



A CRASH COURSE IN THE LANGUAGE OF WOLVES

An article by Lisa Murphy, *The Ooey Gooley Lady*®

In her book, *Teaching in the Key of Life*, author Mimi Chenfeld talks about the “wolves” that are occasionally seen stalking school hallways and lurking around preschool classroom doors. Wolves, by definition, are those concerned types who want to know what children are *doing* all day (read: doing to get ready for kindergarten). They desire to know the rationale for flubber, the developmentally appropriateness of ooblick, the reason for the hokey pokey, the goal of splatter painting, the objective of swinging on your tummy and seem to search incessantly for an overall justification of the importance of what we might call “play.”

You might find wolves disguised as parents, administrators, colleagues, co-workers, principals or maybe even yourself. Wolves desire goals, objectives and activities that are aligned with standards, benchmarks and an assortment of desired results. Obvious links between classroom projects and established learning guidelines assists them in truly believing that we (educators) know what we are doing.

This can be a bit of a challenge for all parties. Teachers want to plan exciting activities for the children, parents want the clothes clean. Teachers are jazzed up about a new experiment and administration is worried about playdough in the carpet. Teachers feel frustrated when asked, “But what are they *learning*?!” and know in their hearts that there is more to be said than, “Kids learn through play.”

Where is the middle ground? I dream of a day when we say, “Today everyone played so hard!” And it is collectively understood that this means we counted rollie pollies, measured sand and water, wrote stories with inventive spelling, negotiated a turn on the bikes without hitting, mixed red and yellow for the fiftieth time and realized it still made orange, sat quietly while we watched the hummingbird sip the nectar from the feeder on the playground, sang songs, did fingerplays and balanced a table-high tower of corks and blocks.

Sometimes I worry that when we say “we played today,” many grown-ups have forgotten what this means. They have forgotten “play.” Remind them. “When we stack blocks we are learning about balance, gravity and patience, come let me show you the photograph of the tower Karen made today! She worked on it for a solid half hour!”

While reconnecting them with play you are also linking the “learning words” to the activities and projects you do in your classroom. Believe me - great will be the day when we no longer have to defend what we do – but for now, we do. So we must be armed with an arsenal of information!

While fighting the good fight and continuing to wage the uphill battle of having play valued for its own sake within our preschools, childcare centers and elementary schools, we must be able to articulate what is happening when children play.

We know that while children are engaged in meaningful experiences they are “getting ready for school.” Some folks can see that clearly, some need us to point it out. We must be able to work with both groups in a professional manner! We must continue to point out (for the millionth time) that when children spend time in hands-on, play based, educational environments that emphasize the importance of wonder, discovery and creativity (not the accumulation of a bunch o’facts) that learning is happening all the time.

Even though many of us work in environments where there is a lot of pressure for children to be performing, gathering random bits of knowledge and hurrying up to be “ready” for the next expectation with no time left to appreciate the here-and-now, I have found, amazingly enough, that sometimes all it takes is a few strategically placed phrases such as, “when we are squeezing playdough we are strengthening our hands and eventually, when our hands and fingers are strong enough, we are able to hold pencils”, or “when we make ooblick we are exploring the difference between solids and liquids” is all it takes to ease the worries and fears of parents that the children aren’t *doing* anything.

Sometimes a few exchanges such as these shows parents that you know what you are talking about. It reassures them that their child is in an engaging environment where play is being

facilitated by caring adults who know their stuff. Your responsibility is to then facilitate and to know your stuff.

After a few conversations with parents where you are able to show and educate them as to the “learning words” that can be linked to the play activities you can often begin to deepen your relationship with them. Once this trust is established (they trust that you know what you are doing and that you can talk about what their child is experiencing and learning and you trust that they will listen when you explain and talk about what is happening in the classroom) you can then take on the deeper issues of honoring childhood for it’s own sake, not just as training ground for all the things that might be coming next.

These words can be used to describe the activities you are doing in your classroom. Link them to the day’s events to show what the children were *doing*. I have found that wolves respond better when you use words like:

Absorption	Effect	Magnification	Risk Taking
Action	Evaporation	Manipulating	Seeking
Amplify	Experimenting	Matching	Sight
Arranging	Explaining	Measurements	Small Motor
Balance	Exploring	Membrane	Smell
Buoyant	Force	Naming	Spatial Representation
Carbon Dioxide	Friction	Observing	Static Electricity
Cause	Gravity	Opposites	Surface Tension
Chemical reaction	Hearing	Ordering	Suspension
Classification	Heavy	Patterning	Taste
Coagulate	Identifying	Pitch	Temperature
Constancy	Inertia	Planning	Tone
Constructing	Inflate	Problem Solving	Touch
Cooperation	Investigating	Propulsion	Vibration
Density	Large Motor	Questioning	Weight
Displaying	Light	Reaction	
Dissolve	Listening	Reconstructing	
Distance	Magnetic	Rhythm	

It is my wish that this brief list assists you in connecting with them....

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