

On Lessons For Our Daughter 4
Robert S. Griffin
www.robertsgriffin.com

This is the fourth in a series of reports of conversations between my six-year-old daughter's mother and me about lessons and schooling for her. The first three are the last three thoughts on this site, and reading them in order will give you background for this thought as well as provide you with an overall picture of my perspective on these concerns.

Dee, as I'm calling her here, started the first grade in a new school, a public school, a couple of months ago at this writing. She attended a private kindergarten that both her mother and I were very pleased with. Dee and her mother live on the West Coast of the U.S. and I live in Vermont. I'm a professor at the University of Vermont. I see Dee about four times a year, and most of her mother and my communications about Dee are through email exchanges. I'm hearing impaired and very poor on the phone.

Last week, I traveled to the West Coast and spent the better part of a week with Dee and Margaret, as I will call her mother. I met Dee's teacher, Mrs. Bradley in this writing. What follows are excerpts from an email to Margaret following my return to Vermont. Also here are portions of an email to a student in an undergraduate university course entitled Sport in Society. She had emailed me with her thoughts in response to my concerns that Dee will participate in sport activities at the expense of other involvements and areas of her development.

First the email to Margaret:

After meeting Mrs. Bradley and hearing of her plans for Dee and working with Dee on her homework, I have a really good feeling about Mrs. Bradley as Dee's teacher. She is task oriented, no nonsense, kind, and focused on important things--reading, math, Dee learning to ease up on the socializing when there is work to be done--and I didn't pick up a PC indoctrination agenda. Dee seemed really comfortable in the classroom [Dee attended the first part of the meeting with Mrs. Bradley, which was held in the classroom] and in the school generally. My sense is that this schooling arrangement is going to work out fine. I really like the way you put it: Mrs. Bradley, this school, is providing a

service to us, no different, really, from that of a house cleaner. Dee is our child; they work for us.

Terrific that Dee likes the math club on Tuesdays. [A nine-week after-school program designed to make math seem relevant and inviting, and even fun. From reading its promotional literature, I was suspicious that it was "hands-on" trendy and a vehicle for promoting "submersion-in-the-herd" collectivism. But it appears that the way this class is being instructed at least, my fears were not realized.] You set that up, and you go through all the logistics, juggling work schedules, late night work for you, to get Dee to that class. So great of you to do that.

I was really impressed with how you worked with Dee on her math homework. Besides helping her learn math, you were teaching her to persist, hang in there when things aren't going well. You were teaching her that she doesn't always have to be happy or having a good time, to do the job no matter what; and that if she does the job no matter what she'll feel good about herself. And you were teaching her to do work with care, engage it, to give it her complete attention, to take work seriously, and stay with it until it meets her highest standards, to complete the job. All that is so important for Dee to learn. You get that across in what you say to her and what you encourage in her, and, so vitally important, in the example you set in how you live your own life.

I think you did the best thing with the Saturday class last Saturday. [Dee is enrolled in a Chinese language class from 9:00-11:00 on Saturdays. The Saturday I was there, Dee said she didn't want to go to the class and Margaret let her stay home. Dee slept in and watched "SpongeBob" on television snuggled up to her treasured stuffed frog, "Froggy."] It's a sensitive issue. On the one hand, you want Dee to go to the class, and on the other you don't want Chinese to have negative associations for her. So it seems to me it is a matter of making one call at a time given your read of the particular situation at that point in time.

On Dee and computers [Margaret and I discussed getting Dee a laptop]: What is good for Dee's brain development, and development generally, is for her to have to take on the world, so to speak: figure things out; solve problems; deal with dissonance, where things don't fit; negotiate with people; make plans; take action to get something done; create; imagine things that don't exist; think hypothetically, if this happens, that will happen. With that as

the criterion, reading is good, and math, and drawing, and arts experiences, dance, cooking--anything where she is compelled to make sense of the world and act on it to get what she wants. Those pretend games, "Appreciation Hotel" [a imaginary luxury hotel where Frances--Dee in character--manages the front desk and sells her art work on the side], and the rest, are good. It is especially good for Dee to have to deal with you. You are very bright and formidable, and it is good for her to have to cope with that. Verbal exchange, working through differences, engaging in shared activities with you, is good for her development.

My worry is that tapping computer keys is too passive and reactive, that it won't doesn't stretch Dee's mind, expand its capability. I know you worry about Dee being computer literate, but my feeling is that she can learn to navigate a computer in a flash at any point--a week and she'll get it. Getting up to speed with a computer is not the big deal it is often made out to be. Writing out things by hand now helps Dee's coordination, and the kinesthetic dimension of doing that is good for her. But with that said, you are really wise with Dee, and if you think she ought to be doing something with a computer now, or soon, I bet you're right. Perhaps it's best to leave it that I don't see any great need to be pushing computers on Dee now. Books, writing, drawing, speaking, tangible reality, the here-and-now, that's what I think Dee needs, and she's getting it. The library has a lot of level-one beginning books; they are labeled that way. Maybe go to the library and get some of those.

I am so happy with what Dee does around food. As far as I'm concerned, nutrition is of utmost importance in her life. Nutrition, and that she feels safe and loved and valued as the person she is, those are the things that really matter. Reading and math and piano lessons and all the rest count, but not as much, to me anyway, as those things. On Dee's and my trip to Safeway last Wednesday while you were at work, I let her get pretty much whatever she wanted, treated it as social occasion as well as a shopping trip. She picked out a big bag of candy, which I went along with figuring it could be for trick-or-treaters at the house [Halloween was coming up], and you saw the big bag of Doritos. In retrospect, not my finest hour letting her get that stuff, especially the Doritos, but as far as I could see, she never asked for the candy in the days after we brought it home, and she just munched on a couple of Doritos. She ate the good food at the Japanese and

Asian restaurants we went to but didn't even finish the hamburger at that restaurant we went to on your birthday. Dee made oatmeal-and-fruit for me for breakfast the morning you went to work early, and she helped you with the pancakes the Sunday I left to go back to Vermont. Talking to her, I was really impressed with the way she is thinking critically about the school lunches, planning how to deal with the food situation at school. Her posture toward food, so solid, is because of you, with me way out here in Vermont.

And then my response a few minutes ago to a student in my sport-in-society class:

Beth [not her real name]:

Thank you so much for taking the time to email and tell me about your involvement with skating when you were younger and how you handled that, as well as how your parents supported you in that. You are very sensitive to issues with me personally around sport involvement for Dee. I'm carrying over with her concerns that grow out of my own experience as a child. I had virtually no parental concern or direction, at least that I could detect, and got caught up with basketball and baseball to the exclusion of other activities that I've decided would have been more appropriate to the person I truly am and what I needed to become. I don't want that to happen to Dee.

Dee is very interested in movement and is very graceful and coordinated, and her mother and I feel responsibility to respond to that, we don't want to hold her back in this area. So far, it has been dance, which she loves. She watches DVDs of ballets--she has a large collection of them--and has taken classes at a ballet school, though not this year. We decided that the class for six-year-olds at the school isn't challenging enough for her, and that it would be best for her to join a ballet class next year that involves more disciplined work, including at the barre, when she is seven. Now she does ballet around the house. She has a Bob Fosse DVD she really likes, Broadway show dancing, and does that around the house too, and remarkably well and joyously. This week she and her mother are going to see a Martha Graham company modern dance performance, and she will be attending a Twyla Tharp modern dance performance a couple of weeks from now. I got

her a good jump rope and she loves to do that now. In just the past few weeks she has grown and developed to the point that she can do it with proper form. I think jump roping is good for alignment and balance, and it can be self-expressive and done to music. I like lifetime sports, golf, bowling (which is beautiful done right and a wonderful social outlet), skating (I particularly like old fashioned roller skating), and I like squash and racquetball (good exercise and a nice social outlet). I'm thinking of getting Dee a cut-down squash racquet now.

But as you are talked about with reference to yourself, I want movement or sport in whatever form it takes to be in balance with the whole of Dee's life: Schoolwork. Reading. She loves to draw, although she has not displayed the natural ability in that that she shows with physical movement. She is good with language and very imaginative, and I am hoping she will get involved with writing, perhaps write short stories and poetry at some point. She is somewhat shy at times, but still she has done some remarkable theater performances around the house, acting out stories in some of her children's books.

I want sport and movement to be what Dee does. I don't want it to become who she is. I don't want a game Dee plays to get so big as to become who she is to herself and others and become the referent she uses for deciding what to do and how to be. I'm troubled that organized sports so often make a claim on a youngsters' identity as a human being: they come to see themselves, and are seen by others, as student-athletes, or just athletes. As I mentioned to you in class, I was taken back by my discussions with young horseback riders this fall: it looked to me that for many of them the activity was getting in the way of involvement and development in other, important, areas. To me, sport to me is a wonderful part of a life well lived, but it is just that, a part of life. I have concern that children, so new to the world as they are, can be taken in by media images and pitches, professional coaches looking to fill out rosters, and schools hyping their sports programs, and lose sight of all the good things to be experienced in childhood and adolescence and all there is to work through in those years to set the stage for a happy and productive adulthood.

It's good to hear your optimism about all this, because you've been through it as a girl growing up. Dee's mother is far easier about this concern than I am, so I feel somewhat

alone with it. Thank you again for taking the time to write and helping me to think this through.