

The privilege of play



CVN

IT TAKES A VILLAGE

MARIA FISK, PHD

DIRECTOR OF THE CARPINTERIA CHILDREN'S PROJECT

Has kindergarten changed? In last month's *Coastal View News*, columnist Melinda Wittwer asked, "Has kindergarten changed that much?" She is in good company asking that question. A study out of my alma mater, the University of Virginia (shameless plug for Thomas Jefferson's U), finds that 31 percent of kindergarten teachers surveyed in 1998 believed students should learn to read in kindergarten. In 2010, a whopping 80 percent of them did. It does look like kindergarten has changed.

In my professional opinion, and recognizing the good intentions behind standards that encourage us not to let children "get behind," we have to keep children's developmental readiness and opportunity to learn at the forefront of education for young children. Four- and 5-year-old learners are pretty concrete: this is the age when it makes sense to explain that there are these things called

Most children will learn to walk on their own and without formal instruction; that's not the case for reading.

opportunities to develop fine motor skills by making sandcastles, picking up pennies, finger painting on the shampoo bubbles in the bathtub. Then with good instruction, nearly all of them will learn to read and become successful academically. If children haven't had enough positive experiences like these, or worse, have experienced trauma, learning academic and social and emotional skills is tougher. Often much tougher. Learning is wrapped up in relationships. We learn, particularly when we are young, when we feel safe and connected to people who love us. We learn when we are relaxed, when we are exploring new materials and new ideas and processing them so that they become our own. That's play!

letters that make up the words that we say and will one day read. You can see a letter, but they are different from things like chairs. If you turn a chair upside down, it's still a chair. If you turn a letter upside down, it's generally not the same thing. If you turn a "b" upside down, you get a "p," and that's a totally different letter. That's mind-blowingly abstract for little ones. If they haven't grasped that concept, they are unlikely to be developmentally ready for reading.

Most children will learn to walk on their own and without formal instruction; that's not the case for reading. We cannot wait indefinitely for children to be ready. Their opportunity to learn is fundamental as is providing the opportunities in ways that are comfortable and grow children's curiosity and love of learning. I saw as a kindergarten, first- and second-grade teacher the magical time when it all started coming together for kids and they became readers. For each at his or her own time, and I didn't worry that those for whom it came together later were necessarily in big trouble academically. But I did worry if kids had not had adequate experiences of talking, reading and singing with adults they cared about and wanted to emulate.

Every child needs formative experiences like snuggle time with bigger people who read and sing to them, op-

Times have changed in many kindergarten classrooms and, let's face it, in upper grades, high schools and colleges, too. But no matter how the places set aside for learning change, school is just one place children learn. Children learn at home, at friends' houses, at Grandpa's house, on the playground and wherever they are. Children are learning all the time—the question is whether they are learning what and how we wish they were learning. As early childhood and parenting specialist James Hymes, Jr. wrote, "Play builds the kind of free-and-easy, try-it-out, do-it-yourself character that our future needs." And our present also needs that relationship-strengthening, curiosity-building, problem-solving, learning. Learning through play is so natural we don't realize children are learning life skills. So grab your picnic, let's head to the beach!

Maria Fisk, PhD is an educator who has taught young children learning English, parents and teachers learning about child development, and principals learning about data systems. She loves being the Director of the Carpinteria Children's Project (CCP). CCP provides early childhood education, family support services, and leadership of the Thrive Carpinteria Partner Network of early education and social service providers. Maria can be reached at mfisk@cusd.net or 566-1600.