

# The Intangibles in the Early Childhood Classroom

by Carol B. Hillman

The early years are such formative years, when attitudes are being created, when habits are taking shape, when thoughts are being crystallized. This is when the very essence of each child is coming into being. These are the intangibles that we may look for within early childhood settings.

We must look towards the child care centers around the world, the nursery schools, the public schools, and in the home care settings. It is there, in these important places, where we want to create a place where each child wants to be. For without that physical and emotional comfort the possibility of learning is greatly diminished. So from the very beginning, from the first steps away from home, we, as educators, must take it upon ourselves to think in depth, to



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plan for, organize, and thoughtfully build an environment that beckons the best both *for* and *from* the children.

What is it that we want young children to know beyond the alphabet and numbers, beyond the days of the week, the colors of the rainbow, beyond what testing is looking for? What are the goals we set for 'our' children during the year(s) that we share together?

An overarching belief for educators of young children is to foster *a zest for learning*, to cultivate an *ongoing curiosity* about the world we live in, that is both vibrant and self-sustaining. We feel the importance of fostering and establishing *an inextinguishable enthusiasm about the joy and the process of gaining new knowledge*, assuring that it engenders in young children a sustained interest and involvement.

The implications for teachers are vast. We are calling for all classrooms, no matter what their level of sophistication, to be vessels of interest and challenge in which young minds and bodies have the freedom to explore new areas of thought and experience; to seek the following intangibles. Here is where:

- The training and skill of teachers come into play.

- The importance of observation and understanding are the guiding forces in choosing what is offered to the children on a daily basis.
- Teachers design curriculum based on their understanding of each child on a very personal level, along with his developmental needs.
- Adults are aware of all the strengths, weaknesses, and dreams that each child holds.

These early years are a time for children to:

- Learn about *trust*, about knowing that there are people in this world who children can look up to and count on to be there for them on a consistent basis.
- Learn that an adult can keep a special secret if a child asks for that to happen.
- Know, unequivocally, that an adult can also be a friend.
- Think about who they are, to understand what gives them pleasure, and to understand what is difficult for them to do.
- Learn how to be open and receptive to new ideas: changes in relation to old ideas, the way things always have been.
- Learn to be flexible: for making adjustments with equilibrium, to

understand how things can change, and life can still be all right.

- Learn by watching others, and figuring out what is important.
- Practice how to do things so that young children better understand who they are.
- Look around, discover new ways, and become aware and attuned to other peoples' actions and reactions.
- Do things for themselves: to begin to understand how to discipline their own actions, and further build their self-awareness.
- Consider the needs of their peers and to establish relationships with other children and adults, and in the process recognize new aspects of their own identity.

So much of what happens in a given classroom is based upon work within small groups. Here children are given ample opportunity to express their own ideas, to be creative, to negotiate with others, and to work in a collaborative manner. It is a social scene filled with challenges, where emotions can run high, where give-and-take is always in play. It is real life at play at the preschool level.

Wherever young children are gathered as a group, their safety must be considered paramount. The room itself must be under constant scrutiny for danger spots. We must be watchful for sharp edges from broken toys and wet slippery floors. As educators it is a matter of vigilance. This includes establishing ground rules, including that it is everyone's responsibility to see that each person remains safe: no running in the classroom and words, not fists, are used to settle disagreements. It is working together to create a social consciousness of caring for one another in a deep and meaningful way.

In order to make these things happen, young children need to be skilled in the art of communication. They need to:

- Feel free to express themselves, their wishes, their frustrations, their fears, and their enjoyment of life.
- Feel comfortable about asking questions over and over again and receive thoughtful responses from caring adults: "When can I do it?"; "Why can't I?"; "What makes the grass grow?"; "Why do robins sing?"

The preschool classroom is a microcosm of the world. So much that is meaningful can take place in this setting. It is imperative that all rooms where young children gather be places where experimentation is honored and children feel free to take chances. These are places to feel what work is all about, to be an architect and build a skyscraper with wooden blocks that may come tumbling down. Here, young children can find out that it is all right to get their hands dirty when they plant their first green bean in a small clay pot. Here, they can learn to take care of a living thing, and feel a sense of responsibility for its care. It is here, in this safe environment, that children can learn the pleasures of a deep work ethic and become stronger within themselves through the work that they have accomplished.

In this safe environment children have the opportunity to take risks, to see others take risks, to be successful — and sometimes fail. Here they can witness and be part of making raisin bread that doesn't rise, block buildings that come crashing down, or beans that never sprout. This is also the place to learn that the world doesn't stop when things don't work out: recipes can be tried again, new block buildings can be built, and beans can be replanted. Early childhood classrooms are places where young children are encouraged to practice their skills and feel good about having the time and opportunity to try again — and to know that this is okay. This is also a time to witness that adults are less than perfect people, that they too make mistakes: a teacher can forget

that it was Jack's turn to pick out the story for Thursday, or that she was supposed to go to the lumberyard to get more wood for the workbench. Children get to see that Jack can pick out the story for Friday, and the teacher can pick up the new wood tomorrow. It is also a time when a teacher can tell the children, "I am really sorry that I forgot."

Through these many interactions, children learn about action and reaction. They are exposed to conflict and resolution. They see firsthand what cooperation and collaboration can yield. They can feel the impact of social action, and experience the pride that goes along with being a participant.

It is also essential for children to develop a conscience about caring for our Earth and things around us: learning not to be wasteful, not to use more than is necessary, and to be gentle with what we have so that it will last longer. It is recognizing that each of us can play a part in caring for our environment. A mini recycling project can begin small in the classroom by collecting scraps of paper from art projects.

Developing children's aesthetic awareness starts with the teacher's choices about how the classroom is set up: the materials presented to the children, and the manner in which they are displayed. It is seeing that the paints are fresh each day and maintaining a sense of order by creating a separate space for each object. It is arranging and rearranging wall displays throughout the year and making the mainstay the work of the young artists in your classroom. Creating an aesthetic sense also has to do with simplicity: knowing that clutter is counter-productive. Blank spaces on the walls allow the eye to rest and the body to relax.

An aesthetic sense can also be heightened by having live plants and flowers

growing in your classroom to look at and wonder about each day. These lend beauty, color, and fragrance in subtle but satisfying ways. Keeping an aesthetic sense alive calls for a great deal of thought and planning that is woven into the very fabric of who you are, how you think, and how you choose your actions. It is like an artist who mixes the colors from her palate, overlaying the colors, one atop another until the blending creates just the right shade of color she sought.

Part of what we, as teachers, hope every early childhood classroom would contain is a reverence for the written word. May there always be books in abundance: to look at and to read to children. And stories to tell. And opportunities for children to write their own stories. Storytelling has always been a remarkable way to engage young minds. Through the music of words we hear about new ideas, meet new people and animals, and thrill to the new adventure that awaits the turn of each page or the inflection of the voice. It is through the written word that we gain new insights that can enhance our thinking and shape our goals.

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I have given a lot of thought to what it is I want each child to gain during the precious preschool time, to take with them for the rest of their lives. I call my list 'the intangibles.' What would you add?

I welcome an online dialogue with readers. Please send your ideas to [cbhillman@gmail.com](mailto:cbhillman@gmail.com).

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