

Printing numbers, free time and play

By Carlo Ricci

Children need free time and lots of it. Free time is valuable time and not wasted time. I believe so strongly in unschooling because it gives children the time they need to structure their own learning. I believe that the more free time children have and the more comfortable they become with having free time, the more opportunities they will create for themselves to learn, grow and unfold. Observations of my two children will elucidate this point.

**Numbers** My four-year daughter was reading her children's magazine when she noticed that one of the activities described how to make a clock, and so she wanted to make one. We gathered the materials that she needed and she started making a modified, and in my mind, improved version of what they outlined. When she picked up her marker to write the numbers, she realized that she didn't know how to write them. Although, she could write letters very well, she had never had the need to write numbers. This, however, was not a big deal. She proceeded to try and write the numbers and she asked a few (very, very few) questions and points of clarification that she needed along the way. Within minutes she was writing her numbers. She clearly could write her numbers, she was capable but she simply had never tried because she did not have a need. Number recognition was something she could do very early on because there are so many things that she wants and likes to do that require a recognition of numbers; for example, she likes to watch television and for that she needs to learn how to use the remote control, and for that she needs to learn to recognize her numbers. My point in sharing this with you, and what intrigued me about this so much, is that children will learn what they need to know when they need to know it, when it's meaningful to them, and when they are internally motivated to learn. We need to learn to trust children and have faith in their ability to learn. Since the making of the clock, my daughter has found all kinds of occasions to practice writing her numbers. She has made many clocks that required them. She has at times just written numbers down. Her favourite number-writing activity lately is writing in the numbers when my wife is doing the Sudoku puzzle in the newspaper. She enjoys helping us while she is

continuing to practice writing her numbers. She is not being drilled and skilled to write numbers for the sake of learning to write them, rather, she is internally motivated to write them because she feels the need to make clocks and do Sudoku which means, in turn, that she has to learn to write her numbers. Last night we were lying on my bed doing Sudoku together and my daughter was writing the numbers while articulating her thought processes out loud. As she was writing, she was speaking about what she was doing. For example, when she printed a four she said, "First you make an 'L' and then you put a line through it," and when she was printing a six she said, "Watch this daddy, first you make a 'C' and then you hook it in," and a nine was an 'O' with a line down the side, and so on. She has her own system figured out and this system works for her. It is powerful, I believe, because it is not an externally imposed system, but is an internally created system that works for her. **Free Time**

One of my neighbours recently shared with my wife how her children had a miserable day because they were home from camp for the first time all summer without any adult-planned activities to occupy them. When she asked them how they would like being free to do what they want all the time, they said they would hate it. This got me thinking, "How could children with freedom come to loathe it? Why could they not find things to do on their own?" To answer these questions, I thought about how my children deal with free time. The other morning I was working upstairs and I could periodically hear them downstairs playing. This lasted for at least two hours and that is not atypical. I do not recall them ever saying that they are bored and they are very good at finding things that they want to do. While I was upstairs I heard a lot of giggling and later I discovered what they were doing. They had made up a very creative game. They had pulled their coloured plates out of the kitchen drawer and they were blindfolding each other and trying to figure out what colour plate the non-blindfolded person was holding up. They can play so happily for such long periods of time on their own, I believe, because they have had so much freedom they have become comfortable with deciding what they want to do. The children are much better at managing free time than my wife and I are. Recently, while we were on a cruise ship, we were quarantined in our room for twenty-four hours because my daughter fell ill and the doctors feared it could be a contagious virus. We had a much harder time with being confined than my daughters did. They did not

complain once about being locked in our room, and they quickly found ways of entertaining both themselves and us. When a new object would enter the room, for example, they would find ways to transform it into an object of play. They know how to structure their own time because they do it on a daily basis. Our parents did not take us to all the activities that young children are rushed off to do today. It's not that we did not play all of the sports and activities that children play today, but when we did play, it was not organized by adults. We were left to organize it ourselves. If we wanted to play hockey or football or go to the park or sign up for camp, it was up to us to do it and we did. As well, we resolved our own conflicts and refereed our own games. In short, we benefited from having to do these things on our own and for having control over our own activities. Today if children want to play soccer they join a league rather than get together and organize it among themselves. Last year, my friend, a school principal, said that unstructured time is important for children, and for the first time, did not sign her fourteen-year-old son up for camp that summer. He was allowed to do what he pleased. She reported that it was the best summer of his life. He went biking and swimming, played music, read, entertained and learned to cook. I believe that my children benefit from their freedom. I believe that we need to respect children's space and not be overbearing with our expectations and demands. We need to allow them to explore, and we need to trust their judgments. We need to allow them to find out what they are and are not capable of doing. To do this we need to let them be free. In conclusion, printing numbers, free time and play are not separate activities as perhaps is suggested by the title of this piece, but each of these activities and so many, many more are interconnected in a complicated web. They are not separate from each other but they support each other. Because children have lots of free time and the support to structure it as they see fit and to play they can accomplish their goals. I repeat, I believe that the more free time children have and the more comfortable they become with having free time, the more opportunities they will create for themselves to learn and to grow and to unfold.