

NAEYC Conference: *Brain Development in Young Children*

Dear Parents:

In December, Allison Pierson (Assistant Director of the Learning Center and Curriculum) and I attended the annual NAEYC National Conference, along with over 40,000 other preschool teachers and administrators, hosted in Washington DC. NAEYC (National Association for the Education of Young Children) is the primary association for Early Education; the conference is important because each year, over 1000 sessions on new development and best practices in that field are presented to educators across the country.

Of particular interest to Suzuki is the on-going research by leading universities on the brain development of young children. Brain development research reinforces the importance of the Suzuki Philosophy and highlights areas where we must strengthen our curriculum. As a newcomer to the educational field, I found these sessions particularly enlightening.

Some of the key "takeaways" that I would like to share with you on brain development are:

- Brain development is dependent upon both experience and genetics. Children are born with a range of IQ potential of approximately 40 points. Our goal as educators and parents is to help our children reach the maximum of this range in the first nine years of life.
- Increased experiences define the wiring of an infant's brain. In fact, by the age of three, 80% of the synaptic connections of brain cells - the "building blocks" of development - are already made. The relationships we foster with our children as we mediate their contact with environment directly impact's the formation of these neural pathways.
- Brain development occurs through stimulation and in the presentation of new experiences. Repetition strengthens the brain; new experiences build neurons. Translating this to the classroom requires the provision of opportunities for active participation, variety of choice, and varied hands-on experiences to every child.
- 60% of nutrition is used by the brain during the first year of life, decreasing to 30% by age 3- what we feed them really matters.
- Have you wondered why there appear to be more children with ADD/ADHD? Perhaps it is because every hour spent with technology (TV and electronic games) increases the ADD/ADHD symptoms by 10%. As we speak with principals and admissions directors each year, the #1 issue they observe in young students is an inability to translate concrete concepts into abstract terms. 90% of what children experience should be through active play and direct, hands-on participation.
- As parents of a pre-teen and a teenager, one of the points of particular interest to me was learning why so many teenagers struggle with exercising good judgment and delaying gratification. Apparently, one of the parts of the brain not fully developed until after the teen years is the front part where these two skills are developed and refined. (What a relief to know it's not their fault, and it's not mine, either!)
- In summary, the experiences that fill a young child's first years have a decisive impact on the architecture of their brains and in the nature and extent of their adult capacities. The early years, as Dr. Suzuki pointed out again and again, are crucial in setting the firm foundation needed for developing a "Noble Heart".

As teachers, we have a huge responsibility to ensure that we are doing our part to nurture your child

and provide a stimulating and enriching learning environment. This spring, teaching teams throughout the school are modifying some of the approaches currently in place to further the variety of experiences of the children in a safe and loving environment. In particular, we will be focusing on the lower ages (6 months to 3 years) by incorporating other methods and ideas in Early Childhood education into these classrooms, because we realize how important these years are in the development of your child's brain.

Both Allison and I gained a tremendous amount from the NAEYC Conference. In December 2006, the national conference will be held in Atlanta. We plan to take advantage of this rare opportunity by sending all of the teachers to the conference on the Friday and Saturday of the 2006 session to benefit from these wonderful educational seminars.

More to follow!

Sincerely,

Paula Charles