will do things automatically or less mindfully over time as they grow up, yet we can help them not to wander too far off from the body memory of mindfulness by nurturing ourselves and them with our gentle presence.

The moments in which we are mindful differ from absent-minded moments; they are the moments when inner harmony can be restored. The initial gentle self-discipline it takes to be present with one’s hands and aware of one’s feelings reactivates our body intelligence and is a powerful gateway to drop into flow. During mindfulness practice, one connects with oneself. That connection then, the more it is practiced, may transform into a deeper state of focus and, eventually, into flow.

TRY THIS

Step by step to mindful activity

Choose a daily life activity you are going to do more mindfully with children this week, such as eating breakfast with your child, washing your hands and your child’s hands, or reading a book. Accompany your activity with simple, clear, friendly, and descriptive language. Narrating keeps you present and provides a clear structure for a young child during an adult-led activity.

MINDFULLY GUIDING AN ACTIVITY WITH A TODDLER OR YOUNG CHILD

- ☆ Together, choose any activity you would like to do with a child, and ask if they would like to participate, such as “Would you like to read a book with me?”
- ☆ Once your child is on board, accompany each single step of your activity with simple, descriptive words: “Now we are choosing a book. Now, we are looking for a comfortable place where we both can sit. Now I am reading the book title. Now I am turning the page carefully. Would you like to turn the page carefully?”
- ☆ If there are learning moments for the child, show each learning step with patience, as often as needed, and then allow the child to imitate you. For instance, “Let’s be gentle with the book. This is how one turns a page carefully.”
- ☆ When you feel the activity is over, you can say, “We just read the book and now we are done, and I am going to put the book back on the shelf, or would you like to do that?”
- ☆ Accompanying your own activity with words, or internally with your thoughts, is also a powerful way to keep yourself present and take command of your thinking mind. You can use this technique anytime you do something to stop your mind from wandering.



FLOW IS THE REWARD

No additional rewards needed

HOW DO YOU KNOW A CHILD was just in flow? They are happy and they look at you, smiling and fulfilled. They are not expecting any rewards from you for doing what they love to do. Even praise isn’t really needed. Acknowledgement, yes. Celebrating what just happened, yes, but as a companion, not as an authority who judges.

We have all been trained out of simply loving what we do. Early on we learn, you do something to get something. We do chores to get an allowance, we play sports to compete and win, we study to succeed in a test, we do homework to get good grades, and we get a job to make money. This makes total sense until we turn our attention inward and realize it doesn’t feel as good as it should if this system of reward were true.

There are endless accounts of people who succeeded in having everything, managing to get *all* the rewards, and yet they feel empty inside. Tom Shadyak, the incredibly successful director of many Jim Carrey movies, reveals this impressively in his documentary film *I Am*. The day he moved into his new multi-million-dollar mansion, he felt desperate and decided to change his life. He turned his back on external rewards and started creating a life where he felt positively connected to his inner landscape of genuine needs.

In this world, doing something just for the fun of it, just because you love it, because you love to learn and discover, is a revolutionary act.

It says, “I’m not only here to survive, I am here to thrive!” Allowing a child to do something just because they enjoy it, without competition, comparison, or reward, is a powerful act of love. And it can deeply and positively influence that child in the long run.

Rewards such as gold stars, good grades, or behavior charts, are, as Maria Montessori put it (already over a hundred years ago), “beneath the dignity of the child.” Only when children enjoy an activity because they love the activity itself, not the adult-created reward, does true authentic, sustainable learning occur, that contributes to a healthy identity.

Self-chosen activities with intrinsic rewards add to a child’s self-esteem, enforce their connection to inner authority, and promote critical thinking. Activities undertaken for disconnected rewards are all too often done lovelessly and hastily. They condition children to look outside for motivation and worthiness instead of following their inner compass and confidence.

Every year there are more multidisciplinary studies demonstrating that intrinsic motivation is absolutely necessary for long-term learning and continued high performance. What we achieve for the sake of an extrinsic reward is easily forgotten once the reward is received, whereas when we learn for ourselves, reaching for mastery, we retain it for much longer, even forever. We value it much more. It becomes part of who we are. As Alfie Kohn’s memorable book title states, children are *Punished by Rewards*. Rewards are counterproductive and indeed train us out of flow.

WHY CANDY REWARDS ARE HARMFUL

Candy as a reward is especially harmful because of the addictive potential of sugar. Food should never be a reward. Healthy food is a basic genuine need that should always be freely accessible for children and everyone—even if it is not like that in the rest of the world, let it be so in your own home to establish an island of sanity. Refined sugar is unhealthy, so reduce it as much as possible. Take it out of sight and remove it from your home,

so it’s forgotten. When children experience cravings, give them healthy options to choose from, and allow their feelings to be expressed at the change. Firm and loving boundaries are again required.

WHY MONEY REWARDS FOR CHORES ARE UNSUITABLE

A money reward should not be the reason a child contributes to the family household. A child is not an employee; they are a beloved family member. Money rewards disconnect the child from the intrinsic value of their contribution to the household. Instead of feeling like a valuable member of the household, the emphasis is on the reward. Instead of learning that their actions have a positive or negative effect on the family, they learn to put too much focus on a monetary reward.

Teach your child that a household has genuine needs that must be met. Explain what each family member contributes and then ask them what they think they may be able to contribute. Help them find age-appropriate chores for which they have enthusiasm. Young children often love to help with chores, but they want to do them their way, maybe slower, maybe not as perfectly as you would do them. Find the patience and help your child grow into doing chores in the spirit of “this is how our family works.” Experiencing togetherness and fun during what is often seen as drudgery allows a child to deeply connect to the family in ways that support their emotional and mental health.

A WORD ABOUT PUNISHMENTS

There is no need to ever punish a child. Children make mistakes because they are learners. They don’t have access to the worldly knowledge, empathy, and wisdom needed to avoid trespassing and hurting others, but they *can* get there with our help and patient guidance. Punishments have lasting detrimental effects on a child’s psyche, and often lead to self-punishment, shame, and aggression down the road. When children

experience forgiveness, they learn to forgive themselves. Understanding what can be done better next time, making amendments, realizing the impact of personal actions and feeling sad about it, apologizing and being given chances to learn, and receiving that comforting reassurance that we are worthy of forgiveness, all of these lead to humble self-esteem and wiser decisions in the future.

SO WHAT CAN WE DO INSTEAD OF PUNISHING?

If a child made a mistake, broke something, stole something, hurt someone, talked back, or was inappropriate while upset, first help them calm down and see what happened. Try to understand why they were acting out and consider how the cause can be remedied without punishment.

Explain what needs to be said and set the boundaries that need to be set. But most of all, believe in a child's benevolence and good will. Help them make amends and repairs, and support them with integrating the negative experience to transform it into a learning experience. Withdraw if you need space to keep your calm, or allow your child to withdraw for a while, if necessary. Don't withhold beloved toys or wholesome activities that help the child heal. It might be tempting to interpret a young child's behavior as intentionally hurtful—remember that young children are not developmentally capable of sophisticated manipulation. Such an interpretation stems from our adult life experience and fears.

Never withdraw your love and respect. *A child is never against you, they are always simply for themselves*, learning to meet their own needs. If children receive benevolence, patience, and understanding in a difficult situation, they will learn to be that way for themselves and others when they are older. If you need to keep them safe or keep their siblings safe while they calm down, ensure you connect with the child before leaving them, or it may feel like you are leaving them in the lurch of their own extreme discomfort as a punishment.

And if you punish a child or hurt a child because you were stressed out, don't then punish yourself. You are the trailblazer; you are the one stopping generational abuse by forgiving yourself and your child as quickly as you can. Own your mistakes aloud with your children. Ensure that you make amends with your children to model taking responsibility for your mistakes in a loving, authentic way. Keep returning to your confidence in each other's benevolence. Cultivate goodness. If a child hears and feels that you believe in their inherent goodness, they are much more likely to be able to return to this inner core, to forgive themselves and develop an identity that is good and reliable for others. It is our self-punishment and harsh self-judgments that keep us from believing we are decent, good people.

TRY THIS

When, why, and how do you reward your child?

A reward can be a fun addition when playing a game, such as a treasure hunt, but it shouldn't be used as an educational tool, or to manipulate behavior toward an adult's desired outcome. Ask yourself the following questions..

- When does a child expect a reward from me?
- Why do they expect a reward?
- What is the reward I use?
- What could I do to make an activity rewarding in and of itself?
- What are the instances in which I think a reward is needed? (If there are any such instances, that is okay. Overall, try to move into the direction of intrinsic rewards.)

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You will discover:

PART TWO | WEEK 14 to 26

YOUR CHILD, A YOUNG MASTER OF FLOW

When children feel emotionally safe, they naturally drop into flow during their spontaneous play. Children aren't little adults – they have different needs, processes, and perspectives. Section 2 will show how children are young masters of flow, (meaning they effortlessly, naturally drop into flow), and how we adults can support them during these valuable moments of learning.

PART THREE | WEEK 27 to 39

THE ZONE, CREATING FLOW ACTIVITY STATIONS

Children “get into the zone” (or drop into flow) effortlessly and naturally when they find places prepared for their spontaneous play and hands-on activities. Part Three shows how you can create flow-friendly places in your home by setting up various activity stations. “Flow stations” reduce tension in your home and support children’s well-being, cognitive development, and the basic feelings of safety and connection.

PART FOUR | WEEK 40 TO 52

YOU, A FLOW COMPANION

In addition to your role as a parent, teacher, or other special adult in a child’s life, you can be a flow companion. Flow companions fully support children in their world to help them develop a healthy identity, high intelligence, and a lifelong love for learning. Part Four helps you elevate

your relationships with children and your relationship with your inner child by showing how you can become a flow companion. The more you know about flow first-hand, the better you can support your child’s flow state.

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