



Playful Learning



THE PLAYFUL LEARNING GUIDE TO
RAISING LIFELONG LEARNERS

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WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF EDUCATION?

As parents and educators, we need to make sure that we are not only preparing our children for the next grade, test, or stage of development, but also that we are preparing them for life—a meaningful and fulfilling life. Though skills and knowledge are important, we have witnessed firsthand that they continue to evolve from one generation to another. In order to truly serve our children, we must look toward long-term goals and think about the future citizens that we are collectively raising. We need to see to it that our children leave our homes and our schools with habits of heart and mind that transcend time and act as a means for digging deeper, solving problems, relating with others, and fulfilling their potential.

- Mariah Bruehl, Founder of Playful Learning



What comes to mind when you hear the word education? Most people envision chalkboards, worksheets, flashcards, and textbooks. Now think about the times in your own childhood when you truly learned something.

In addition to the facts you memorized in school, you might also vividly remember parents or other key people in your life teaching you something through experience.

Perhaps you planted a garden together, which led to a deeper understanding of the life cycle of plants. Maybe you spent a day picking up litter and learned a little more about ecology and the earth's delicate ecosystem. These are the types of activities that make a permanent impression on young minds, teach valuable life lessons, and give children the desire to learn more and more every day.

Educating the mind without educating the heart is no education at all.

– Aristotle

Think Beyond the Classroom

From your own experience, you know that learning does not only occur in a classroom. The purpose of education is not just to relay facts to children or to create the best school curriculum for achieving the highest standardized test scores. The purpose of education goes well beyond good grades and diplomas.

The purpose of education is to nurture dispositions so that children can reach their fullest potential and be successful in an ever-changing world.





Of course, success is a subjective term, but in this context it includes living a fulfilling, productive, and meaningful life. Teachers cannot undertake this massive task alone. The educational system's role is to provide a curriculum that builds a strong knowledge base. Parents have the opportunity to supplement this curriculum by developing the habits of heart and mind that will ensure success in all areas of life.

Educate for the 21st Century

Whether you were born in 1950 or 1980, the world has changed dramatically in your lifetime. Many of the skills you learned as a child are now obsolete. You likely will never again use a slide rule or a card catalog. However, if you were lucky, your education (both in the classroom and at home) prepared you to be adaptable so you could learn new skills as the world changed around you.

Imagine how much more the world will change throughout your children's lives. Their future is unpredictable. Advances in technology have already changed the



expectations. This narrowly defined focus may cause us to miss out on other signs of growth and insight (and possibly brilliance) from our children. As our children get older, the checklist becomes even more standardized when they move into a one-size-fits-all educational paradigm.

The mind is not a vessel to be filled, but a fire to be kindled.

– Plutarch

Although understanding the stages of development is important, as well as presenting material in a way that's developmentally appropriate to children, perhaps we should pose some questions. Does that approach, on some level, impose a glass ceiling? Does that, in some way, make us feel that certain children of certain ages aren't capable of processing information in a variety of ways? Does it prevent us from noticing other important traits, characteristics, or insights?

This unintentional glass ceiling on children's potential can stifle their natural curiosity and the other dispositions that lead to becoming lifelong learners. Of course, every individual is different, but many children have the capacity (and often the desire) to process much more than we expect.

So how do we overcome this glass ceiling? Too often, traditional school curricula do not leave much room for exploration beyond the subject matter immediately at hand. What if your child discovers a particular interest in the insects she found while gathering leaves for a school project? When and where will she have the space and resources to explore this natural interest of hers? If this natural desire to learn is stifled or not nurtured, it can wither. The good news is that as parents, we can tune in and take advantage of these types of teachable moments with our children. We can do little things that can make a big difference.

Teaching should be such that what is offered is perceived as a valuable gift and not as hard duty. Never regard study as duty but as the enviable opportunity to learn to know the liberating influence of beauty in the realm of the spirit for your own personal joy and to the profit of the community to which your later work belongs.

– Albert Einstein



Unleash Your Child's Potential

Observant parents will realize that there is much more to a child than meets the eye. Children are inherently driven to actively investigate and make a positive impact on the world around them. When presented with stimulating and engaging experiences, children intuitively take full advantage of the opportunities to learn. It is up to parents and educators to allow children to tap into their

potential by nurturing these internal processes.

Maria Montessori once said:

The child is endowed with unknown powers, which can guide us to a radiant future. If what we really want is a new world, then education must take as its aim the development of these hidden possibilities.

Because the purpose of education is to help children reach their fullest potential, parents and educators must look beyond the surface and re-evaluate their expectations.

Loris Malaguzzi, founder of the schools in Reggio Emilia, Italy, agrees about the untapped potential of children:

All people, and I mean scholars, researchers, and teachers, who, in any place have set themselves to study children seriously, have ended up by discovering not so much the limits and weaknesses of children, but rather their surprising and extraordinary strengths and capabilities, linked with an inexhaustible need for expression and realization.

By realizing that children possess hidden potential that may exceed our expectations, we can make a more concerted effort to help them unleash it. However, this does not mean pressuring children to read by age 3 or exposing them to news or other information that's inappropriate. Raising the content of a third-grade curriculum to a fifth-grade level and claiming to have raised "standards" is not the solution. In fact, this can result in detrimental effects and prohibit learning.

For these reasons, parents must become astute observers of their children. With so many facts and skills being squeezed into the school day and more pressure to cover greater amounts of data, one of the best gifts that a parent can give their children is time to discover and pursue their personal passions. The more we simply observe and listen to our children, the better we will become at identifying and meeting their social, emotional, and cognitive needs.

What if Maria Montessori was right? What if children are capable both intellectually and emotionally of far more than we as a society ever allow them to reach or express? What does that mean for us as parents and educators? This e-book aims to further explore all of these important issues:

- Essential skills and characteristics that can help children thrive in a new age
- Techniques to create memorable learning experiences for your child
- Tips to help you nurture your child's lifelong desire to learn

By committing to raising lifelong learners, you provide the opportunity for your sons and daughters to achieve long-term success and happiness in all areas of their lives.

A GLIMPSE INTO THE FUTURE

One of the most joyful yet challenging aspects of parenthood is watching your child develop into a unique individual with free will. You hope that you have prepared your children with healthy habits and the ability to make good choices, but they will ultimately face adulthood on their own. The greatest gift you can give is the ability and desire to learn as they face new situations and challenges at every age.



When it comes to education, the steps you take today will inform how easy or difficult it will be for your children to integrate new information, systems, and cultural dynamics into their own lives. The more interested they are in engaging with the world around them, the easier it will be for them to learn and adapt as global dynamics inevitably change.

Employment Is Changing

Once upon a time, children were taught that they should study a specific discipline so that they could get a job at a good company where they would achieve financial security for the rest of their lives.

Younger generations take a different attitude about employment. Rather than feeling obliged to stay loyal to one particular company or career path, they feel more like free agents who can flexibly move from one job to the next. Part of this is due to a decrease in benefits, but another factor is the changing landscape of employment due to economic instability. An absence of job security has bred a different approach to employment.



Advances in technology have also significantly impacted mobility and flexibility in the workplace. Because many types of positions can now be filled from virtually anywhere in the world, more jobs are outsourced to other countries. What does this mean for our children? You can count on the fact that some of the jobs and skills that we educate for today will not be available when our children become adults.

Study without desire spoils the memory, and it retains nothing that it takes in.

– Leonardo da Vinci

Opportunities Are Changing

Nobody who went to school 20 years ago was specifically educated to become an IT professional. Now, entire schools are dedicated to this type of training. Predicting what technical skill sets will be required in the next 20 years is practically impossible, but it is safe to assume that they will be at least partially different from the ones taught today.

How do we educate for jobs that do not yet exist? In 1980, parents and teachers could not have predicted the advent of the Internet, so they taught children how to research in libraries.

While nobody is likely to argue that basic research skills should not be taught, how they are taught can significantly impact the way a child learns throughout life.

The Creativity Crisis



In the education world, the Creativity Crisis has been a hot topic for years. In the 1950s, E. Paul Torrance, an educational psychology professor, developed a series of tests to measure the creativity quotient, or CQ, of an individual. Interestingly, in a study that followed 400 individuals over more than 50 years, childhood CQ was discovered to be three times more important than childhood IQ in determining success (not to mention happiness).

Other studies also showed that much like IQ, average CQ increases with each generation. The main reasons cited for this phenomenon are a better education system and enriched learning environments in general.

The Creativity Crisis came about when a researcher at the College of William & Mary analyzed hundreds of thousands of Torrance scores over time. The results showed that CQ steadily increased along with IQ until 1990, when creativity scores of younger children in the U.S. started to drop. The reasons for this are unclear; some hypotheses include not enough emphasis on creativity in school curricula, the over-scheduling of children's free time, and more time spent watching television and playing video games.

Although the reasons for the Creativity Crisis are not yet known, the problem is arguably one of the most significant we face as a nation. Other countries have recognized this and are starting to emphasize creative development in school curricula. Meanwhile, American educators struggle with finding enough time for creative activities while teaching the required subject matter and preparing students for standardized tests. Many educators, including myself, would argue that creativity and a rigorous curriculum are not mutually exclusive, and I have witnessed teachers and schools who work tirelessly to provide this type of learning for their students. Yet as the trend leans more and more toward the standardization of education, it will be up to parents to nurture creativity and other important dispositions that lend themselves to lifelong learning.

ESSENTIAL SKILLS FOR A NEW AGE



Given the unpredictability of the future landscape, parents and teachers must help children develop *ways of being and thinking* that lead to lifelong learning. As the world changes around them, children who have developed the ability to quickly adapt and learn new information, new systems, and new ways of interacting with others are more likely to lead a fulfilling life in the 21st century and beyond.

What follows are some of my tried-and-true methods for engaging children and raising lifelong learners.

Nurture Dispositions

Though helping children build specific skills and knowledge is important, helping them develop certain dispositions, which shape their intellectual character, is equally important¹. Every child is unique, but some common characteristics can

and should be nurtured throughout childhood. Many of these dispositions will come naturally to children but need to be cultivated and protected (fiercely, at times) for them to thrive and blossom.

Nurturing the following dispositions in your children will help to give them character traits that will serve as a solid foundation for growth throughout their lives:

1. Creativity – We all know the critical role that creativity plays in living a meaningful life. No matter what your passion or chosen field of expertise is, being creative and thinking outside the box will make it fulfilling on a personal level and set your child apart on a global level. Creativity is the reason for some of the world's most important scientific inventions and societal advancements. The success of our nation and global economy depends on creativity and innovation, and parents and educators should actively nurture and preserve this disposition within our children.

Quick tip: Through my years of experience with children, I have found that free, unstructured time in an environment with inviting materials is the best way to nurture creativity. Children possess the innate desire to build, create, and express themselves. By providing unscheduled time, children preserve and strengthen their ability to make good decisions while spending time productively and creatively.

2. Curiosity – Almost every child goes through a phase when every other word spoken is *why?* This disposition comes naturally for young children because the world around them is completely new. They are inherently curious about almost everything. This is the time to harness that curiosity and give them the educational tools they can use to *find out why* for the rest of their lives. Lively curiosity drives the intrinsic motivation that we all hope to develop within our children.

Quick tip: Wondering aloud with your children is a great way to keep the spirit of curiosity alive. When you begin to seek answers together as a family, children internalize the notion that learning is a lifelong pursuit.

Curiosity can be triggered in regard to facts, hypotheses, ideas, inventions, cause and effect, and social situations—all offering great opportunities for shared moments and conversations with your children.

3. Discernment – In a world where information is coming at us from every direction and from multiple sources, children must learn to be discerning. Though it is important for children to be respectful, it is also beneficial for them to approach new information with an analytical eye. This flows naturally from curiosity because it requires children to ask *why?*, not only about the world around them, but also about their own internal experiences. As the modern world gets more and more crowded and noisy, success will come to those who can discern the signal from the noise and prioritize their pursuits. I have a hunch that the curators in our society will become highly valued—people who not only curate their own experience artfully, but also gracefully curate the experience of others.

Quick tip: Talking with children about the choices you make as a family teaches them about making decisions. Discussions about food choices, the movies you watch, or the apps that you use are good topics for modeling the disposition of being discerning. Make sure to include reasons for not choosing things as well. With discernment comes the development of an internal set of values and criteria that will act as a gauge for filtering information. The more you make your process explicit, the better able children are to begin forming their own.

4. Open-mindedness – Being open-minded to new ideas and ways of being is essential as we move into the new global era. As the Internet puts the world at our fingertips, we will need to communicate, work, collaborate, and connect with people all over the world. With each culture comes a different set of values, customs, and ideas. It is an exciting time to be coming of age! Yet, being set in one's ways is no longer an option in today's world, where keeping pace means constantly adopting new ideas and systems.

Quick tip: You can encourage open-mindedness in your child by creating a weekly or monthly habit of trying something new. Let them

make the decision about what to try, whether it is a new activity, new food, or new book. This is also a disposition that is easy to model with your own behavior.

5. Perspective taking – Just as open-mindedness is important, being able to look at a variety of situations through multiple perspectives is essential. We have learned throughout our lives that there is always more to things than meets the eye. The ability to “stand in another person’s shoes” will help children avoid coming to superficial conclusions in what could be important or serious situations. So much can be gained by taking the time to explore and learn from people with different world views. Not only does it make life richer, but it also allows us to make fully informed decisions and be thoughtful in our actions.

Quick tip: Encourage children to take different perspectives in fun ways through imagining life as a pet, or by discussing the different points of view of the characters in a story book. You can also help develop this disposition by asking children how they think another person feels about a particular situation. These types of conversations become ever important as children grow older and find themselves in the midst of new and complex social interactions.

6. Persistence – If your children are like most humans, they will not always achieve success on the first (or even second) try. The desire to try again, do more research, problem-solve, and come up with new and different strategies rather than give up or become distracted is a huge determining factor not only in success, but also in building a positive self-image. When learning is a joyful pursuit and mistakes are seen as an important part of the process, children will learn to maintain their focus and spirits through the ups and downs they encounter. Yet too often when they start school, getting the answer “wrong” is a humiliating endgame before they move on to the next lesson. Forty-five-minute periods filled with more information than can be reasonably processed make it difficult for children to learn the power of perseverance. Fortunately, we can help at home.

Quick tip: Persistence is encouraged when we value process over product. Putting less emphasis on finishing quickly and always getting things “right,” while putting more emphasis on reflecting on their work, learning from mistakes, finding ways to add to it, and making it better sends the important message to children that learning and working is a rewarding journey.

7. Understanding – The disposition to actively seek understanding entails having the ability and the drive to collect information, make connections, develop theories, and test ideas. Memorization of facts certainly offers value in the real world. However, the ability to transfer knowledge to new situations will better serve your children for years to come. One of the most important skills for developing lifelong learners is the ability to apply knowledge to different contexts.

Quick tip: Offering children opportunities to explore topics of interest in a variety of contexts will encourage deeper understanding. Modeling how one experience may relate to another will encourage them to begin making connections on their own. We can also help our children develop understanding by talking with them about not only their opinions and beliefs, but also by digging deeper and asking them about how they developed their ideas and the reasons behind them.

8. Intuition – Developing a strong sense of intuition is a multifaceted process. At the foundation of one’s intuition is a strong moral compass and sense of self-respect. Our society consistently encourages us to turn to others for answers, whether from experts, doctors, government leaders, or teachers. Yet, many of our most brilliant thinkers, writers, inventors, and entrepreneurs made a difference because they followed their intuition and strayed from the norm. As our children get older, spend less time with us, and encounter more complex social situations, we hope that they will follow their internal voice and make healthy decisions.

Quick tip: Trusting one’s instinct is a disposition that can be nurtured at a young age. Model and be explicit about the times in your life when you

struggle with certain decisions, and share your internal process with your children. Introduce terms such as, “go with your gut,” “listen to your inner voice,” or “trust your instinct,” and use them during discussions about circumstances that arise. Refer back to these terms when you help your children make decisions in their lives and reflect on challenging situations.

¹ Ritchard, Ron. (2002). *Intellectual Character: What It Is, Why It Matters, and How To Get It*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.



BEYOND MEMORIZATION: MAKE LEARNING MEMORABLE



The aesthetics of a child's experience are just as important as the content. If you want to create memorable experiences, engage as many senses as possible. What a child sees, hears, touches, smells, and even tastes will create a long-lasting impression.

Think about some of your most memorable experiences in school and how many of your senses were engaged. I'll never forget my personal experience in kindergarten when we read the book *Stone Soup* and then went outside and dug for rocks so that we could cook our own "stone soup." So many of my senses were engaged: We were moving, we were digging, we were cooking, we were chopping, we were smelling, we were tasting, and we were hearing a great story.

This experience serves as a great reminder for me to think about the role that every material I present to my children plays in their development. What are they picking up? What are they feeling? What are they touching? What are they seeing?

What are they hearing? How are they moving? All of these details come together to create memorable moments. When learning is memorable, children will reflect, process, discuss, and build upon the concepts and skills that we hold valuable.

Every parent has felt the joy of watching a child experience something for the first time. Whether it is the sour face children make after putting a lemon wedge in their mouths or the look of awe and wonder at the first sight of snow, a first experience is a time when curiosity is at its peak. Though there are only a limited number of first-time experiences in any child's life, you can tap into this same feeling of curiosity and make learning memorable by educating the senses.

Create It and They Will Come: The Role of the Environment



Throughout my years as an educator, I became profoundly aware of the powerful role that the environment plays in the development and behavior of children.

Here is another wonderful quote from Maria Montessori:

And so we discovered that education is not something that the teacher does, but it is a natural process, which develops spontaneously in the human being. It is not acquired by listening to words but by virtue of experiences in which the child acts on his or her environment.

The goal is to create an environment that invites the children to act; an environment that triggers their intrinsic motivation—the desire to act rather than being acted upon.

Ultimately, we must nurture independence, so we want to make sure that children can both easily access and put away their own supplies. When children are able to independently choose, take out, and set up an activity, and then put it away, it empowers them and creates a desire that makes them want to engage again and again.

I love the saying "Create it and they will come." By creating simple, thoughtful spaces, we can inspire children to act in new ways, explore new directions, and engage in new activities.

The Playful Learning Framework

After years of experience teaching in the classroom and working with my own children at home, I discovered a framework that's effective in honoring child-led explorations and learning experiences. Keep the components of this framework in mind as you engage in learning with your children.

Create Invitations



By leaving out a leaf press and leaf guides, our daughters were inspired to go outside and collect leaves.

An invitation is something intriguing that can be set up and left out in the environment for children to discover. The presentation of simple invitations can inspire children to engage in meaningful activities.

What I love about creating these invitations is that they are easy (you don't have to tackle that scary closet) and you can use materials and activities already on hand. Think of these

invitations as a way to *highlight* your child's underused supplies, games, or toys.

Amazingly, putting together a few thoughtfully selected, theme-based items on/in a tray, bin, or basket can reawaken a child's interest. And here is the best part: All you have to do is leave them out for your child to discover. You don't have to say a thing, and before you know it your child will be enthusiastically exploring the materials you provided.

Engage in Open-Ended Explorations



When the girls brought in their findings, they made designs and came up with ideas on how the leaves could be sorted and classified.

Providing time for open-ended explorations of materials and concepts is a critical component of the learning process. Whether the topic is trees, addition, or nonfiction writing, children must be able to explore, investigate, and make hypotheses on their own terms, without any preconceived agenda. Your role during this phase is to help them notice things, to encourage them to explore and ask questions, and to listen and take note of what what's coming up for them. This information will help you provide appropriate provocations and extensions later in the experience.

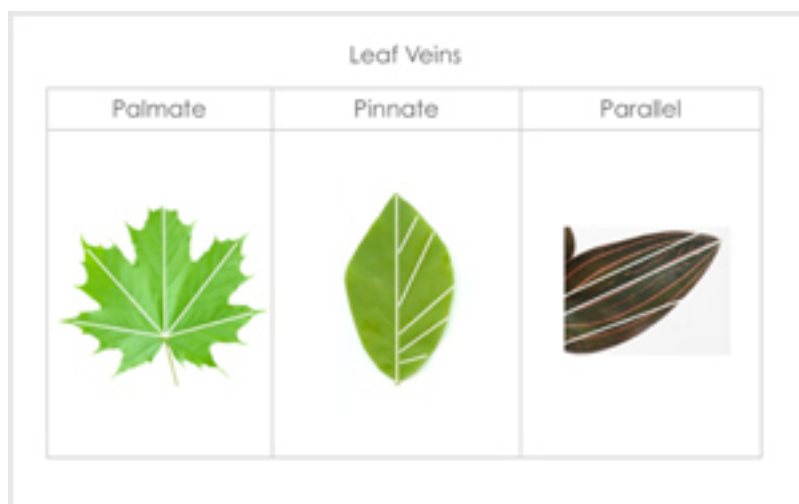
Introduce Provocations



Next, I introduced a simple leaf guide to take their observations to the next level.

Once your children have done some open-ended exploring, give them a provocation, which can be a prompt, a guided question, or an introduction to a new material that gives them some food for thought or that takes their thinking, behavior, or experience to the next level.

Extend the Experience



By offering a leaf guide, the girls continued their investigation and inspired a leaf margin scavenger hunt.

or technology? We live in a multidimensional, multidisciplinary world—our teaching and learning needs to reflect this exciting reality.

When your children have completed their work or explorations that resulted from the provocation, consider whether extension activities would be appropriate. You can judge this next step by paying attention to your child's enthusiasm about the topic. Think of ways to tie in multiple disciplines. Can the topic at hand be extended through art, reading, writing, science, music,

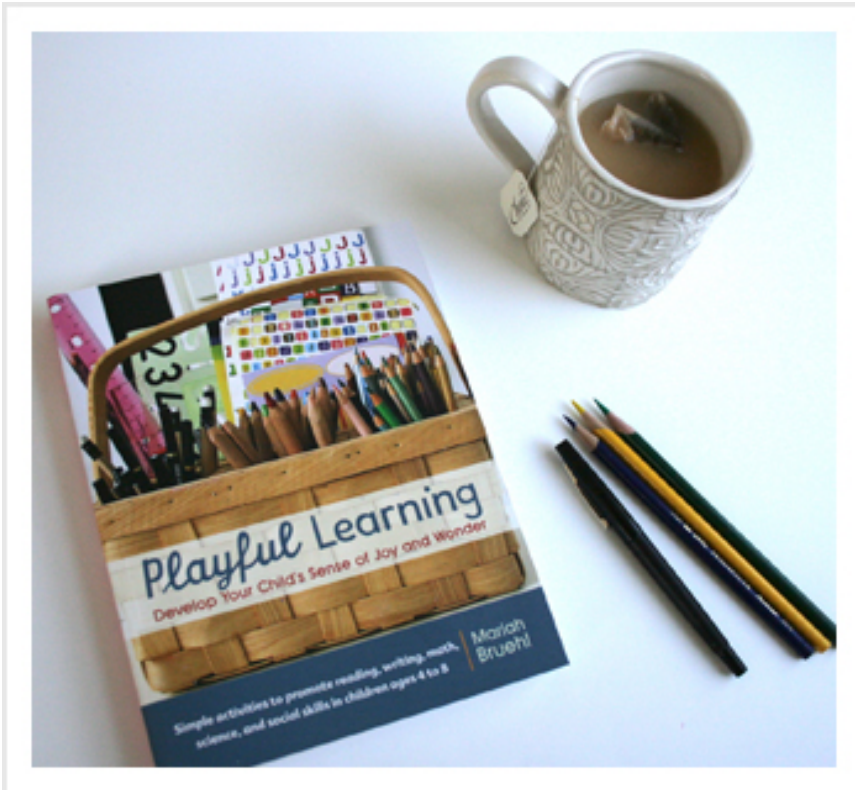
Sometimes schools, because they have so little time, focus on overly simplified lessons. If trees, leaves, butterflies, or insects are part of the curriculum, they will most likely be taught through lessons that barely skim the topic. Good schools find ways to go deeper into the topics they teach by using a project-based approach. Ideally, children should be exposed to multiple experiences on the same topic so that they can transfer what they have learned from one experience to a different situation. Within that transfer of knowledge and skills from one experience to the next, true understanding develops.

Children must be taught how to think, not what to think.
– Margaret Mead



CLOSING THOUGHTS FOR RAISING LIFELONG LEARNERS

Raising lifelong learners requires more than just a traditional education. Memorizing facts and learning how to prepare for exams are indeed important skills, but they do not lend themselves to educating the whole person. Nurturing dispositions and developing habits of heart and mind will give your children the mental and emotional tools that will allow them to enjoy learning throughout their lives. As the world changes around them, your children will be better prepared to



adapt intellectually, socially, and emotionally.

Implementing the Playful Learning framework at home is rewarding for the whole family. You will get to spend more valuable time with your children, and they will form strong memories not just of what they learned, but also of the supportive family dynamic that they experienced throughout the learning process.

When you supplement

traditional education with developing habits of heart and mind and making learning memorable, you give your children a greater opportunity to succeed.

The [Playful Learning Academy](#) is committed to helping parents nurture lifelong learners. Additionally, the book [Playful Learning: Develop Your Child's Sense of Joy and Wonder](#) is a good starting point for parents who want to learn how to create a playful learning spaces in your home. This useful resource also provides more than 50 activities you can do with your children, along with suggestions for the materials you will need and printable pages to have on hand for when your child is ready to do the activity.

In addition to the book, our online courses offer opportunities for parents and children to easily engage in meaningful learning experiences together while connecting with other families all over the world. We provide amazing little eCourses for life's big lessons.

The fact that you have downloaded *Playful Learning Guide to Raising Lifelong Learners* means that you are joining a community of parents and educators who are committed to playing a critical role in the lives of our children. Together, we can ensure that the citizens of tomorrow possess the needed dispositions, knowledge, and skills to create a better world. I look forward to continuing this conversation over at the Playful Learning blog and within each of our eCourses. I hope that you stay tuned as we grow our Playful Learning Ecademy's offerings as well as our global community of like-minded parents and educators.



ABOUT MARIAH BRUEHL

Mariah Bruehl is a parent, an educator, an entrepreneur, and author of the book *Playful Learning: Develop Your Child's Sense of Joy and Wonder* (Shambhala Publications, 2011). With more than 20 years of experience working in the field of education and a master of science degree in education from Bank Street College, she has worked as both a teacher and director at highly respected schools.

In 2008, Mariah brought her expertise online, creating the Parents' Choice Gold Medal award-winning website Playful Learning. In 2011, she launched the Playful Learning Ecademy, which takes virtual-learning experiences to a new level by incorporating the best practices in education with engaging hands-on lessons, bringing parents and children together from all over the world into a unique, creative community environment. The Playful Learning Ecademy provides parents with the support and guidance needed for supplementing and enriching their children's education regardless of age, interest, or skill level.



Playful Learning's tried-and-true lessons and recommendations have produced remarkable results for parents, making it a consistent go-to parenting resource. For additional information, please visit our website at www.playfullearning.net.

Do not train a child to learn by force or harshness; but direct them to it by what amuses their minds, so that you may be better able to discover with accuracy the peculiar bent of the genius of each.

- Plato