

“Recognizing Teachable Moments at Home”
Idea from the book, “getting to Got it!” by Betty Garner

By recognizing teachable moments at home, we can help children develop their cognitive structures, which will help them become better learners and decrease the chances of learning difficulties.

“Cognitive structures are the basic mental processes people use to make sense of information. (p.2)”

As parents and teachers we have to remember that we cannot develop children’s cognitive structures, they have to develop their own and it is never too late to develop them. We are doing so much for children these days that they are doing so little on their own and in return their brain is becoming under developed. I like how the book puts it, “Too often, well-meaning parents and teachers short-circuit students’ cognitive development by doing the mental work for them (p.15)”. Scientific studies have shown that the brain does in fact grow and change if we involve it in the right activities. Developing the cognitive structures goes hand in hand with our Montessori philosophies of helping the child learn independence and developing the whole child. This means we need to embrace every situation we can that is a possible “Teaching Moment”. We call this “following the child” in Montessori. We follow the child and develop activities to help meet that child’s needs. We recognize that each child has a different way to learn and we embrace this.

To help children develop their cognitive structure’s we can do the following things to help:

1. Help direct children to work through difficult situations on their own (see hand out from book of a sample situation about Harold). We can brainstorm with the child how to solve a problem rather than solve it for them and tell them what to do.
2. Observe and watch your child while they play or work with things so you know what skills make them thrive and this will help you think of things to feed their passions. The brain will not just develop through language and math skills (as much as love doing them with children), but the brain also develops when the child is passionately working with something he or she loves.
3. Ask open ended questions (as we encourage the children to do in our Empathy training in class) about everything a child does or shows you. If a child shows you a picture, don’t just say good job,” but say “tell me about your picture,” and keep asking more questions as the child opens up about what they were thinking about as they drew. When you are in a car, a museum, a store, a plane, or any where, ask children, “what do you notice,” what if...?”, “what does this make you think of?”, “Would you like to write a story about this so you never forget it?”, and “What do you hear (taste, smell, feel, see)?”. There are endless questions we can use in any given situation to help encourage a child’s brain to further develop. Those “who model asking open-ended questions stimulate student reflection and the need to know more (p.26)”.

4. Encourage independence and the child's involvement in every day life.

Children are very curious and ask a lot of questions. Although sometimes they can ask so many questions that they wear us out, we also need to remember that these questions and the answers they will receive are fuel for their brains. "We also need to ask stimulating questions and provide opportunities for them to make mistakes in safe environments where they don't need to worry about 'feeling stupid' (p.23)" We strive to do this in our school and we hope to help parents identify these teachable moments at home also.

One afternoon I was explaining to a group of educators how students need to make connections, find patterns, formulate rules, and abstract principles. Harold, a psychologist in the group, suddenly made a connection with a childhood experience. He was 10 years old, and he and his dad were in their basement, building a birdhouse. The floor was covered with sawdust. Harold dropped a screw and immediately tried to find it by searching through all the sawdust. His dad stopped him. "Son, look where the screw fell from," he said. "Based on that, where do you think it will be?" Harold immediately looked on the floor directly below the edge of the table, reached down, and found the screw. Then his dad asked, "Will it always be that way?" This made Harold stop and think about how abstracting a generalizable principle would save time and energy.

Several things happened here. Harold's dad coached his son—in other words, he mediated meaning—by asking questions rather than telling him what to do or solving the problem for him. He not only let Harold find the screw but also taught him a valuable lesson for life. He was helping Harold develop cognitive structures by first helping him to be reflective (urging him to stop and think about an experience) and then by encouraging him to notice a relationship that was predictable. Harold's dad then went one step further to encourage him to think about abstracting a generalizable principle that would affect future experiences.

Little interactions like this have lifelong impact. Notice that Harold's father did not make fun of him, embarrass him, or call him clumsy or stupid for making a mistake. He recognized a teachable moment. We have many opportunities to coach students in such a way that helps them develop cognitive structures. As I thought about Harold's story, I realized how we often assume students are making connections, finding patterns, formulating rules, and abstracting principles, especially when things are so obvious to us. A student named Sean helped me become aware of this challenge.