

# The Heart of Learning

by Lawrence Williams, EdD



**Oak Meadow**

**Oak Meadow, Inc.**

Post Office Box 1346

Brattleboro, Vermont 05302-1346

[oakmeadow.com](http://oakmeadow.com)



# Introduction

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*What good mothers and fathers  
instinctively feel like doing for their  
babies is usually best after all.*

—Benjamin Spock

**H**omeschooling offers us a remarkable opportunity to effect profound transformation in our children and in ourselves. Homeschooling provides the chance to nurture the special gifts our children have and to share with them the joy of learning. However, in order to be truly effective, homeschooling not only has to support intellectual and physical development, but also has to address the inner needs of children during the learning process.

We tend to focus most of our efforts upon the *outer* life of children. We want to make sure they learn to take care of their bodies (eat right, dress warmly, get enough sleep), and learn how to get along with others (share toys, take turns, say please and thank you). We make sure they learn their alphabet and their multiplication tables and learn to read a map and make change for a dollar. Maybe we even have them learn to play baseball, ride a horse, or play the piano. Outer forms like these can contribute to positive development, but it is only in the child's *inner*

life that learning becomes transformational. This inner life is where each child's true potential lies.

*The Heart of Learning* was created to illuminate the essence—the heart—of the learning process and to explore how we can use this knowledge to support the growth of the inner life of children. With this understanding, we can help our children grow into strong, intelligent, and compassionate adults who can have a profound impact upon the lives of those around them and upon this precious world in which we live.

While this book was initially written to help new homeschooling parents as they explore home education for the first time, it has evolved into something that is applicable and relevant to a much wider audi-

ence. You'll find that the words *parent* and *teacher* are often used interchangeably in this book; these words can apply to anyone who is in contact with children. Parents who are not homeschooling and teachers who are not parents will find practical ideas that can be put to immediate use

in their homes, classrooms, and relationships. By putting into practice principles that enhance the way we understand and communicate with children, our own lives are often enriched in unexpected and surprising ways.

In our effort to create a practical guide, we often include first-person anecdotes and stories based on decades of experience in teaching, parenting, and homeschooling. This book was a collaborative effort that embodies the experiences of Oak



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Meadow teachers over the last four decades. (When you see the word *we*, it refers to this Oak Meadow cohort; the word *I* refers to Lawrence.) The ideas we offer are just that—our ideas and experience, not scientific fact based on extensive research. However, we do cite many excellent sources that are based on scientific studies, and our educational principles and practices are grounded in a synthesis of well-tested theories that have been proven over time. Scientific research regarding brain development and learning has expanded exponentially since the *Heart of Learning* was first written. This updated edition reflects a new understanding of brain plasticity as well as learning differences. However, we still find that work of Rudolf Steiner, founder of the Waldorf school movement, is relevant and provides an effective framework for understanding child development.

Homeschooling looks a lot different now than it did when the *Heart of Learning* was first released in the early 1980s. Homeschooling is widely accepted now and often supported by local school districts and charter schools. More families than ever are homeschooling, and they are doing it for a wide variety of reasons. In addition, every family has a unique lifestyle and a unique set of resources and challenges. There is still a core of common wisdom, though, around how to lovingly guide children into adulthood, and there is still a core of common experiences and stages that almost every child goes through. *The Heart of Learning* speaks to these commonalities. The information and practical advice in these pages can serve as guideposts no matter where your parenting journey leads.

If there is one piece of advice that we hope you carry away from this book it is this: *Trust your instincts!* You know your child better than anyone else does, and the love you have for your child will

usually guide you in the right direction. Of course, we all make mistakes—and mistakes give us more opportunities to learn and grow—but parenting is not about being perfect. It is our wish that as you read, consider, absorb, and experiment with the ideas in this book, you will develop a keener inner sense of what will work best for your child. When this happens, you will gain confidence in trusting your own instincts.

Enjoy this journey into the heart of learning, for in discovering how to enhance the lives of our children, our lives, too, are transformed.

## SECTION I



# The Nature of Childhood

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**E**very adult was once a child, so you'd think we'd all be experts on childhood, having already been through it. Actually, it is no surprise that we're not. Childhood has its own intense single mindedness. Children are so absorbed with their own experiences of exploring the world that they are pretty much unaware of anything else that is going on around them. They are also basically *unselfconscious*, not even aware of themselves most of the time, which is one of the charms of childhood. Picture a child so absorbed in making mud pies that he doesn't notice that his shorts have fallen down or that the entire family has already gone inside for lunch. A child's lack of awareness is perfectly normal. Actually, it's perfectly necessary.

The goals of childhood are simple: to grow and learn. These inner mandates are so pervasive that everything in a child's life has to do with one or the other. The complexities of a child's physical growth have been explored in great detail, and most parents have a good deal of knowledge and support about their child's physical development. But how does a child learn? And how can we support and facilitate this learning process? That's what fascinates parents and educators alike.

In this first section, we'll explore the nature of childhood. We'll begin by looking at the ways children perceive and respond to the world around them. Next, we'll look at how child

development moves through different stages of focus, and how individual learning styles or preferences come into play. Finally, we'll look at specific ways in which different learning preferences can be taken into account in an educational model.



## Chapter

# 1

# The Nature of Children

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**T**o be successful homeschooling teachers, we have to know something about the nature of children. The more we understand children, the more we can help them become more of who they truly are—and that’s the whole point of teaching.

The very best way to understand children is to spend as much time as possible with them, talking, listening, and playing. Another good way to learn is to read books about children. This may not be as much fun as playing, but it can be helpful. A third way to learn about children is to look within ourselves, because the same basic elements that are present in a child are also still present in us, but in another stage of development.

All three ways are useful, and you’re probably already working with the first and second approaches. So now we’ll do a little exercise in the third approach—looking within ourselves to gain a better understanding of our own nature.

As you do this, try to let go of any preconceptions you may have about yourself, and look at yourself as a scientist might look at a newly discovered species to discover its unique characteristics. In this exercise, we won’t be looking at the personal characteristics that make you unique; we will be noticing the characteristics you share in common with others. In this way, we will begin to discover the basic principles that make us human beings, which



are the same principles that comprise the essence of your child's nature.

## Looking within Ourselves

To begin, find a time when you can sit quietly by yourself for just a few minutes, without children around. (Good luck with this!) Take a few deep breaths and notice what's going on. Maybe you hear the sound of your children playing in the other room, or you feel your belly moving in and out with your breath. Perhaps the smells from breakfast are still in the air. Maybe you notice dust particles floating in the sunbeams streaming through the window. We all experience body sensations like these—sound, touch, smell, taste, and sight.

Now close your eyes and shift your attention away from what's going on outside your body. You may first notice your feelings. Maybe you feel content, or maybe you feel impatient. Just like body sensations that come and go, feelings rise and fall constantly. Feelings are not good or bad—they simply exist. Many times we identify with our feelings or emotions as being who we are, but there's more to us than that.

The next thing you may notice are your thoughts. Thinking is always happening, and it happens so quickly we often don't even notice what we're thinking—or even that we *are* thinking—until we're caught up in it. Because thoughts can be so subtle and elusive, it's very easy to identify with them and believe that's who we are. As the saying goes, "Don't believe everything you think." Just because you're having a thought about yourself doesn't mean it is true; it's just a thought. Thoughts come and go constantly, like the waves in the ocean.

So far we've noticed physical sensations, feelings, and thoughts. Is this it? Is this the sum total of who we are? At first glance, it would seem so. When our bodies are comfortable, our feelings are calm, our thoughts are not very active, and there appears to be nothing else happening. If you sit quietly and continue to watch, however, you begin to notice something very interesting: you become self-aware.

This awareness from which you observe your own inner states and the world around you feels like more than just another part of you, it feels as though it is *you*. You can observe your body, feelings, and thoughts as objective phenomena, but when you experience that center of awareness, it feels as though it's not something separate from you, but that it *is* you. This is the nature of self-awareness.

So what does this mean for us as homeschooling teachers? What does it mean for our children? Knowing about our inner landscape enables us to see ourselves and our children more clearly. Learning to quietly observe is a skill that we will use every day as we allow our children the time and space to explore based on their own interests. Developing a practice of inner awareness will cultivate a tangible sense of calm in our outer lives, which will spread outward into our home and homeschooling environment.

Experiencing self-awareness also helps us better understand the nature of children. Children have all of the same components you observed within yourself: physical sensations, feelings, thoughts, and a center of awareness. But when you compare a child's experience of these elements to that of an adult, you begin to see the child's unique situation and to understand what makes the child "a child."

## The Physical Realm: Meeting the World

When we compare the physical body of an adult with that of a young child—perhaps a three-year-old—we are immediately struck by the difference in size. Unless the child has some unique condition, their body has all of the parts that a body should have—the proportions are even similar—but the body is quite small. The body will reach its full adult size in about 20 years, but until then the child's body is comparatively small. Thus, it's tempting to say that the difference in body size is the primary difference between an adult and a child, but let's look at this more carefully.


Children have a remarkable degree of control over their bodies even when they are young. They can use their large muscles in a variety of ways—running, jumping, climbing, throwing, catching, etc. Though most three-year-olds are not as adept at activities that require a much more refined degree of control, such as knitting, sewing, riding a bicycle, or drawing detailed figures, by the time they reach 10 or 12 years of age, they will have developed a considerable degree of control even in these fine-motor areas. Between the ages of three and seven, a child learns to accomplish many of the physical actions that an adult can do, even though they have only been working with that body for a few short years. This is a remarkable process.

In spite of the obvious differences in size, physical abilities develop quite rapidly. Thus, it appears that there may be other more important factors that make the child “a child.”

## The Emotional Realm: Responding to the World

What about the emotional nature in children? Are children's feelings or emotions different from those of an adult's, and if so,

how? When we look at a three-year-old's awareness and control of their feelings, we begin to see a greater difference from what we found with the physical body. Although the child of three has already developed a considerable degree of control over the physical body, the awareness and control of the emotions is



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obviously much less. Very young children can express a range of feelings but have almost no control over them. They are largely influenced by their environment. If we place three-year-old children into a room with people who are in emotional conflict, the children begin to act out that conflict. If the same children are moved to another room with kind, calm people, they change almost instantly, without one word being said.

A twelve-year-old child, on the other hand, is influenced by the feelings of others, but she has a greater measure of control over emotions than her three-year-old sibling—and actually enjoys the excitement of engaging in social banter. Consider the way that preadolescents and teens love to engage in social networking sites, and the way many of them text each other incessantly just to comment on the usually mundane events that are happening in their daily lives.

By the time a child is 12, the capacity to control and play with social-emotional feelings has grown, but the range and subtlety of feelings is still limited. After the onset of puberty, children begin to explore the realm of emotions with more depth and intensity, and their ability to control and express a broad range of feelings continues to develop until well into their twenties.

So with feelings we begin to see more of the distinction between children and adults. Young children have a considerable amount of physical awareness and control, but only a minimal amount of emotional awareness and control. Furthermore, it will be many years after they've gained physical control before they develop a similar level of ability with their emotions. Many of us know adults who are still unable to control or express strong emotions appropriately.

## The Mental Realm: Understanding the World

What about the realm of thought? When we compare the mental awareness and facility of children with that of adults, we notice a distinct difference. While most young children are very cognitively engaged, they are not yet capable of understanding complex abstract ideas. A three-year-old child can imitate what others have said and can even interject relevant remarks, but rarely do we find children of that age who are capable of sustained, complex thought.

For most young children, sustained mental activity is completely uninteresting. If we try to explain something to them in abstract detail, they have great difficulty following what we are saying and lose interest very quickly. But if we abandon our mental approach and begin physically demonstrating whatever it is we're talking about, they immediately become very present and capable, because the attention is once again in the physical realm, their primary way of understanding the world.

By adolescence, children begin to awaken to the mental realm of abstract thinking. Child development theorists recognize this stage, which Erik Erikson called the stage of *identity* and Jean Piaget called *formal operations*, as characterized by increasingly

complex, abstract thought and a developing sense of personal identity. This is when it becomes of paramount importance for a child to express individuality and explore what it means to be true to one's self. Rudolf Steiner recognized this as the third stage of childhood, when children develop their analytical and mental capacities, and revel in ideas, philosophy, and the personal search for truth. This core of who we are as adult human beings begins to emerge in adolescence and will take a decade or more to fully manifest.

We can see that children are different from adults physically and emotionally, and when we consider mental faculties, we begin to notice an even greater difference between the child and the adult. But the real difference—that which makes one “a child”—is deeper than any of these processes: it is the absence of self-awareness.

## Self-Awareness Defines Us

When we consider the overall nature and growth of a human being from birth to mature adulthood, it appears that the most significant change that occurs is this quality of self-awareness. Children become aware of and gain control of their physical bodies relatively quickly. The ability to control the feelings takes a few years longer. The ability to engage in complex abstract thought takes even longer. But long after the awareness and control of these faculties have reached a fair degree of stability, the awareness of “I” is still deepening and continues to do so throughout life.

As we move from the physical to the emotional and then to the mental realm, there is a progressive increase in the disparity between children and adults. However, the main thing that

clearly marks a child as a child is the relative absence of self-awareness. Young children are naturally centered in their own experience—self-centered—and not quite able to fully comprehend another’s perspective. Yet they are not quite aware of their own unique sense of self. As children get older, they are better able to differentiate “self” from “other,” and they gradually progress from self-centered to self-aware.

Self-awareness evolves as the child’s worldview expands. This developing sense of self includes not only being aware of our actions, emotions, and thoughts, but also being aware of our environment and how we interact with it. Self-awareness brings an expansive element as we start to understand how our actions have an effect on the world and on the people around us. This helps us gain compassion for others. The more we are able to see ourselves clearly, the more we will be able to see others more clearly as well.

## The Goal of Education

When we view a child in this way, our perceptions change about who the child is and how, as a parent and a teacher, we should approach them. We begin to understand the meaning of the word *education*, which derives from the Latin word *educare*, meaning “to lead or draw out.” Rather than being a formless lump of clay we can mold as we choose, a child is a center of awareness seeking expression in the physical world. Our responsibility as teachers, therefore, is to help children awaken their minds and hearts, deepen their awareness, and develop their ability to express their unique capacities in the world.

Learning how to draw out that awareness within each child is our primary concern as teachers. There are several means



whereby we can accomplish this feat, but we should be aware from the beginning that the task we are approaching is similar to the feat of the young boy who became King Arthur as he drew the sword out of the stone. It isn't a task that can be accomplished easily. It requires more than strength, more than subtlety—it requires our own bit of magical transformation.

Obviously, real change and transformation take time. We don't move beyond our limiting concepts quickly, just as our children don't progress from infancy to adulthood in one quick leap. However, we do have help along the way, and surprisingly the help comes from those whom we are helping: our children. Through their unconditional love, we begin to see the person we wish to become. This love can bring out the best in us and provide us with the inspiration and motivation to change. We begin to believe that we can be the strong, capable, aware person our child sees in us.

There is another way in which children help their parents. It is not nearly as endearing as their open, loving gazes, but can be equally as powerful as a tool of transformation: children present us with patterns of behavior that we cannot tolerate. Perhaps they are disorganized and leave a mess behind them everywhere they go. Perhaps they are prone to becoming absorbed in every little detail and not seeing the big picture, or perhaps they are interested in any new thing that comes their way and never seem to stick with anything long enough to finish a project. Depending upon our attitude about these patterns of behavior, we will either increase our capacity for love, or encounter obstacles in our relationships with our children.

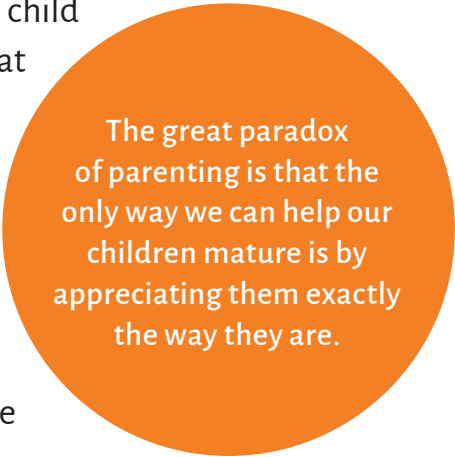


## Obstacles as Opportunities for Growth

When we notice a pattern in our children that we can't tolerate, our initial response is usually to label the pattern as "bad" and blame the children for being that way. Instead of stopping the pattern, this approach usually makes the pattern more pronounced, which causes us to lash out even more strongly. This, in turn, causes the pattern to become even more pronounced. This is the cause of many parent-child entanglements.

In most cases, the difficulty we have with the basic behavior pattern is a reflection of one of two things: either we can't tolerate the pattern because it is totally foreign to us, or we can't stand it because it is just like us. In either case, most often the difficulty lies not with the child, but with the parent. For example, a very quiet, reflective parent may have great difficulty accepting a child who is very active and adventurous. However, there is nothing innately wrong with being energetic and adventurous. The problem in this case is not with the child's expression of her nature, but with the parent's inability to encompass and accept the resulting behavior.

The great paradox of parenting is that the only way we can help our children mature is by appreciating them exactly the way they are. The way to help a child resolve a pattern of behavior that is disruptive or problematic for the family is to fully accept that they *are* that way, in that moment. Of course, behavior can be influenced by the situation or environment, and it doesn't necessarily define who we



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are. But as teachers, our first job is to meet the child where they are, and as parents, our first job is to love the child the way they are: love the innate sense of rhythm in the child who is constantly banging on things; love the social impulse of the child who is always talking; love the inquisitive nature of the child who takes everything apart. By appreciating and honoring the underlying impulse that results in particular types of behavior, we can learn how to provide outlets for our child to express the pattern in appropriate ways.

Of course, the process of loving a child's pattern isn't always sweetness and light. If the pattern is deeply ingrained, it has probably gathered around itself a gnarly host of behaviors that are not very pleasant. If you truly want to help your child release the pattern, you will have to look past all of the manifestations of the pattern and see the essence, the central core that is the motivating power behind it. Invariably, at this level, you will discover something that is very beautiful and that you can love: perhaps a dynamic will, a deep compassion, or maybe a brilliant intellect. (We'll talk about this in more detail in chapter 12 when I relate a story about a significant turning point in my own development as a teacher and as a human being. If you can't wait, feel free to skip ahead to read it now, and then come back.)

When you see this central element, whatever it is, love it. Look past all of the distortions that have developed around it and appreciate that essential force that is the basis of the pattern. See the beauty in it and be glad that it is there, even though you may have difficulty dealing with the way it is played out from day to day. This is not easy, of course—good parenting can be very hard work! The goal of this book is to give you practical tools and strategies that will make your parenting and your teaching more effective and more rewarding. When you can

learn how to love the inner essence of an undesirable behavior, the results will be immediately observable, and the distortions of the pattern will begin to fade, allowing the beauty of your child's inner nature to flow more freely into being. In the next chapter, we'll look at ways to recognize and work with the stages of development while integrating them into the learning process.

Our children's journey into greater awareness and expression of their true nature proceeds slowly, just as a flower grows—first the roots, then stem, leaf, and flower. As we guide and support them through this journey, we also have the opportunity to reeducate and transform ourselves. As homeschooling parents and teachers, we bring our own awareness and compassion to the process, so that this also becomes *our* journey, one that we take together.

## Chapter

# 2

# Head, Heart, and Will

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**A**s we found in the last chapter, children and adults have a lot in common. We're a collection of thoughts, feelings, and physical sensations, and these change constantly. One moment we're happy; another moment we're sad. At times we want to be active; at other times we want to be contemplative and thoughtful. We may experience humility and compassion one minute, arrogance and selfishness the next. Conflicting emotions are part of what makes us human.

These alterations between such ambivalent states of mind can be confusing to the teacher of children. It may be helpful to group these experiences into broad categories to bring some order to this apparent chaos. As we observed in the last chapter, if we look inside our adult selves, we find thoughts, emotions, body sensations, and a center of awareness. Since self-awareness slowly comes into focus as a child nears adulthood, most of our teaching and parenting efforts will naturally focus on the earlier stages of development that involve the body, emotions, and intellect. As these stages unfold, self-awareness will naturally begin to emerge.

One way of grouping these experiences is to label them as *head*, *heart*, and *will*. When we are thinking, we are in the head. When we are feeling, we are in the heart. When we are being active, we are in the will. Over the years, we've found that looking at

children through the lens of head, heart, and will dramatically shifts our understanding of their development and the learning process—and it can help us become better teachers.

It is impossible, however, to convey the essence of each of these aspects in just one word. These three elements are powerful archetypal symbols that we all recognize as recurring themes in the human drama and as essential aspects of our nature as human beings. Many of the oldest myths and legends in the world convey a conflict between the head and the heart, and stories of courageous heroes and heroines who overcome opposition and accomplish great deeds through the force of will are legendary.

To gain a better understanding of these three aspects, we'll explore each of them in more detail. It's important to remember, however, that these are not separate and isolated pieces of ourselves. They are each just one part of a complex whole, each a distinct expression of a multifaceted human being. These three aspects are dynamically interrelated and form the basis of how we interact with the world.

Rudolf Steiner, the Austrian philosopher and educator who developed Waldorf education in the early 20th century, used this grouping of head, heart, and will to explain the nature of children and the process of education. His insights into these areas are remarkable for their depth and practicality, and the implications of his work are still being explored in thousands of schools around the world. Over the years, Oak Meadow has incorporated other perspectives and interpretations into some of Dr. Steiner's original ideas, but we remain deeply indebted to him for his vision and pioneering work. His perceptive insights

have been invaluable in our understanding of children and education.

## Head: Clarity and Focus

When we talk about *head*, we're not just talking about the physical structure that sits on top of our body. On one level we're focusing on the intellect and our ability to think, so sometimes we may use *thinking* as synonymous with *head*. But the quality we call *head* is more than just that. It represents the force that crystalizes fluid energy (such as thoughts) into concrete forms (such as a building or a research report). This is the way the head works.

Thought plays a valuable role in our everyday lives. It brings clarity and focus. It enables us to create goals and keep on task. It helps us manifest our visions by breaking them into logical steps that we can complete in a sequential order, just as an architect creates a blueprint for a building before the construction can begin. It enables us to read, write, comprehend new information, and learn new subjects.

In children, the force of the head gradually brings about self-awareness as adulthood nears, and this is an essential part of being human. But too much focus on the head early in a child's development can cause the awareness of self to develop prematurely and ineffectively. Early overemphasis of thinking and head activity can incline children toward being critical, judgmental, and irritable. They can become self-conscious rather than self-aware.

We know that children are developing cognitively all the time, but according to Steiner, the child's inner forces do not center in

the head or mental realm until adolescence approaches. However, there is no doubt that the head contributes invaluable qualities to every aspect of our lives. A sharp intellect is highly prized in our modern culture, but to be creative and happy, we have to balance the clarity of the head with the strength of the will and the compassion of the heart.

## Will: Action and Persistence

The quality we call *will* works in the opposite direction of the head while working in conjunction with it. The head tends to be reflective and inward focused, but the will is active and outgoing. Will is the force that takes thoughts and brings them into the world. The head can develop ideas, but without the force of will they remain impotent and nonexistent in the physical world. While the head expresses itself through thoughts, will expresses itself through our body, especially our large muscles and limbs. It is through our limbs that we contact the world, work with the material world, and express our creative impulse. Will makes things happen. It expands possibilities.

We sometimes think of will as being stubborn—a force that causes us to grit our teeth to avoid doing something, like trying to stop eating sweets. But willpower is more a reflection of the head than the will (control vs. doing). Will is an unstoppable force that keeps moving, keeps expressing. It is a persistence that causes you to keep going rather than a stubbornness that causes you to resist. It can show up as actions that are immediate and dynamic: children racing headlong to see who can jump in the lake first, or climbing trees, heedless of rough bark and poking branches. Will can also be slow and tenacious, like a toddler who insists on pushing the stroller instead of riding in it. Will gets you out of bed in the morning when it's still cold and

dark, and will helps you finish the last mile of a long race. Will causes a three-year-old to insist on dressing himself, no matter how long it takes, and it is in full force whenever a child learns to tie her shoes for the first time.

But will needs to be balanced; just as an overemphasis of the head can cause imbalances in our personalities, so can an excess of the will. When will is not balanced by the head, it can create a chaos of disordered action, of motion without purpose. Without the compassion of the heart, will can become destructive, moving forward without concern for humanity.

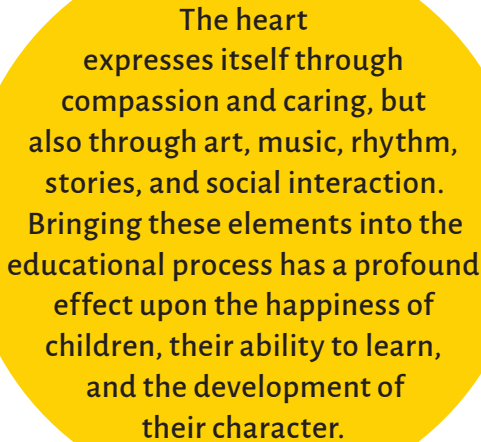
Will is an essential attribute for a human being. Without will, we would be powerless. We would be unable to create. We would have no art, no music, no cars, no factories, and no inventions that have enriched our lives. As Thomas Edison remarked, “Genius is one percent inspiration and ninety-nine percent perspiration.” *That* is will.

## Heart: Compassion and Transformation

When we talk about the heart, we’re not usually referring to the physical organ in our bodies. We’re referring to that quality of warmth, compassion, and caring that resides in all of us. This universally understood expression of the heart reflects its primal quality as the great mediator. In this triad of forces, *head* is one polarity, *will* is another polarity, and *heart* is the force that integrates the two.

We sometimes think of any synthesis between two polarities as a mix of both, like mixing black and white paint to make gray. The heart is no muddy, mediocre mix, however. It’s not a fuzzy area between head and will, or a watered-down version of each of them. Heart includes both polarities and then introduces a





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transformative third force that creates a larger, more dynamic expression. So if we say, for example, that will is white and head is black, then heart isn't gray—it is the entire world of color.

The heart expresses itself through compassion and caring, but also through art, music, rhythm, stories, and social interaction. Bringing these elements into the educational process has a profound effect upon the happiness of children, their ability to learn, and the development of their character. It also transforms us as teachers. After all, teachers are not (and should not be) just heads and wills. It is this ability to integrate and transform that makes the heart such a powerful force. It's also what makes the heart such a potent tool in education.

As powerful as the heart is, however, it must also be balanced by encompassing the very polarities it integrates. Without the clarity of the head, the heart can become sentimental and aimless. Without a strong will, the heart can become self-absorbed and impotent. Balancing these three aspects is the work of awareness.

## The Calm Center of Awareness

The triad of head, heart, and will is the essential tool kit that we have as human beings and as teachers. With these tools we can create everything we need in the world. We can teach our

children effectively, and bring joy and happiness to ourselves and to those around us. However, it is our adult awareness—that calm center—that is our true nature. It is our awareness that enables us to balance these three great forces effectively and use them wisely in our lives and in the educational process.

Within this center of awareness lies the real power that we have as human beings: the ability to *choose*. Through awareness, we can choose whether to be in our head, heart, or will. We can choose whether to speak or be silent, whether to analyze or empathize, whether to plan or take action. We can choose based on what each situation calls for, choose with an awareness of what is needed to balance the situation at hand. Children are not yet able to do this, so we must do it for them.

This power to choose comes from an aspect of awareness known as *mindfulness*—the ability to be aware of what is happening at any moment without judgment, and to accept it for what it is. When we are mindful, we aren't consumed by the past or the future, by right or wrong. We're just present with whatever is happening, and we are responding compassionately and intelligently with open hearts.

Fortunately, mindfulness is something that we can develop. A simple internet search for “mindfulness” will generate a plethora of sources to help you become more mindful in every aspect of your life. There are also many excellent books that explore innovative ways to help your children develop greater mindfulness as you are learning together. Good books to start with are *Everyday Blessings: the Inner Work of Mindful Parenting* by Myla Kabat-Zinn and Jon Kabat-Zinn and *The Mindful Child* by Susan Kaiser Greenland.

Mindfulness practice can take the form of meditation, art, music, martial arts, writing, and many other activities. Disciplines such as these help us focus our minds and hearts, and open ourselves to the presence that lies within us. Engaging in a personal mindfulness practice and introducing mindfulness in your homeschooling can transform you and your teaching, and help you move into a balanced, harmonious worldview.

Mindfulness differs from self-awareness because of its qualities of nonjudgment and acceptance. When we are self-aware, we may be aware that we are feeling impatient or frustrated or judgmental, and be able to draw connections between our feelings and environmental circumstances. When we are mindful, we are able to observe a situation without seeing it as good or bad, frustrating or pleasing, but rather seeing it with acceptance and a lack of judgment.

Mindfulness allows us to approach each student openly, listen clearly, and respond in an effective, appropriate way. This has a positive impact on the ability to learn. Learning how to balance these three forces of head, heart, and will takes time, but it is a skill that can be learned and that will significantly improve your effectiveness as a teacher.

## The Balancing Process

We often tend to think of balance in terms of a static state. Have you ever been on a seesaw with someone else and tried to find the exact balance so that the seesaw just stayed level? If you both weighed about the same, it was pretty easy. If you weighed more or less than your friend, one of you had to move a little closer to the center until you could find the balance point, but eventually you found it. And when you found it, it was set. You

didn't have to do anything else; it just stayed level and balanced unless someone moved.

Finding a balance of head, heart, and will is not that easy. There is no fixed point that you can find in which the three are balanced and then you can forget about them and they stay that way. It's not like a recipe, where we add one part head, one part heart, and one part will and then it's balanced. Unlike the constant weight of friends on a seesaw, the relative power and strength of these forces is constantly changing and shifting, just as the wind changes and shifts over the course of a day. The balance of each child—and each of us—varies moment by moment with the conditions of our lives and what we're doing. A seesaw uses a static balance point; the balance of head, heart, and will is a dynamic process.

Each child is different, and each situation is different, sometimes calling for more or less of a particular trait. Some children seem to be balanced when they're expressing a lot of will. They need to move a lot, and asking them to sit still won't work. Other children are more comfortable in the realm of the head and are content to sit and read books. For each of these children the balance will be different, but to be healthy and happy and to learn effectively they each need to express some amount of head, heart, and will during each day. Helping them find that balance is your job as a parent and a teacher.

## The Dynamic Balance of Head, Heart, and Will

The ability to pay attention in the present moment to what arises and to be able to respond without judgment is especially important to being an effective teacher. Of course, the human brain is hardwired to assess, evaluate, and make judgments. We

judge how far to jump to avoid stepping in a puddle, or how hard to throw a ball, or how loud to speak. We often make assessments based on clues we pick up (that child is slow; that child is shy), and even though these assessments are not always accurate, we sometimes make accompanying judgments (the slow child is lazy; the shy child is unfriendly). The goal is to be aware of our judgments and to be willing and able to set these judgments aside and be mindfully present.

**The ability to pay attention in the present moment to what arises and to be able to respond without judgment is especially important to being an effective teacher.**

As Zen master Seng-Ts'an (sixth century, China) wrote, "The Great Way is not difficult for those who have no preferences." This is the spirit we need in order to integrate head, heart, and will into the educational process. To respond appropriately to what is needed, we can't have any preferences for head, heart, or will. As powerful as they are, they're just tools, and using them effectively means using the right tool at the right time. Seeing what is needed without judging this need (or lack) as good or bad is essential.

If we, like the child who just wants to sit and read, have a particular preference for the head, then we might not be able to recognize when we're being too analytical or we may be slow to introduce activities that incorporate the will when necessary. Or if we just love being in that cozy, warm place in the heart, then we might miss the signals that indicate when it's time to bring in the head because more clarity is needed. If we have no preferences (or become aware of our natural tendencies and can set them aside), then we see clearly what is needed, we respond

promptly and appropriately, and the learning is enhanced and nourished. If our own preferences unduly influence our teaching, learning can become frustrating.

The other part of mindfulness is staying focused in the present moment. Forget about what worked five minutes ago! Children are as changeable as the wind, and, for that matter, so are most of us. All that matters is what's going on right now. Suppose, for example, we begin the day with a lesson on a letter of the alphabet. As we introduce the lesson, we see the need for more clarity, so we bring more head to the process. We focus more on the details of the shape of a particular letter and writing it accurately. This works for a while, then we notice that things are getting too rigid, so we bring in some will and play an active game. This energizes the situation and works for a while, and then things start getting a bit chaotic, so we bring some heart into it. We sing a song or bring out the paints. Ah, that makes it better, and all goes well. Then things are getting too dreamy, so we see that we need to bring more will in again. We trace the shapes of letters in sand and make letters out of cookie dough. In this way, we balance the forces, learning progresses, and our children remain balanced. There is a beautiful flow of energy to the day.

As Thomas Jefferson said, "The price of freedom is eternal vigilance." He was talking about how we maintain our freedom in a democracy, but he could just as easily have been talking about how we each find our deeper freedom as human beings or how we teach our children. Only through being aware of what is happening around us and within us can we respond appropriately in a way that will bring us happiness, both individually and collectively. It's also the best way to help our children learn. (We'll talk more about mindfulness in chapter 8 when we look at maintaining creative tension in the learning process.) At first,

maintaining this steady awareness as we teach can seem daunting, but with practice it becomes as natural and comfortable as breathing. It becomes intuitive.

These powerful forces of head, heart, and will—and the center of awareness that can serve to balance them—are present at birth, but they unfold in progressive stages in the development of children. In the next chapter, we'll explore these stages and how to cooperate with them effectively in the educational process.