



I have great faith in a seed. Convince me that you have a seed there, and I am prepared to expect wonders.

Henry David Thoreau

SERIES INTRODUCTION

The Seed in the Palm of Your Hand



In our souls, we are all gardeners, whether we realise it or not.

We sow our seeds, and wait for them to sprout. We cultivate and water the seedlings, and we dream of the plants they will grow to be — and the fruits that they will bear.

In our souls, we are all gardeners, and our children are the plants we nurture.

But if you could hold in the palm of your hand any seed in the world, what kind of plant would you choose to sow?

- 1 The beautiful, but solitary rose, whose protective thorns ensure a lonely existence?
- 2 The fast-growing, but fragile hot-house flower that blooms early, then withers, unable to stand the heat or the cold?
- 3 A bonsai, special and unique, whose shape and dimensions reflect your desire for perfection — albeit limited by the size of the pot you place it in?

Or maybe, the Bamboo...

Consider the Bamboo — a Lesson in Preparation

The Bamboo is one of the most successful plants in the world, because much of its development happens beneath the ground, before new shoots even become visible.

The Bamboo has much to teach us about how we should — and shouldn't — approach the early years of our children's lives.

A bamboo plant starts to spread by extending its roots and tendrils (called rhizomes) beneath the soil, colonising the surrounding area and giving itself extensive physical foundations and good access to the water and nutrition needed to sustain the mature plant.

Once all the required elements are in place, new shoots spring from the rhizomes and appear above the ground surface. They grow very quickly and strongly (some bamboo species grow up to 1.2 metres a day — or 5 centimetres per hour! — during their 'growth spurt') and the mature bamboo plant resists almost all natural threats in its environment — including typhoons — because it is flexible and because each element of its structure supports, and is supported by, every other element.

Compare the Bamboo with other plants we might choose to grow.

A Rose by Any Other Name...

Stand back and admire the rose, but don't get too close. Its petals are fragile and fall away at the slightest touch, and should you hold it to your breast you *will* feel its sting.

Many of today's children — even in their pre-school years — spend so much time in study and enrichment, 'refining their skills', preparing for success, searching for perfection, that there is little time for anything as 'unstructured' as play.

After all, if it can't be measured and graded, what use is it?

What use...?

It is in play that we learn who we are — who other people are — and how to 'get on' in a world in which 'inter-personal skills' are as vital as 'intelligence' and (more often than not) EQ trumps IQ in the employment market-place.



The temptation, as a parent, is to try to help our children to avoid the ‘pitfalls’ of childhood — to control and modify their ‘anti-social’ behaviour — rather than creating a loose structure of rules, within which they can behave in a more unstructured way, and learn by trial and error what works and what doesn’t.

If we try to control our children — their experiences and their environment — too rigidly when they are young, we squeeze out the playfulness, the messiness, of childhood.

Why is this dangerous?

Because we run the risk of reprimanding out of their lives the messy experimentation and silliness which teaches them what it means to be an interactive human being.

We might produce children who are well-presented and sit like perfectly-behaved ‘Stepford children’ when we go visiting — and even get praised for their beautiful manners.

Unfortunately, we also run the risk of stifling their personality growth — of creating teenagers and ‘prickly’ young adults who resist social interaction and whose identity is tied up in what they do (or how they appear) rather than who they are.

There is nothing wrong with imagining a beautiful rose, but why not imagine a superior rose — one without the thorns which isolate it from the world beyond itself?

Is there Life beyond the Hot-house?

We hear a great deal about ‘hot-housing’ our children, to give them the ‘winning edge’ in the ‘competitive’ world of early education. Perhaps we should be thinking more closely about the long-term effects of such a well-meaning but misguided policy.

Hot-house blooms can appear to develop quickly and attain maturity at an impressive rate, but as any gardener will tell you, they rarely make the transition to real-world conditions.

Of what use is it for a two-year-old to parrot the faces and names of famous artists — flashed before him on a set of five-by-four-inch cards — if he has no appreciation of the wonderful works those artists have produced? It may appear impressive, but it is no more miraculous than teaching a parrot to roller-skate. It can be done, and you can see the results on YouTube, but does the trick make the parrot a more effective bird? Of course not!

A bird is born to fly and soar. Why would you even want it to roller-skate?

Flash-card memorisation — one of the many useless strategies used to hot-house young children — does nothing more than cram the child's working memory with useless information. Where else in their lives will this 'trick' be of any use?

It is an unfortunate fact that the swift (and unnatural) development of hot-house flowers comes at a terrible price. They are not sufficiently prepared by their early, artificial development to cope with the demanding conditions they will inevitably meet beyond the walls of the hot-house, and they fail at the first sign of inclement weather.

In a rapidly-changing world, we can never predict the future environment to which our children, as adults, will need to respond. The traits of resilience and versatility are established in early childhood — through experience with the real world of trial and error.

So, unless you plan to keep your 'seedlings' trapped behind the glass of an unnatural environment for their entire existence, it's a good idea to avoid the hot-house completely.

The Bonsai — Art, or Arrested Development?

An Old English proverb states:

As the twig is bent, so grows the tree.

It is the same truth which underpinned the work of the bonsai artists of Ancient Japan — starting a tradition which has survived virtually unchanged down through the centuries to today.

A bonsai is, without doubt, a work of art and contemplation — a beautiful miniature; a reflection of perfection; nature confined to a pot, cut and trained and constantly manicured into the bonsai master's concept of what a tree should be.

A bonsai is Art imitating Life.

But is it the metaphor we want to follow, when it comes to our pre-schoolers?

Do we want to limit our children by pruning them and bending them to our will? Do we want stunted, compliant imitations or bold, creative thinkers — people who will conform, or people who will *reform*?

A tree that matures in the real world, adapts and responds to the climate,



the weather and the soil — limited only by its own genetic imperatives.

If we concentrate too much on limiting the form — on restricting our vision of what could be, then we risk creating children who are ‘pot-bound’ for life.

Contrary to what some parents fervently believe, childhood is not about moulding a perfect mini adult. Early childhood is a stage of development in its own right. It is a training ground for future development. Micro-managing a child’s development — especially in the early years — ignores the natural instincts and interests of the child, in favour of activities that the parent feels will create the perfect well-rounded adult.

Experience — messy and exciting and as unpredictable as real life — is what moulds a well-rounded adult, and you can’t fit enough experience into one small pot to achieve that result!

The more we focus on ‘force-feeding’ our pre-school children to perform only in the artificial environment of a school — the more we design tasks whose only purpose is to compare and grade them at earlier and earlier ages — the less chance they will have to truly prepare for the life they will live in the demanding and changeable world of the 21st Century.

Why the Bamboo?

In Asia, the Bamboo is a symbol of both longevity and friendship, and it is considered the most useful of all plants.

- Its shoots are edible, low calorie and nutritious.
- In architecture and construction, it is both ornamental and practical, being used as a hard, lightweight and exceptionally durable timber for buildings and furniture — even high-rise scaffolding and concrete reinforcing.
- In medicine, it has been widely employed to treat infection and respiratory diseases.
- Bamboo fibres are used to create a yarn which is woven into a soft, anti-bacterial fabric or to produce a kind of environmentally friendly paper.

- The list of its uses for household utensils, toys, musical instruments and furnishings — even skis and skateboards — is limited only by your imagination.

Which means that it is virtually limitless.

This wide versatility and resilience is, of course, an ideal metaphor for how we want all children to develop, but for the parents of younger children in particular, the lesson of the Bamboo is even more profound.

The foundation of its success is the system of roots that it develops before anything obvious happens above ground. To the casual observer, nothing much appears to be occurring, but the growth that is taking place out of sight is quite spectacular — and more importantly, it is the right sort of growth.

This is how it is with young children. When they play — when they experiment, hands-on, with all elements within their environment — connections are being made. They may not be able to explain them, they may not even be aware of them, but children's impressive creativity is evidence enough — if we care to pay attention — that important things are happening 'beneath the surface'.

As experiences accumulate, things begin to connect and make sense. Then children begin to understand, at a fundamental level, concepts which they will need in later life.

And understanding builds further connections. The 'root system' within their developing brains — the complex neural network upon which all future learning depends — is expanding and proliferating, preparing the ground for future growth.

The Power of 'Child's-Play'

It is often said that we live in a young person's world — that is, things are evolving so rapidly that only young people seem to be equipped to keep up with the changes. But this is an illusion.

As human beings, we are all capable of altering our understanding and our approach. What prevents us is a mindset — a way of looking at the world — which falls back on old habits and resists innovation.

We need to be open to innovation, to seeing things in a new way. If we are to keep up, we need to become more 'child-like'. We need to learn to play again, because play is the essence of innovation.



As George Bernard Shaw once wrote:

We don't stop playing because we grow old; we grow old because we stop playing.

Our children are experts at play, and as long as we don't 'organise it out of them', they will remain flexible and innovative. They will enjoy the challenge of an environment in flux. They will soar.

They will understand, as we need to understand, what Mark Twain recognised more than a century ago, when he said:

Work and play are words used to describe the same thing under differing conditions.

Or what creativity expert, Roger von Oech, so wisely pointed out, when he wrote:

Necessity may be the mother of invention, but play is certainly the father.

For more insight into the importance of play, look up the work of Dr Stuart Brown — the founder of the National Institute for PLAY. It will open your eyes to the Power of 'Child's-Play'. Also, look for books by Professors Kathy Hirsh-Pasek and Roberta Michnick Golinkoff whose work on early childhood learning is a revelation.

Children drilled and channelled into narrow, rigid, ways of behaving can certainly be trained to jump through the right hoops, even if they don't adequately understand what they are doing. After all, that's how we train dogs and lab rats — and children are far more intelligent than they are!

Without understanding, however, the learning isn't transferable — they can't apply it to anything except the particular (usually meaningless) task for which it was learned. The necessary wider connections are simply not being made.

Like the hot-house bloom or the bonsai, their neural 'root systems' are frail and limited, unable to support future growth.

Though such children may appear to shine at an early age, more often than not, it is a false dawn, which never quite lives up to its early promise.

Managing Change

The past half-century has produced the most profound social and intellectual changes in human history. Change will be the one constant in the lives of our children.

It is inescapable. Irresistible.

Manage change and you ride the leading edge of the wave as it carries you into the future. Resist it — or respond to it with fear — and it breaks over you, swamping your potential and drowning your dreams.

In recent decades, the pace of change worldwide has been meteoric and it shows no sign of slowing. New innovations in information technologies and the growing sophistication of the Internet, together with advances in medicine, physics and psychology, to name a few, are changing our understanding of how everything — including the human mind itself — works.

And this changed understanding is affecting every area of our lives.

The purpose of *Pre-school Parenting Secrets: Talking with the Sky* is to empower you, the parent, to instil in young children, the learning habits and the confident mindset of future champions.

If we want our children to succeed in the 21st Century, we must ensure that they are adequately prepared — that they have both the self-confidence and the skills to succeed in the world created by the Information Revolution.

The strategies we outline in the chapters that follow draw on studies from a wide variety of disciplines, including research into the nature and development of creative intelligence.

Championship in the 21st Century will require the twin abilities of active creativity and high-level social skills, and the exciting thing is that these are skills for which most pre-school children already possess great potential.

If we are aware, we can nurture and strengthen this potential during the early years, within the protective environment of the home. If we do this effectively, we can avoid it being unnecessarily — and prematurely — crushed by the pressures of the world beyond.



Expanding the 'Comfort Zone'

To judge a bamboo plant's progress only according to what we see on the surface is to ignore the massive preparation that has occurred under the ground.

In the same way, to think that the activities outlined in this series are 'just play' or 'just fun' is to miss the complex cognitive growth taking place beneath the surface. It is pointless to judge a child by the evidence of surface learning at a young age. To do so is to completely miss the point of early childhood learning. As a society, we are hung up on assessment and evidence. We seem to work on the assumption that if we can't measure it, it doesn't exist.

Albert Einstein — the absolute epitome of the creative thinker — summed up the fallacy of this mindset, on a sign which he hung in his office at Princeton. It read:

Not everything that counts can be counted, and not everything that can be counted counts.

Many people believe that promoting children's growth requires 'throwing them in at the deep end' — pushing or forcing them out of their comfort zone and beyond their previous achievements.

Sadly, this belief is outdated for a number of developmental reasons — and especially for this age group.

While it is true that, as human beings, we learn little if we stay within our comfort zone, the good news is that, for children, as long as it is connected to an enjoyable experience, we can gradually extend the comfort zone — and therefore the learning potential — without their being aware of just how far they have come. And because experience is the true teacher, once they have moved beyond the old boundaries, they rarely, if ever, go backwards.

Learning changes the very structure of our brain. Learn something new, something beyond your previous experience, and you begin to think differently. You are not, and can never again be, the same person.

In the end, it is far more effective to expand a child's boundaries gradually through carefully structured activities. Completing the activities outlined in this series expands a child's comfort zone — often without the child even noticing.

With the right strategies, all children can learn by using the natural, intuitive abilities with which they were born. This approach forms a secure and solid platform upon which to build the future learning behaviours — especially creativity, logical thinking and problem-solving — which will lead to sustainable success in Primary School and in later life.

This is the active principle behind each strategy developed for **Pre-school Parenting Secrets: Talking with the Sky**.

Expand a child's world and you expand that child's mind.

Create a new understanding and you lay the foundations for a lifetime of future understanding.

Open a gate and the road beyond goes on forever...

The 'Key Roots'

Just like the Bamboo, the successful pre-school learner develops 'key roots' that will support future growth spurts in learning and championship.

Importantly, this does not involve drilling a young child in specific topics with repetition, flash-cards and rote-learning — a common approach, which is boring and frustrating for young children, and ultimately pointless.

Young children are experiential learners, which is to say, they learn by doing — by hands-on experience and experimentation — and by tying that learning to positive emotions.

Each activity outlined in this series is designed to develop competence in one or more key areas of a child's development. These strategies are built around physical activities, structured game-playing, supportive interaction and, above all, FUN.

So, don't expect to find advice on how to turn your child into a human calculator or a robotic reading machine before s/he enters kindergarten. There are expensive books and programmes out there eager and willing to offer the promise of producing, in your child, the next ten-year-old Nobel Prize winner.



There is a huge difference between genius and a Champion Mindset. Genius occurs spontaneously and is at the present time unexplained and unable to be duplicated. A Champion Mindset can also appear spontaneously in lucky individuals, but the work of Professor Allan Snyder FRS, at the Centre for the Mind, Sydney, shows us that it can also be learned — and taught.

What we offer, in this book, is a different way of thinking about your child's development and some easy-to-use activities to lay the foundations — the root-system — which will support the development of your future champion.