



When I went to elementary school in the 50's and 60's, I sat in a bolted-down desk, didn't speak unless my teacher called on me, and waited for a bell to signal a switch from reading to arithmetic, from spelling to social studies. Fun subjects, like art, were taught only on Fridays. I never wrote a "composition" until seventh grade, when we were asked to describe what we did on our summer vacation. Each day, my mom made sure my school outfit was clean and that I got to class on time, but otherwise, she left teaching to the teachers.

In my daughter Maggie's class, 8- and 9-year-olds write stories, illustrate them and entertain their classmates regularly as they read their adventures aloud. In the drama Maggie brought home to show me yesterday, a new bicycle sprouted wings so the rider could fly. I can't even

Stevenson School were shocked out of their mathematical stupor when she asked them to put their textbooks away and pull out the sports pages of *The New York Times*. For months, the students pored over the changing statistics of their favorite baseball teams and players. "The true meaning of decimals came to life as we quoted leading batting averages and realized what Don Mattingly's .300 average really represented," Bangs recalls. "It meant if he got up to bat 1,000 times, he got a hit 300 times."

This kind of teaching opens students' eyes to the fact that math can actually be fun and not the "worksheet wasteland" so many educators decry. "Learning experiences should be as close to children's real worlds as possible," says psychologist Teresa Amabile, Ph.D., of Brandeis University, and author of *Growing Up Creative* (Crown, 1988). Kids should have a "sense of ownership and pride in their classrooms," she says. "Teachers should say, 'This isn't my classroom, it's *our* classroom.'"

This new emphasis on what children need in order to learn at each age and stage is revolutionary. In fact, says Professor Zigler: "Education is not really about education. It's about human develop-

Does Your Child

High self-esteem, a feeling of competency and a loving home life will help your child get started.

Imagine what Sister Immaculata, my eighth-grade teacher, would have thought about a flying bike.

Today, if you want your child to love learning and thrive in school, the classroom must be exciting, active, multidimensional and definitely pleasant—and, in the words of Lauro F. Cavazos, United States Secretary of Education, "the home environment should be a learning environment."

"Children learn for the same reason birds fly," explains Edward Zigler, Ph.D., Sterling Professor of Child Psychology at Yale University. "They are learning machines." If your child is having a problem in school, the question you should be asking yourself is: *What's happening to turn off that learning machine?*

Peek inside your child's classroom. Do you see shades of New York City teacher Cary Indig Bangs's style? The fifth-grade students in her class at the Allen-

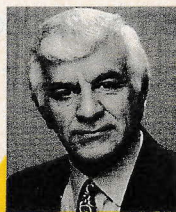
ment. What happens in a child's total life influences what happens in school."

Parents, not schools, remain the most important educators of children. "Create a sense of learning within the home itself," says Secretary Cavazos, who suggests that you limit TV watching and fill your home with books and other educational materials; show an interest in your children's lives by talking with them about their concerns and asking what they learned at school; instill in them a sense that you care about them just for who they are.

Wake them in the morning enthusiastically:

"Get up, you're going to learn something new today!"

T. Berry Brazelton, M.D., FC contributing editor and professor of pediatrics at Harvard,

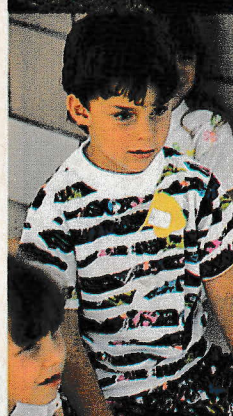


Samuel G. Sava,
National Association
of Elementary
School Principals

It's not better curricula in schools that children need right now, it's better childhoods. You can tinker all you want with curriculum, but it's a better childhood that they need most.

Photos by Katie Connell

U up (picks up turtle)
D down (puts down turtle)
X erase



Love to Learn?

confirms this notion of parents as teachers. "The real job in education comes long before children get to school," Dr. Brazelton says. "You've got to have kids feeling good about themselves, feeling self-confident and ready to learn."

This focus on the family is all well and good, but if you are like me, you carry something Thomas Armstrong, Ph.D., author of *In Their Own Way* (Jeremy P. Tarcher, Inc.), calls "old schoolhouse stress memories": long hallways, harsh buzzers, stern teachers. "Find out what's really happening in your child's class, so you can stop thinking of school in terms of what you went through," advises Darryl T. Yagi, president of the California School Counselor Association and a counselor for Sylvan Learning Centers. "When you go into a classroom today, you should see activity. You should see kids having fun and being able to enjoy the learning process because they are a part of it."

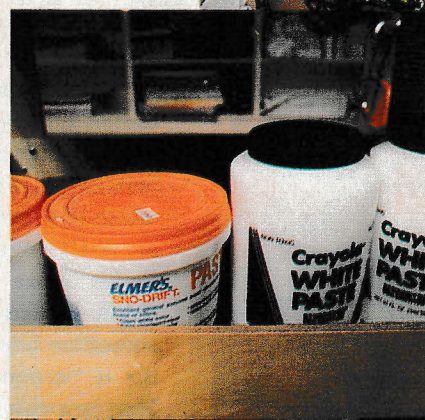
"Unless parents are better informed and feel more confident about schools," says Jeannie Oakes, associate professor of education at UCLA and co-author with her husband, Martin Lipton, of *Making the Best of Schools* (Yale University Press), "they tend to fall back into conventional practices. This only reinforces some of the things that are so destructive to developing children."

Take testing, for instance. In this age of school

accountability, use of standardized tests has grown by leaps and bounds. Yet, the more than 100 million computerized exams administered to kids from kindergarten through high school don't always reflect your child's true academic talents. When he's nervous, he may not be able to think clearly or quickly, and the questions themselves can be misleading.

In reality, learning is "complex and disorderly," according to UC's Professor Oakes. Picture yourself dancing your way across a stage—taking two steps forward and one step back—you'll be close to describing the way kids progress through school. It's not an easy straight line.

Last year in the first-grade classroom at the Tower Hill School in Wilmington, Delaware, 6-year-old Brent could often be seen shoeless and standing while his teacher, Judy McCracken, taught the class. McCracken, a 20-year veteran, knew something about Brent that is typical of millions of little boys: They can't sit still for a long time—and shouldn't be expected to if you want them to learn. Kids are all different and "highly sensitive to the world around them," (Continued)



By Mary Ann Bucknum Brinley

9/4/90 **Family Circle** 87