

On Lessons for Our Daughter 3

Robert S. Griffin

www.robertsgriffin.com

My daughter--I'll call her Dee here--is six years old and lives with her mother on the west coast of the U.S. I live in Vermont and am hearing impaired and can't use a phone, so Dee's mother--Margaret here--and I communicate by email and an occasional instant message. Dee has just started the first grade at a public school. She attended a private kindergarten, so she's new to this school. Margaret and I have been working through what to do about lessons for Dee--dance, piano, drawing, that sort of thing. The last two thoughts on this site--On Lessons for Our Daughter 1 and 2--were about that. You could read those two thoughts before reading what's here to get some context, although I don't think you really need to.

We enrolled Dee in a Saturday morning class in Chinese a few weeks ago. Margaret observed the class Dee was assigned to and reviewed the resume of the instructor and wasn't impressed, so she requested a change in instructor, which was granted, and she reports that things are going well with Chinese both from her perspective and Dee's. Based on our experience over the past year in particular, Margaret and I have come to the conclusion that we really need to stay on the case with what is going on in lessons and classes. Dee can't do that for herself and really needs us to look out for her.

The most recent correspondence from Margaret has had to do with three things: the possibility of enrolling Dee in a nine-week supplementary math program for an hour on Tuesday afternoons the public school is offering for a nominal fee; a report the first grade teacher sent to Margaret about how Dee is doing initially in reading; and Margaret's request that I look over the school district's goals for students on its web site and let her know what I think about them. What follows, in the form of a hypothetical email message to Margaret, is compiled from parts of five emails I have sent her over the past several days on all of that. What I'm trying to get across in this thought is not what is going on with Dee, Margaret, and me personally, but rather a sense of how I see schooling and the responsibilities of parents in that regard.

So, the "email":

You are such a dear mom, thinking about registering Dee in this after-school math class and figuring out how you can handle it logistically. [Margaret works full time, and the class is scheduled from 3:00 to 4:00 on Tuesdays, which would mean that Dee would miss the bus to her after-school program and Margaret, who typically works until 5:00, would have to take off work early.]

This math program's is being used in a lot of schools. I checked out its web site. The basic idea is to show Dee how math is applicable in everyday life, and that it is fun to boot. With all the references to "communities," "teams," "groups," and "sharing," I pick up the usual-these-days egalitarianism and collectivism. It looks to me that this program is particularly aimed at "lessers"--low income, minorities, disadvantaged for one reason or another--the sort that, so it is assumed, you have to coax and accommodate to get them engaged with math. And, probably in this program, the belief in an entertaining, controlling and prodding approach for some kids spills over and is applied to all kids, regardless of their background. There is that pattern in education: what seems to work with the least becomes the strategy employed with everybody. In any case, I don't think Dee needs this kind of thing, at least as it is simplistically applied. For that matter, I don't think the lessers need it either, but that's a bigger issue than what we are talking about here.

The web site has a picture of a smiley guy in a kind of top hat charming the kids, everybody laughing, with the caption that they are playing "cool games." This looks to me like one of the attempts--misguided in my view--to make learning "practical" and "fun" and "relevant." The perspective I think we should be promoting with Dee is that math is legitimate, needed work, and you are empowered and feel good about yourself when you take on legitimate, needed work. Do the job in front of you, be responsible to it; take on the next challenge in your life. Don't demand that things be interesting and immediately relevant and fun--most often, good work is none of that. And don't wait around for someone to nudge you along; don't be dependent on that. Be responsible to the challenges in your world, take them on, do what needs to be done. Be purposeful, goal directed, and active. Move yourself forward to get important things accomplished, and be proud of both your efforts and what you achieve, even if it is minimal. Whatever you accomplish,

learn from it, build on it, go past it. Dee isn't going to be able to articulate all that as young as she is, but she can begin to operate out of a gross, organic, physically felt sense of that basic way of being in the world. And so important, she needs to see us living that way in our own lives to inspire and guide her.

Specifically, what are they going to do with a six-year-old in this math class around the applicability of math? Measuring ingredient proportions in baking cookies? Working with time? What? There is not much to go on in the information they provide in the notice the school sent around beyond some general promises. If you are thinking seriously of signing Dee up for this, I think you ought to make a phone call or whatever and ask them give you a couple of examples of that they are going to do with a first grader.

Dee will be getting math in the first grade curriculum this year, adding, subtracting, that kind of thing, getting a basic sense of numbers, learning to care about precision, attend to detail. It seems to me taking that on successfully is what is relevant to Dee right now and what we should be encouraging: doing her best with what her first grade teacher assigns her to do around math. That's the action for her, not playing around with how math can help you make change, anything like that, because it is a real challenge in Dee's world; her first grade teacher and the work she assigns is real; it's right in front of her, the next thing for her to take on the best she can. And if Dee does take it on the best she can, regardless of what she gets done, we ought to let her know we respect what she is doing. All a person can do--Dee, you and I, anybody--is the best we can. We can all be proud of ourselves when we do the best we can with something. Basically, I think the way to get happy is to do the best you can with what next needs to get done in your context, to be responsible in that way.

Over the next decade and more of her life, a developmental challenge for Dee is to become as capable as possible with abstractions. She is empowered to the extent that she learns to use her mind well, to think clearly and imaginatively, to get beyond dependence on things being grounded in concrete, so-called practical reality. I love the pretend games Dee makes up and plays now because they are divorced from tangible objects. They are ideas, hypothetical circumstances, abstractions. Learning to deal with the world in that way frees her from convention, orthodoxy, simple

inference, received notions of what is true and right and possible.

The people in power in schools, particularly government schools, tend not to understand or appreciate the life of the mind, nor do they themselves live it to any significant extent. With mathematics, to use that example, they don't understand how people really into math, so to speak, see and approach it. People really into math aren't inspired by the practicality of math, they are inspired by the, how to say it, world of numbers, the universe of numerical relationships. Math is a wonderful, intriguing, challenging game to them. It's a mode of expression, an art form, a creative opportunity; it's a venue for delight, a high. And out of all that, a byproduct of all that, comes some wonderful practical applications, both for themselves as people and for the world.

A fundamental problem with schooling--at all levels, really--is that too frequently people who don't really love ideas, who don't really turn on to learning new things, who don't really value the intellect, figuring things out, imagining, creating, who aren't themselves curious about how things work, are charged with teaching students to be those ways. They are trying to teach something they themselves aren't. Another way to say it, people that are rooted firmly on the ground are trying to teach people how to fly. Or, I'm afraid, better, they are trying to teach people to trudge along the same way they do: be practical, get it done, have a pleasant time, get along, don't work up a sweat, move on. I was getting at this when we were talking about setting up drawing lessons for Dee. My first concern is getting her with a true artist, bringing her into contact with someone who models that way of being, introducing her to someone who doesn't just *point* the way to becoming a true artist, but rather *is* the way.

We need to look at how groups of six and ten year olds process and make sense of things and create. Yes, developmental psychologists, Piaget for example, can offer important insights with regard to how a child's brain develops and the value in children rooting things in concrete, tangible, reality in their early years, through early adolescence. But I think educators have gone way too far with that. Educators tend to oversimplify and dichotomize: things are this or that, rather than this, that, and other things in a mix that depends on who we're talking about. They would do well to get beyond their education-course texts and look at how Nobel

prize-winning mathematicians look at their discipline and how they got to be the way they are. They could review how the architect Le Corbusier, and the dance choreographer Twyla Tharp, and the software entrepreneur Bill Gates, became who and what they are. (I bring these three examples up because I have looked into their current lives and upbringings recently.) They need to realize they can learn from the lives of successful adults as well as from conclusions based on observations of children. School people would do well to study the late physicist Richard Feynman's book *The Pleasure of Finding Things Out* before they teach anything at any age.

School professionals live in a self-contained thoughtworld. They reiterate and reinforce the same conventional wisdom, the same truisms, over and over and over again, decade after decade after decade. For example, there is the belief in the worth--the necessity, really--of students being engaged with things related to their experience, things that are relevant in that way. But are fairy tales, computer games, and science fiction relevant in that way? They are captivating to children because they *don't* connect to their everyday lives; they transport them to other times and places, that's their appeal.

The blurb for this math class makes a big thing out of students working in teams, as if teams are a no-question-about-it good thing, anywhere, anytime. Indeed, teams can at times contribute to a life well lived, but we have to keep in mind that people really invested in something, really connected to it, really passionate about it--cooking, creating a business, remodeling cars, you name it--are rarely team players. More, they are grounded, referenced, in themselves as unique individuals, and they *very selectively collaborate* with others who share their visions and contribute to their getting their lives done well. They don't willy-nilly lose themselves in the group, the collective, they don't defer to it, and they don't suffer mediocrities and incompetents readily, they get away from them.

The current educational establishment references itself in mass competence, not exemplary individual achievement. Keep watching these notices Dee's school sends you every week for mention of "Singapore math." Singapore has done well across-the-board on tests of mathematical achievement by stressing hands-on approaches, drilling kids in a number sense, that kind of thing. For sure, doing that will get

standardized test scores up. The issue is how many of these Singapore kids will become the computer whizzes and frontier-of-math trailblazers and enchanted-by-the-world-of-math people that change the world and find joy and meaning in the process.

Standardized tests, or teacher-made tests, any kind of tests, don't get at creativity, imagination, freshness of thought, intensity of engagement, and the joyous work/play characteristic of anyone truly connected to math or any other field. Read through the list of characteristics in this last sentence--that's Dee now, creative, imaginative, and so on. You can take major credit for it, and at least the private preschool and kindergarten didn't inhibit it. I don't want her to lose those qualities, I want her to be even more those ways, and that is far more important as far as I am concerned than learning basic math processes at six and seven.

A question we need to answer is whether this extra math class on top of what Dee is already doing, and will be doing, throws her education out of kilter, adds a tick of imbalance to it. There's such a thing as overbooking Dee. Her current roster of activities, both underway and planned, looks really good to me. She goes to the first grade, does all that involves, and there's the Saturday morning Chinese class, piano lessons will starting up in a month or two, and you've got some dance and music performances at the university lined up, and we're getting Dee some culturally enriching DVDs. Plus she is doing some drawing on her own, and she's reading her library books, and playing pretend games, and dancing in the living room, both ballet and modern, and playing with her friends. And she's cooking with you, and frankly, cooking with you is an infinitely bigger deal to me than this added math class.

And very important, this math class involves nine Tuesdays worth of logistical problems for you, and I'm worried about your job status and your health holding up with yet one more thing to arrange. As far as I'm concerned, if you get off work early on Tuesdays, you and Dee going to Ben & Jerry's for ice cream, or to the mall for that super frozen yogurt at that yogurt store, or to Target where Dee can ride in the special shopping cart she likes and help you pick out things to buy, looks better to me than a math class on top of all the other things Dee is and will be doing.

I think generally we want to stay clear of programs or teachers that use words like "hands-on," "relevant," "fun,"

"cool," "applied," practical applications," "enjoy," and "exciting." Let's avoid teachers that try to be a friend, entertainer, or trickster, or try to get intimate, or are gimmicky with a lot of "creative activities that get children involved." Teachers playing pied piper leading a flock of kids around and calling attention to themselves and making themselves look good; self-conscious, self-aggrandizing teaching--no thank you. Just get Dee studying math--no nonsense, mature, paper and pencil, get to it, go to work, get it done, and we acknowledge both the effort and the outcome, and, it is hoped, so does the teacher.

I notice the school is offering a course for parents on brain functioning. The most important thing for Dee's brain development is good nutrition. That and being pushed to use her mind, engage the world abstractly, figure things out, solve problems, deal with dissonance, imagine, think conceptually, create, plan, all of which she does now around the house, I just hope the school pushes her in that direction. That basic process continues all through life. Be very skeptical about anything the school may contend about multiple intelligences, learning styles, left-right brain distinctions, or cognitive development. People in the hard sciences report serious reservations about all of that. Not to say the school people don't believe those notions, they do, most of them, but the real functions of this kind of talk are to 1) support the school establishment's passion for categorization schemes, typologies--they can't get enough those, makes them feel on top of the action; 2) bolster their egalitarianism--we're all OK, and just as we are, nobody's better than anybody else; 3) justify doing dinky little stuff in the name of education, which they love to do, because it is so student-centered and student responsive, which is what separates them from the unenlightened; and 4) make the day go better--it puts the spotlight on teachers and their creativity, kids don't give them trouble, and it's 3:00 o'clock before they know it.

Basically, Dee should be acting on the world rather staying passive and reactive. Television, I believe, runs counter to what we want to see happen with her. Reading in great. Creating art. Fantasizing, pretending. Writing her thoughts and ideas. Verbal exchange, taking you and others into account, negotiating, taking a stand and backing it up. Having to deal with you as bright and strong as you are is good for Dee's brain development. Being careful not to overwhelm her, stay strong with her, it will stretch her mind.

Switching topics, I reviewed the scores on Dee's reading-related skills the school sent you, and I went through the link to the site that included a description of the goals for the school district. Four "p" words came to mind: pretentious, presumptuous, pseudo-sophisticated, and picky. We're talking about a six-year-old here learning to read and write a little bit and getting some beginning capability with numbers. What's the gigantic to-do? All these lists and all this jargon strike me as an attempt to make Dee's schooling seem oh-so-complicated, in the league with liver transplants. It's an attempt by people doing something home-schooling parents with no training are doing very nicely make themselves look cutting edge and better than you are.

The district material talked about how they are going to get Dee to have a global and local perspective (which evidently is preferable to a state or national perspective for some reason). What business is it of theirs what Dee's perspective is? Private schools, dependent on tuition, have to respect parents and defer to them. Government schools, public schools, with their captive audience, don't feel such restraints, plus they believe they have a mandate to reshape both children and society in a particular favored direction. I have a major concern about the way government schools have been politicized to the left all the way through, including universities. If you are interested, you might read a long recent writing for my web site called "How University Academics Think." University academics shape the hearts and minds of future teachers during a time in their lives, their college years, when they are particularly suggestible, gullible.

Reading through the statement of all the things they are going to impose on Dee and get into with her, I asked myself: are there any--I'm serious, *any*--limits to what these government employees consider themselves mandated to control? Do they believe they have any--*any*--responsibility to check with parents about what to do with their child? I came away with the strong impression that "parent involvement" and "parent support" is our deference to government agents dictating our child's education. This material surfaced for me the very basic question of whose child Dee is, ours or the state's?

I worry that how Dee does with reading and math and the rest of the school subjects is going to be made into a far bigger concern than it ought to be in her life, and that that will be detrimental to more important areas of development

related to how she views herself and engages life. I worry about Dee being "problematized": that school-related matters will be over-scrutinized and broken into little pieces, and that somewhere in all of that she will be found lacking, and that that will get through to her and she will come to define herself in those terms, at least some extent, perhaps even to a significant extent--and more, that we will come to define her in those terms. And that the pressure will build on Dee, and other things in her life will seem less important, and she will start focusing too much on these particular school issues, and all of this will bring her down a peg or two or three. Metaphorically, Dee will become a horse broken to the saddle.

Let's keep this school business in perspective. Growing up well is about far more important things than being at the benchmarks in first grade reading and math, as that school report put it. Let's not simply mirror school workers' preoccupations: because something seems like a huge make-or-break matter to them doesn't mean that 1) it really is that in the life of a child, and 2) that Dee, you, and I have to go along with that perspective. We need to keep the larger perspective in mind and think for ourselves. My feeling around grades and reports is that we should basically ignore them--or at least that is always an option for us. The school personnel can write their 1's, 2's, 3's and 4's and say what they want with reference to whatever they want, and we can respond, so what? As long as Dee is working hard and doing her best, and she has always done that, it is just who she is, why do we have to care what the school says? Dee is going to learn this stuff they are talking about, this year, next year, sometime. Where we have to get on the case is if they bring down how she feels about herself and life, if they, to any extent, flatten and diminish her. That is not going to go on.

Dee is happy, secure, vibrant, and engaged with life, and we want to keep her that way. I never had the sense that her previous private school messed with her self-value or belief in herself. I always had the sense that it respected her dignity and autonomy, and recognized that we, not they, were her parents. I'm picking up the public school has much more of a proprietary posture toward its forced-to-be-there clientele, and to the degree it does I take issue with it.

I like the meeting you have set up with Dee's teacher to get straight about what these grades she sent out mean and where she plans on taking things with Dee. After you get your factual questions answered, I suggest you get it across to her

that you don't want Dee's confidence and zest for life diminished. However you say it, let the teacher know that she doesn't own Dee, and that she is to respect Dee's dignity and integrity as a human being. Dee is not her sled dog. If Dee doesn't want to do something the class is doing, let her work quietly on her own over on the side. Dee's right to say yes and no should never be abridged.

How about letting the teacher know that I'm coming in to visit in two weeks and would like to observe the class and meet her along with you. Don't worry, I'll be civil and diplomatic. My first commitment is Dee's welfare. She has to go back to that school every day, I understand that.

Let me know what you think about any and all of this.