



## PREFACE

### PLAY OR ENRICHMENT? A PERFECTLY REASONABLE QUESTION

#### **Which is more important — play or enrichment?**

We run Parenting Strategies Workshops for thousands of people in a number of countries, and in one recent session, this question came up. It is a common theme among parents of this generation of pre-schoolers.

The young mother raising this particular issue was there to learn everything she could about providing her children (a lively four-year-old girl and a boy of maybe two or three) with whatever might be required to make them both happy and successful.

**Sweet flowers are slow  
and weeds make haste.**

**William Shakespeare**

She was clearly a caring and attentive parent, and it was a perfectly reasonable question, under the circumstances. Like parents in many wealthy countries, she wanted only the best that money could buy for her children — clothes, toys, nutrition...

Preparation for life...

That being said, it is a question which bears closer examination. Because it is a question that few parents might have asked — even as recently as a generation ago.

We have reached an interesting (and disturbing) tipping-point in our society, when we can even contemplate choosing between “play or enrichment”.

**For young children,  
play is enrichment.  
Play is how a child  
learns to make  
sense of the world,  
to mould together  
the tiny particles of  
experience that will  
lay the foundations  
of future creativity  
and intellectual  
development.**

Unfortunately, our society, both within its learning institutions, and outside them, has become dangerously — and quite unnecessarily — obsessed with forcing children to ‘perform’ and compete at younger and younger ages.

Life for a child in today’s world is becoming more and more demanding. With strict criteria for entry into the ‘best’ kindergartens and primary schools (and sometimes, even pre-schools), most parents

are looking for a way to give their child 'the competitive edge'.

This has led to the explosive growth of an 'enrichment' industry — replete with flash-cards, pseudo-scientific mumbo-jumbo about 'right- and left-brain (or even 'middle-brain') training' and 'critical windows of opportunity', DNA 'testing' or finger-print analysis to predict 'innate talents' — and children being ferried from one enrichment activity to the next with a frequency which would make an adult's head spin.

But these are not adults — nor even 'young adults'. They are children, and we are in grave danger of damaging their future development as successful human beings, by denying them their right to a childhood.

Ambitious parents point proudly to the number of enrichment activities to which they subject their children, without ever asking some very basic questions:

- 1 *Is all this stressful activity really necessary?*
- 2 *Is it actually benefitting my child?*
- 3 *Is my child enjoying the experience?*
- 4 *What is my real motivation for imposing this amount of pressure onto my child?*

If my motive is to impress other parents with my dedication to 'enriching' my child's experience, then it is time for a radical rethink.

This is not to say that we can't seek out ways to enrich our children's lives with new experiences — or even that we shouldn't introduce them to professionals who understand their needs and can help their developing minds to grow with enthusiasm. It is simply that in choosing that help, we must be alert for the exploitive, the naive, and, above all, the 'fashionable'.

As parents, we are the earth from which our children grow. How we prepare and fertilise the soil will define their relationship with the world. It will determine the nature of their lifelong conversation with the universe.

## Time to Be a Child

If 'enrichment experiences' are not the key to producing a child who is 'all he or she can be', then what *is* the secret?

How *should* I bring up my children? What kind of experiences *do* I need to give them in their preschool years, so that I feel confident I have provided them with the best possible childhood?

**Children are not status symbols. If you want to impress your neighbours, buy yourself a shiny red sports car.**



**The key, above all other things, is to give the child time.**

**Time to bond. Time to be a child. Time to explore the world through play.**

If my motive is to give my child an enjoyable and enriching experience (as opposed to a fashionable 'enrichment experience'), then perhaps the simple answer lies in learning what we can do — together — to broaden our mutual horizons, while strengthening the all-important parent-child bond.

Reading together, playing board games and puzzles, engaging in sports, making up shared stories, rolling on the floor or on the beach, having fun with numbers, words, colours and shapes...

These and a thousand other activities are all playful diversions which enrich a child's experience of the world. They encourage intellectual and emotional maturity in a natural and satisfying way — and they don't cost a thing.

More formal enrichment activities should always grow from the child's interests and needs. Do they show an interest in music? Art? Are they happiest when they are doing somersaults and cartwheels? What activities do they gravitate to by choice?

## Science — or Pseudoscience?

Beware of false prophets, who promise the world, and try to blind you with 'pseudo-science'.

In the world of medicine, no drug or medical procedure can be sold or offered until it has been tested and researched thoroughly and its effects are a matter of public record.

There is no such regulation in the enrichment or education industries. This means that the unscrupulous — or the naively well-intentioned — can make any sort of untested claim with impunity.

Be particularly cautious if a programme or organisation:

- i) **Claims 'miracle' results through some new and previously unknown discovery about the human brain.** Neuroscience is a science in its infancy, and the claims made about the 'powers' of the right-brain, or the ability to 'unlock genius' — or any specific talent — are simply not based on any reputable science. True geniuses are born — not made — and no reputable scientist would even claim to know what causes genius.



- ii) **Bases its claims on the work of one 'guru' — especially if you search the web for his/her work, and the only references are on that organisation's own website.** The work of reputable scientists is always peer-reviewed — but generally, these 'gurus' are anything but reputable. Many are not even qualified in the science in which they claim to have made their 'breakthrough'.
- iii) **Is tied to the name of a 'motivational speaker' — who also, in other forums, offers advice on how to manipulate the stock market or other such adult-oriented 'skills'.** What may work to motivate adults, especially when the ethics are questionable anyway, has little to do with developing the minds of pre-schoolers — but many of these 'entrepreneurs' see parents as just another lucrative and easy 'market'.

Building on our children's passions is the surest way to enrich their experience. Observe your child and you will be guided towards the most appropriate (enjoyable) activities — which are the only ones that will be of any real benefit.

### A Word of Caution

Always keep a check on whether it is your child's passion, or your own passion, unrealised, driving the activity. Know the difference between the children doing the activity for their own enjoyment, and doing it to please you — which they will most certainly do.

Research shows that if children do not enjoy an activity for its own sake, then they are likely to derive no lasting value from it.

Of course, many parents live impossibly busy lives and, though they do their best, it is unrealistic to expect them to be able to drop everything and 'just play'. At least, not as often as is desirable.

What busy parents *can* do, however, is create the kind of home environment that is enriching for their child. This includes not just physical surroundings, but also the social/emotional climate. In the end, it is the home environment that has the greatest impact on early childhood development, not a series of 'enrichment' classes.

**The only truly effective way to home in on the passions that drive your children is to give them the widest possible range of day-to-day experiences — in an informal, unstructured way — so that they can discover for themselves what truly excites them.**



Many parents are anxious that by the time their children start school they not only have the minimum set of pre-academic skills — such as letter and number recognition — but that they are in fact ‘advanced’. As if education is a race and a ‘head start’ will keep their child always at the front of the pack.

Unfortunately, learning does not work like this. The learning journey is rarely, if ever, straightforward. There are always challenges to overcome, crises to navigate and times which may see your child thrive or falter.

Ultimately, what is more important than loading children with basic

**Enriching a child’s life means allowing that child to discover, through hands-on experience, how things work, and how to make them work better.**

**By far the best way for a child to do that is through play — both structured and unstructured.**

demonstrable skills (like the alphabet and numbers) is the solid preparation of the internal framework they carry with them. It is this framework that makes them ready to learn, want to learn — love to learn — throughout their life.

There are many things parents can do in the crucial pre-school years that prepare their children to be fascinated, enthusiastic learners with a strong intellectual and emotional foundation from which to tackle any learning challenge. As you read on, you will learn to master many of these.

In 1998, we founded an organisation (called MindChamps) with the aim of providing young people with the help that every parent desires for every child.

As well as training parents in how to create a truly enriching home environment, we have, over the years, developed a unique pre-school curriculum, which nurtures all the key foundations of learning through games, guided imagination, music, movement and social interaction — with no drilling or ‘flash-cards’ in sight.

When developing out-of-school programmes for young children, we have always focussed on creating the fun, experiential, active and ‘hands-on’ foundation activities that children enjoy. This is the child-centred ‘structured play’ which experts around the world now recommend as the only truly effective path to productive lifelong learning. That is our definition of enrichment and in that, we are not alone.

The Oxford Dictionary defines enrichment as ‘to make richer in quality,

flavour etc.'. True enrichment is not 'product oriented', and the Oxford definition mentions nothing about learning five languages by the age of five or becoming the next baby Mozart.

**Pre-school Parenting Secrets: Talking with the Sky** is the first volume of a two-volume series for the parents (and carers) of pre-school, kindergarten and early primary-aged children. It is not written as an academic text, and though we will, at times, discuss the science and the philosophy behind a strategy or an approach, we have kept the scientific details and philosophical discussion to a bare minimum.

For parents interested in following up on some of the ideas raised, we have included at the end of each volume a bibliography of some useful and enlightening books, web-pages and articles for you to read. *Pre-school Parenting Secrets: Talking with the Sky* is the result of more than 10,000 hours of research, hundreds of hands-on programmes, lectures and discussion sessions, and years of working closely with young people and their parents.

You have embarked upon an exciting journey — but any journey is easier with a roadmap. We hope that this book and its companion volume **Pre-school Parenting Secrets: Wider than the Sky** provide that roadmap, and help you to share more confidently in the excitement of the journey — from the crib to the classroom.

And beyond...

**Our aim is to empower parents, with simple strategies (and lots of fun activities!) for creating healthy thoughts, feelings and attitudes within their children.**

**Like thousands of parents across the world, you too can learn to nurture simple skills and behaviours in your child, to provide the foundations for a lifelong love of learning — for its own sake.**