

Printing Numbers, Free Time & Play

by Dr. Carlo Ricci



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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 the 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 the free time, the more opportunities they will create for themselves to learn and to grow and to unfold. In what follows I will share with you some observations that I have recently made that will help elucidate this point.

Numbers

I have two daughters ages two and four. My four-year daughter was sitting at the kitchen table and she called me over. She was “reading” her children’s magazine that someone had subscribed to for her as a gift. She noticed that one of the activities described how to make a clock, and so she wanted to make a clock. She is familiar with analog watches because she has one and has had it for a long time. She has been able to tell time on it fairly accurately, initially to my surprise, for awhile now. Anyway, we gathered the materials that she needed to make the clock and she started making a modified, and in my mind improved, version of what they outlined. She picked up her marker and started to write the numbers. She quickly realized that she does not know how to write the numbers; although, she could write all of her letters very well, numbers is something that she recognizes, but up until now she has never had the need or will to try and write them out. 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. Literally, 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 where she needs a recognition of numbers to do; 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. And, more importantly perhaps is that we need to learn to trust children and their ability to learn.



Since the making of the clock, she has been finding all kinds of occasions to practice writing her numbers. She has made many clocks that have forced her to practice her numbers. She has at times just written numbers down. Perhaps, her most favourite number writing activity lately has been Sudoku. My wife has recently become interested in Sudoku, as have so many others, and my daughter enjoys writing the Sudoku numbers in the appropriate boxes for my wife; in short, she enjoys working on the Sudoku puzzles with me and my wife and in that enjoyment 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 numbers, but she is internally motivated to write numbers because she is living her life and at this stage of living her life she feels the need to make clocks and do Sudoku which means, as an aside, that she has to learn to write her numbers.

Incidentally, 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 what she was doing. I enjoyed listening to her explanation and description of how she was forming her numbers. 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. Again, what strikes me about this is that she has her own system figured out, and this system works for her. It is so powerful, I believe, because it is not an externally imposed system, but it is an internally created system that works for her.

Free Time

One of my neighbours recently shared with my wife how she told her children something to the effect that they had such a miserable day because they were home for the first time all summer without being in camp or some other adult planned activity for them. She then asked them how they would like doing this all the time. This got me thinking. The question that came to mind for me was how could children with freedom come to loathe it? In other words, why is it that they may

have felt so bored and the need for someone or something to entertain them? Why could they not find things to do on their own? This led me to observe and reflect about my children and how they deal with free time.



My children have been fortunate to have lots of free time. We have been fortunate that I am in a position where I can do a lot of my work from home and they are touchingly very respectful of the time I need to do my work. The other morning I was working upstairs and I could periodically hear them downstairs playing. This lasted for at least two hours and it 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. That they can play so happily for such long periods of time on their own is, I believe, because they have always had plenty of free time and they have become comfortable with deciding what they want to do in their free time and understanding that they need to fill their own free time and not have their time filled by someone else.

In fact, I believe that they are much better at this than my wife and I are. Recently, we were on a cruise ship and we, unfortunately, discovered that my youngest daughter is susceptible to motion sickness. In short, my wife insisted on bringing her to the ship's doctor and the result was that we were quarantined in our room. Ships have discovered that it is much better to inconvenience a few passengers than to have a ship full of passengers come back and it be reported that a large number of passengers fell ill. So as soon as they found out my daughter vomited they confined us to our room because they could not confirm why it was that she vomited. It could be motion sickness, but it could also be a virus and since the test takes two weeks to confirm, we were told, and we were on the ship for only a week, therefore, enjoy your quarantine. Fortunately, my desperation got us out after only 24 hours. My point in sharing this is that my wife and I 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 very, very impressively and creatively found ways of entertaining themselves and us. When a new object would enter the room, for example something brought in by room service, they would find ways to transform it into an object of play. They know how to structure their own time because this is something that they do on a daily basis and I believe that they are much better for having the luxury of structuring their own time.

We often joke amongst some of our friends about how our parents did not take us to all the activities that young children are rushed off to today. We often say it to lovingly slight our parents for not doing it, but really I believe that I am better off for it. It's not that we did not play all of the

sports and activities that children play in today but when we did play it was not organized and timed by adults but 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. I look fondly at this time because we controlled what we did and when we did it and how we did it. We organized our own games and placed our own limits on how long we played. 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. When I was younger if I wanted to play soccer I would have to make it happen and I would. Today if children want to play soccer they join a league rather than get together and organize it among their friends on their own.



One day this past summer, I came home to find my younger daughter out in our backyard lying on lawn chair all by herself. This image of her sticks out in my mind as a peaceful moment where she was just Being. I opened the sliding door that leads out to the covered patio and this awoke her from her place. She just looked at me and said, “Get me some milk.” To me this enjoyment of just Being, of doing nothing but Being is a gift that we all have to learn to re-embrace. We need to slow down our too hurried lives.

My final comment on this point is something that was shared with me by a friend and school principal. She said that she realizes that unstructured time is indeed important for children to have and so for the first time her now fourteen-year-old son was not signed up for camp this summer and was given the summer to do what he pleases. In short, it has reportedly been the best summer of his life.

She mentioned that, “some examples of the living and learning he did on his own throughout the summer was biking, swimming, playing music, reading, entertaining and learning to cook.”

Playing at the Park

Recently, I was at a local park and I had an encounter that highlighted for me the differences in orientations to parenting. It reminded me of how influential our philosophies of life are in how our everyday experiences are lived out and in how we perceive our and others way of life. When we go

to the park, not surprisingly given what I have shared so far, my children have a lot of freedom and I do not follow them around scrutinizing their every move. If they want me to help them negotiate a particular structure I help them, but if they feel like playing on their own and doing their own thing I honour that. So on this occasion, I was sitting on a bench reading the newspaper and relaxing while my children were having a great time doing their own thing. When all of a sudden I intuitively felt this mother's disapproving gaze. For my part I felt that she was way too smothering of her, what I would estimate to be, four-year-old child. I felt that she did not let her child go anywhere without her being inches away from her. And I imagine that from her world view she was thinking the exact opposite of me. She must have been thinking that I was a negligent parent more concerned with reading the newspaper than in interacting and watching my children. Because of my world view and my observations, I believe that my children have and continue to benefit from their freedom. I believe that we need to respect their space and not be too overbearing. We need to allow them to explore and we need to trust their judgements. We need to allow them to lean to judge for themselves 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 the free time, the more opportunities they will create for themselves to learn and to grow and to unfold.

Biography



Dr. Carlo Ricci currently teaches in the faculty of education's graduate program at Nipissing University and he founded and edits the online Journal of Unschooling and Alternative Learning (JUAL). He tries to incorporate the spirit of unschooling, democratic and learner centered principles in all of his classes. Everything of value that he has learned, he has learned outside of formal schooling. He has never taken a course in school connected to what he now teaches and writes about. He has taught in elementary and high school. He has also taught in undergraduate, teacher education programs and graduate programs. His personal schooling experience as a student and later as a

teacher has inspired him to revolt against institutional schooling. He continues to heal from the wounds inflicted on him by formal schooling. He has two daughters ages 3 and 5 that he hopes will decide to unschool.

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