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Eleanor Buelke

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WE SUGGEST

Eleanor Buelke

Ames, Louise Bates, & Chase, Joan Ames

Don't Push Your Preschooler

New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1974. Pp. x + 212.

Where have all the wee ones gone—
Long time passing?
Where have all the wee ones gone—
Long time ago?
Where have all the wee ones gone?
Gone to pre-school, everyone.
When will we ever learn?
When will we ever learn?¹

After the manner of folk media, the balladeer sings a plaint for young girls and young men facing crucial issues of their times. Writings and protest marches by youth further proclaim their plight. Professional group leaders plead causes for members of their organizations. Politicians wield power and influence for their constituents. Articulation of human rights is accorded accolades in almost every life sphere. But, there is one group that remains relatively unheard, and, because of its age limits, particularly vulnerable to the efforts of its purportedly dedicated and loving caretakers.

Who will sing, or speak up, for the preschoolers, for the very young? Who will rise in protest against thievery that steals from them their precious time for growing; against larceny that removes the three-dimensional real world of playing, acting and doing, to replace it with the unreal world of manufactured rules, structured activities, and the two-dimensional environment of books, and of pencil and paper; against adult abdication of good sense, judgment, and faith in Nature's "own intricate and highly effective plan and pattern" for growth of a fully functioning human infant into a full-fledged adult? Who is to caution against unconsciously self-serving, albeit well-meaning, professionals who use their work "to gratify rescue fantasies" to which young children "lend themselves so easily and exquisitely?"²

Speaking for the very young, in this book, are Ames and Chase, experts in the science and understanding of child behavior. They continue

¹ Paraphrased from the ballad, "Where Have All The Flowers Gone," popularized during the last two decades.

² Bruno Bettelheim, *A Home For The Heart*, p. 11. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1974.

the affirmation of Dr. Arnold Gesell and Dr. Frances Ilg that “behavior is a function of structure.” They suggest that parents not spoil things for their children, and for themselves, by “expecting too much too soon, or by trying to push them into behaviors for which they may not be prepared.” They cite some very good reasons for these admonitions: the important things a normal child needs to learn in his preschool years will come about quite naturally; if a child is not normal, he will need supportive appreciation and understanding, not pushing; pushing cognitive development or other behaviors simply *does not* work; any positive effects of pushing, or initial advantages of early instruction, *do not last*, and may be negated later by undesirable attitudes; and such efforts can lead to false assumptions by educators about speeding up school curriculums. Perhaps, the strongest argument against pushing preschoolers to learn academic skills is how this affects other aspects of the child’s development during these years. It is during this period that a child needs voluntary, intensely personal, highly motivated, happy, success-oriented play activities. Play is necessary because it sets in motion all the ingredients for successfully coping with life. In it the child is a decision maker; he has freedom of action; he can master his imaginary world; he meets the elements of adventure; he expands his language; he explores the world of things and the ways people react to him; he builds interpersonal relations; he learns to master his physical self; and he investigates and practices adult roles. Through all of these experiences the child will be reaching perfection of behavior in orderly, predictable steps, following his own inborn, individual timetable. He will be succeeding as a human being. He will not be a Loser—a Labeled Disabled.

In recent years much good sincere effort, operating from a base of massive government grants, has been expanded in compensatory education, in the hope of speeding up, or improving, academic performance of certain categories of very young children. “None of the programs so far appears to have raised significantly the achievement of participating pupils.”

The writers of this book do indicate some things parents/caretakers can do to help their preschoolers get the most out of their preschool years. These are detailed in five separate chapters beginning with the words: “What You *Can* Do.” They conclude with some recommendations for a healthy child-parent relationship which takes cognizance of constitutional psychology and characteristic child growth and behavior:

1. Patience will pay off—relax and enjoy your child;

2. Set up the child's day and life to be comfortable, but at the same time, stimulating and rewarding;
3. Remember that Nature's blueprints are highly individual; some children are better at living than they are at formal learning;
4. Keep a biological point of view which holds that each individual has his own timetable;
5. Do not try to speed your child into behavior that his still young body is not ready to perform; and
6. *Respect* individuality; *respect* immaturity; *respect* your child for what he is at this moment.

There is nothing in this list about administering batteries of tests designed to diagnose and label the young, preschool child with data which will remain in his record the rest of his life. There is no mention of "education's hottest new boom, the 'learning disabilities' badge."³ No implication is made that specific motor and perceptual exercise routines, or prescriptive psychoactive drugs to modify behavior or automatically produce advanced students, or segregating children into special learning disabilities classrooms is indicated. The key word in the list is *respect*; implicit in such respect is trusting the other to grow in his own time and in his own way. Only thus can the child be activated to justify such trust and respect, and to trust himself to grow.

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 Long time passing?
 Where have all the wee ones gone—
 Long time ago?
 Where have all the wee ones gone?
 Gone to growing—everyone.
 So shall we ever learn.
 So shall we ever learn.

³ Diane Divoky, "Education's Latest Victim: The 'LD' Kid," *Learning*, (October, 1974), 3:20.