

Exploratory Learning

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Back to School



As our thoughts go with the children returning to classrooms for the new school year, it reminds us of the importance of learning and adapting. Our children should be learning and adapting at school. And we hope they will be learning many different ways to learn – not just by listening, but through exploration and experience. We know that toddlers and infants learn incredibly fast, and they do so through observation, experimentation, and imitating the behavior of those around them.

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Think of Hogwarts! Every person who read the Harry Potter books wanted to go to Hogwarts!

The cozy, fun, common room, the lack of adult supervision, the creatures, the adventures, and the CLASSES! Yes, the classes, where concepts are explained and then students use their wands to transfigure animals into water goblets, or brew potions with magical ingredients, or levitate, summon, and banish objects and make them fly around the classroom. At hogwarts, learning is experiential – the students explore the tasks and learn by trying, failing, and trying again. Some of our formal education is done this way, too. When I think back to my K-12 education, the most vivid memories of class work are of being taught how to brush my teeth in kindergarten with a toothbrush in hand, of looking at pond water under a microscope in middle school, and of baking lemon meringue pie in foods class, and dissecting the eyeball of a cow in high school. Obviously, some things are more easily taught through exploration than others, but giving students a safe place to explore their topics of study is essential.

Teachers are the other primary agent in the complex system of education. If we want our teachers to create a safe place for our children to learn and grow, we should probably start by giving them a safe space to work in! Teachers are currently threatened from many sides – by administrators, by state and national curriculums and testing requirements, and by parents and students themselves. These agents should be working cooperatively with the teachers to help students learn, but they often push teachers and schools toward competition or survival instead of cooperation and creativity. As social beings, the best way to motivate teachers is by treating them as the capable adaptive agents they are. This can be done by giving them opportunities to collaborate and explore their profession with other teachers, and honoring their ideas and suggestions by implementing them.

So with the start of this school year, think about learning in a new way, and encourage exploration and creative play in your community and school system. Because wouldn't it be awesome if our schools were a little bit more like Hogwarts!

-Kaity Dixon