

On Lessons for Our Daughter 2
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As I write this--September 1st, 2010--today is my six-year-old daughter's first day in her new school, the first grade. She lives on the west coast with her mother and I'm in Vermont, and I'm waiting, somewhat anxiously, I'll admit, to hear how it went. Among other things, her mother and I are communicating from long range--email, I'm hearing impaired and bad on the phone--about what to do about lessons for Dee (not her real name, I'm protecting privacy)--in dance, piano, and so on. This thought is a continuation of the last thought on this site, "On Lessons for Our Daughter," and reading that one before reading the rest of this one would help put this writing in context.

In a message yesterday, Dee's mother--I'll call her Margaret--wrote that she thought it best to keep Dee out of formal dance classes this coming fall for a couple of reasons: to give Dee a chance to test out her interests in areas other than dance; and, the biggest reason, because of our concern that the class for six-year-olds at the ballet school she has been attending would be beneath her ability and interest level and not challenge her, and that her participation in the class might turn Dee off to dance and flatten her motivation generally. Dee is really excited about life, she has a positive attitude toward everything she does, and we want to keep that going.

Instead of formal dance instruction, Margaret wrote that she plans on getting more dance DVDs for Dee to watch (she has quite a collection now), taking her to see some upcoming dance performances at a nearby university, and encouraging her to continue to dance around the house and at friends' (which she does frequently and, in our estimation, superbly, and far beyond what would be expected of someone her age, just turned six).

In addition to the dance experiences, Margaret plans on speaking to a teacher at Dee's new school about giving Dee private drawing lessons. She is also making arrangements to set up some private swimming lessons for Dee (we had a bad experience with group lessons this past summer). And she is going to arrange for piano lessons in October or November--a new piano is scheduled to arrive any day.

All that sounded good to me, and about an hour ago I sent an email to Margaret that included:

The approach to dance sounds on the money to me--no classes, DVDs, the university performances, and dancing around the house. And the teacher and the drawing sounds good too, although I'm wondering if it wouldn't be better to start out with a talented high school or college student. It might be cheaper, frankly, and a young person may seem more inviting, less intimidating, to Dee just starting out with drawing. I'm also concerned that anybody teaching Dee is an artist her- or himself, and not just somebody who took an art class and can draw Mickey Mouse, if you know what I mean. I have been thinking of pencil drawings with Dee, a sharpened #2 pencil, sketches, impressions, caricatures. They fit my read of Dee: she's very observant, and it would give her a way to express what she sees, be a gratifying, and growth-producing, sensitizing, outlet for her. I think it would be good now for her to pencil her versions of quick sketches in books, like the Lennon drawings [Beatle John Lennon's book, *Real Love: Drawings for Sean*], in order to get a sense of the process. This is an activity you could do with her. I did that once with Dee when I was there a couple of weeks ago and she did very well with it.

The private swimming lessons sound good for you and Dee together. [Margaret swims, but only does the breast-stroke.] Learn the proper free-style technique for both arms and legs, and the backstroke. A couple, three sessions. And then you and Dee practice. You are absolutely beautiful in the water. Dee can model her swimming after yours.

Piano lessons starting in October or November sounds good; no rush with that all the new things going on in school. Perhaps between now and then you and Dee could see if there is anything you can pick up from the beginning piano book I sent out there. I was so touched to receive the thank-you note from Dee on that.

At the same time I was sending this last message, a new message arrived from Margaret. In it, after letting me know that the first day of school went really well for Dee--relief!--she wrote about receiving a notice that Dee's elementary school is offering a six-week

course in jump roping, and said that it looked to her like a good possibility for Dee. The problem is that it is offered on Wednesdays from 1:30 to 3:00, and Dee would miss the bus to go to the private after-school program that we have set up to accommodate Margaret's full-day work schedule (again, I'm living and working in Vermont, so Margaret is responsible for logistics with Dee). Margaret said she could see if one of the teachers wants to make some extra money by bringing Dee to the after-school program on Wednesdays. Margaret asked me what I thought of the jump rope class idea. This is the part of the email reply I just wrote having to do with the jump rope class:

It's dear of you to want to set up the jump rope class for Dee. She is remarkably coordinated, and I think she some day will be a super jump roper, and she's shown interest in it, jumping some with the rope you got for her. I think it would be a really good activity for her, fun, and contribute to her alignment, balance, cardiovascular health, and coordination. And since you are so good at it, jump roping could be a nice shared activity for you and Dee up the line; and I like to jump rope too, and that would be good for me to do with the both of you. So jump roping sounds good to me. The issue is how to come at it.

I looked over the jump rope class announcement you attached, and I didn't see anything about age. My guess is that this class is going to enroll primarily, or even exclusively, older children. But beyond that, I don't have the sense that Dee, at just turned six, is physically ready for this; or anyway, before she gets into the class, I think you need to check out her basic ability level before you sign up--in effect, audition her, like out in the driveway. See what shows up with that, but my experience with Dee is that she is too young to start formal lessons now. I'm worried that she will learn bad habits, like essentially muscling the rope around. She shouldn't start jump roping in any serious way until she's big enough and coordinated enough to do it like the boxers: hands low, all in the wrist, feet barely leaving the ground. If she can't do that, it's best to have her just be around you while you jump rope and see what you do, and perhaps do a bit of jumping herself here and there, very informally. If Dee ingrains bad habits with jump roping, with any physical activity, it'll be tough for her to unlearn them up the line.

A basic developmental need, or challenge, that Dee is starting to take on, not that she is consciously aware of it, and will confront, well, all of her life, but particularly between now and eleven or so, is resolving the issue of whether or not, in her own eyes, she is a masterful person. Some children come to see themselves as basically masterful, able to get the job done, whatever it is. It's not that they see themselves attaining perfect, or even top rate, results every time, but by and large, characteristically, they expect to achieve good results when they put their minds to something. That is how they view themselves. In contrast, some children reach the conclusion about themselves that, on the whole, they are on the inept side of the continuum, incapable, dependent on others to make things happen, bystanders while other people get the canoe untangled from the ropes, if you know what I mean. What's sobering to think about is, at least from what I've read and observed, how a child comes down on this personal masterfulness issue stays with them: it plays out in how they see themselves, and how they come at life, at sixteen and twenty-five and thirty-six. Decisions we make about ourselves young tend to persist into adulthood. That's what makes what goes on with Dee now, even as young as she is, so vitally important.

Having a record of success in what you take on--accomplishing good results by the standards that prevail in that particular setting--contributes to one's overall self-image as a masterful, fundamentally capable, person. It's not good for Dee's sense of herself if she is put into situations where she is unlikely to measure up well in that particular context. Dance was good for her [she took dance classes in a ballet school this past year] in that she was so much better at it than the other kids; and for all practical purposes, there was nothing the instructor could have thrown at her she wouldn't have been able to do well. Dee is capable of doing virtually anything asked of ballet dancers far older than she is. Dance was a good experience developmentally from a sense-of-personal-mastery perspective. Unless you are sure that Dee will be successful at this jump rope class--and from my time with her, including watching her jump rope--I don't think she's ready for this, she's not old enough, physically mature enough, the best thing to do, I believe, is keep her out of the class they are starting at school.

Plus, and this is major, logistically it doesn't work for you, negotiating with someone to take her to the after-school

program, all that. You have enough on your plate without taking that on. Your needs matter too.

So I would say bag the jump rope classes for now. Instead, a couple times a week you go out in the driveway, or to the park or lakefront, and jump rope--just some cardio and stress reduction for yourself. Dee likes to do things with you, and she can bring her jump rope and do whatever she does with it while you are jump roping. You are a great model for her because you jump rope with proper form, and she can watch you and create a mental picture of what jump roping looks like when it is done right. Informally, you could give her tips, or not, no big deal. For a few dollars, you could buy a jump rope DVD and learn some moves and teach them to Dee. Up the line, when she is nine or ten or twelve, some lessons.

What do you think?

I just sent this message off, and now I'll wait for Margaret's reply.