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Child-Centered vs. Child-Led Education

by Bonnie Williams

Oak Meadow supports a “Child-Centered” education, but many people confuse this with a “Child-Led” education. What is the difference?

In a “Child-Centered” education, it is important to consider the learning style and particular interests of the child. For example, a bodily-kinesthetic learner would be taught in such a manner as to offer multiple opportunities for movement and action, as opposed to sitting in a desk or at the kitchen table. In addition, if the student expressed an interest in animals, he or she would be encouraged to read books about animals, train animals, show an animal, write stories about animals, or study in greater depth about animals. Thus, the entire language arts and science program might revolve around this subject of great interest to the child. However, a structure would be created with multiple opportunities for learning to take place.

“Child-Led” education, on the other hand, does not necessarily offer a structure or opportunities but instead waits for the child to ask or initiate. The problem with this is that there are so many opportunities that the child does not even know about or cannot imagine. Because the adult is more aware, more mature, and hopefully more focused than a child, it is up to the adult to provide a suitable structure within which the child can learn in an enjoyable manner suited to the needs and temperament of the child. Often, “Child-Led” educators say, “Susie hasn’t expressed an interest in learning that yet!” The question is, “Would Susie be more interested if she knew what the possibilities were?” If we place a recorder on the shelf and wait for our child to play it, we might find that the child picks it up, squeaks a few notes and throws it down, never to express interest again. However, if we were to take the time to teach the child even three notes on the recorder, he or she could then play a variety of songs and have many hours of enjoyment from the process.

It is absolutely necessary to bring focused attention to creating structures within which children can learn. We must offer them appropriate instruction so that they can experience the freedom to initiate within this structure in the future. If we hand a child a math book and do not sit beside him and instruct him, we cannot expect that he will be excited about math. However, if we instruct him one step at a time, he may discover that he really loves math and wants to spend an hour a day or more doing math problems.

Focused time within a process not only opens up doors for our children, but it also deepens relationships. We would like to encourage you to clear a space every day so that you can spend focused, quality time with your children, getting to know them better and interacting from the heart. When your children know that you care enough to make them a priority, not only will they learn more quickly and easily, but they will also become more intelligent.

This type of truly child-centered education is yet another indication of the advantage that homeschooling parents have with their children. By giving children the love and attention they need, we can help them develop into adults who can make a significant difference in the future of our world.