

Why Am I Doing This?

By Lois Todd

I'm sure you've heard the caveat- "I've never seen an epitaph that reads "I wish I had spent more time at the office". Sad to say, there is a version of that heard all too often " I wish I had spent more time with my preschool children" from parents who wake up to the fact that the short period of time before 1st grade contains some of the most eventful and endearing milestones of their children's lives. If they have been too busy with their own work world, they have given up witnessing a myriad of moments that they will never have the opportunity to experience again. Humans are only 1 year old once, 3 years old once, 4 years old ONCE. No other span in a child's life holds so much wonder and joy and fantastic change. It is a shame that so many are missing this by living in fast-forward mode. You should be proud of yourselves for stepping out of the fast lane long enough to enjoy this very special time, AND enrolling in a co-op school as a fine preschool experience to enrich those wonder years.

But wait a minute - it dawns on you "I need to spend time in the classroom every month - what was I thinking? Will I know what to do? Isn't it going to cut into the free time I was planning on using for myself ? Why didn't I pick a program where I could just drop off and pick up and maybe attend a program or two?"

Take heart - you are not only giving your child a wonderful start but the side benefits for yourself are definitely worth the effort.

What is unique about this style of classroom is that you are part of the action, not just a spectator. Granted, the first time you help, your child will be very aware of your presence, perhaps hanging on your leg and being a total ninny. But later you will appreciate having the chance to observe her participation because the children soon become accustomed to parent helpers and start to take them for granted. Have you every said you would like to be a little mouse to see what goes on? This is as close as you will ever get. Also, it is a great way for her to learn to share you with others.

The teachers will train you in your responsibilities and will be there to support you. In turn, you will learn an unbelievable amount from their modeling of how to interact with children. You will become comfortable in helping children with art or science exploration, game rules or turn taking, conversing or sharing books - all of which will be helpful to you when your child has others over for play dates or you become the scout leader or room parent.

When you have witnessed a daily routine and shared the experience with your child you have an inside track on many of the adventures that are part of his school life. Dinner conversation will have more content when you have some clues to trigger a response. You will have an idea of what choices are available to him; how he responds to the activities and to the other children; how the other children react to him. When he talks about Johnny or Alice you will know something of that child's personality and have a better picture of what happened. You can help him understand and develop empathy by sharing the climate of the classroom.

I heard a child being interviewed on television say "We are running out of people we can trust." By becoming a significant addition to the classroom, you will be giving all the children the experience of interacting with someone other than their own family. The other parents are doing the same for your child. This is probably one of the most important volunteer jobs you will undertake to benefit your child's school career. It seems insignificant, but can mean so much in the future for the child to be able to get the most from the many adults who will be his teachers in all aspects of his learning years.

As you help other children, you will become aware of different learning styles, and in so doing, know your own child better. You will see that not all children of any given age approach new material in the same way and you can make allowances and adjustments to give your child room to learn in her own way. This will make you a better advocate for your child as you confer with her teachers. Knowing how to become a partner with educators instead of an adversary may be the best gift a parent can give a child.

By joining this group of parents helping in the classroom, you have created an adult/child ratio that is very significant in the area of social development for your own child and all the others. By "keeping the plates spinning" you allow the teachers the time to guide the children through learning to share, to delay gratification, and to begin to handle conflict resolution. Caring adults can provide a safe place to confront frustration or anger and to practice compassion for others who are having similar problems. All these issues get brushed aside with adult-imposed rules using a one-size-fits-all mentality in a classroom with too few adults. "Let's get the problem over with so we can get on with it." This just puts off problems until they create crises at the grade levels. We want children to learn how to learn in a group of children without coming apart at the seams. This takes experience - it can't be learned from a book, a lecture, or a computer screen.

Being in the classroom gives you a chance to know the other children and their parents and to nurture relationships you think would be enjoyable. It is getting harder and harder for children to make connections with their peers; even if there are others on your cul-de-sac, they may be whisked off to day-care and glued to the T.V. or computer in the evenings. For you and your child, co-op school is a golden opportunity to cultivate a variety of friendships beyond relatives and neighbors. Working with others in the classroom or on committees can be a welcome alternative to an isolated existence.

How do I know all this? I have just enjoyed Cedar Hills Cooperative School's 50th anniversary as a former parent in the 50s and as the kindergarten teacher in the 70s and 80s. So many parents expressed their appreciation of the experience for themselves as well as for their children that it proved what I have come to believe over all these years - Parents belong in the classroom - how could we do it without you?

That's why you're here.