

The Greatest Gift: A Love of Learning



Scientists and psychologists have found that infants can probably start their formal education at a much earlier age than was formerly believed. However, as in everything else, moderation is the key. Knowing that infants can learn sophisticated concepts almost from birth doesn't mean we have to turn them into full-time students at three months old.

It does, however, behoove us to be aware that infants are learning all the time. Therefore, it is our responsibility to provide them with enough stimulation to keep their fertile minds growing—and to be careful that we provide a healthy, positive environment for this learning to take place.

The greatest gift a parent can give a child is the love of learning. This can be developed at any stage of life; however, children who love learning from the start have a great advantage over those who must develop it later on in life. Winifred Barnes Conley is a psychotherapist, educator, and president and CEO of the National Learning Laboratory in Bethesda, Maryland. She recommends that the best way for parents to foster a love of learning in their children is by loving it themselves.

"We suggest having family learning time," she says. "While children are doing their homework, the TV should be off. Perhaps classical music could be playing. Parents can be reading, paying bills, or studying for a course they're taking. That way they're modeling learning as well as verbalizing it.

It's what parents do that makes the biggest difference."

Children will imitate their parents' actions. Conley tells of one family that came to her because the children would not do their homework. It turned out that the father insisted on watching television from the moment he came home from work until the moment he went to bed. So the children were constantly sneaking away to watch television instead of doing their homework. It wasn't until the father gave up some of his tube time that the children began to improve their study habits.

Fostering the love of learning can, and should, begin long before children ever reach school age. According to Dr. Fred Plum, Chairman of Neurology and Neuroscience, Cornell Medical Center, the reason certain ethnic groups consistently test considerably higher on IQ exams is not because of any difference in brain capacity. It's because they come from a culture where learning begins early and remains a child's highest priority through his or her university years.

Learning can begin with the youngest of babies by providing them with new environments, new sounds and voices, new sensory experiences. This stimulation allows them to become familiar with the world around them and to feel freer to explore on their own later on.

Until the age of fourteen, the brain is like a sponge continually absorbing information. It's important to establish learning patterns early, when

the developing brain is most receptive. "The brain is maximally plastic up to the age of eight," says Dr. Plum. "Up until then, one can produce serious injury, for example, to the language zones of the brain, yet the child will learn language with the other side of the brain. After the age of eight, it becomes increasingly difficult or even impossible to teach normal language to the non-dominant hemisphere."

According to Dr. Plum, two elements of learning are important to all of us, and particularly to children:

- 1** A lot of love and trust. If you can't trust your own environment growing up, how can you trust what you're learning? Why should you trust a book or a teacher if you can't trust your parent(s)?
- 2** Communication. Children should be in a state of constant learning. Read to your children frequently. Take them places out of the ordinary, such as a petting zoo, hands-on museums, and parks. Spend time with your child, and pay attention to his or her questions, no matter how silly they seem.

It may well be that the greatest gift we can give our children is the love of learning, but just as important: the knowledge that we do become what we think about all day long. ▲

Barry Farber is the author of 11 books, including The 12 Cliches of Selling and Why They Work (Workman Publishing), and was rated by Successful Meetings magazine as one of the top speakers for 2006. Farber is a black belt weapons expert, an entrepreneur and marketer of innovative products, and a television host and producer. To learn more, visit www.barryfarber.com or email him at barry@barryfarber.com