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| **Curiosity: The Fuel of Development** | [http://teacher.scholastic.com/professional/bruceperry/images/drbruceperry.gif](http://teacher.scholastic.com/professional/bruceperry/index.htm) |

[**By Bruce Duncan Perry, M.D., Ph.D.**](http://teacher.scholastic.com/professional/bruceperry/curiosity.htm#bio)

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| **"Whas’at? Whas’at?" —A question from a 3-year-old boy asked of his mother over and over as they walked through the zoo.**  Children are such curious creatures. They explore, question, and wonder, and by doing so, learn. From the moment of birth, likely even before, humans are drawn to new things. When we are curious about something new, we want to explore it. And while exploring we discover. By turning the light switch on and off over and over again, the toddler is learning about cause and effect. By pouring water into a dozen different-shaped containers and on the floor and over clothes, the 4-year-old is learning pre-concepts of mass and volume. A child discovers the sweetness of chocolate, the bitterness of lemon, the heat of the radiator, and the cold of ice.  **The Cycle of Learning** If a child stays curious, he will continue to explore and discover. The 5-year-old finds tadpoles in a tiny pool of mud on the playground. This discovery gives him pleasure. When he experiences the joy of discovery, he will want to repeat his exploration of the pond. [Pleasure leads to repetition.] Each day, he and his classmates return. The tadpoles grow legs. [Repetition leads to mastery.] The children learn that tadpoles become frogs — a concrete example of a complex biological process. Mastery — in this case, understanding that tadpoles become frogs — leads to confidence. Confidence increases a willingness to act on curiosity — to explore, discover, and learn. "Can we bring tadpoles into the class? How do other baby animals grow up? Why don’t dog babies lose their tails?" This positive cycle of learning is fueled by curiosity and the pleasure that comes from discovery and mastery.  **Shared Discovery** What is most pleasurable about discovery and mastery is sharing it with someone else. ("Teacher, come look! Tadpoles!") We are social creatures. The most positive reinforcement — the greatest reward and the greatest pleasure — comes from the adoring and admiring gaze, comments and support from someone we love and respect. The teacher smiles, claps, and comments, " You are great. Look at all these tadpoles! You are our science expert!" This rewarding approval causes a surge of pleasure and pride that can sustain the child through new challenges and frustrations. Approval can generalize and help build confidence and self-esteem. So later in the day, when this boy is struggling with the introduction of simple math concepts, rather than eroding his esteem by thinking, "I’m stupid, I don’t understand," he can think, "I don’t get this, but I’m the one who knows about tadpoles."  **Constrained Curiosity** For too many children, curiosity fades. Curiosity dimmed is a future denied. Our potential — emotional, social, and cognitive — is expressed through the quantity and quality of our experiences. And the less-curious child will make fewer new friends, join fewer social groups, read fewer books, and take fewer hikes. The less-curious child is harder to teach because he is harder to inspire, enthuse, and motivate.  There are three common ways adults constrain or even crush the enthusiastic exploration of the curious child: 1) fear, 2) disapproval and 3) absence.  **Fear:** Fear kills curiosity. When the child's world is chaotic or when he is afraid, he will not like novelty. He will seek the familiar, staying in his comfort zone, unwilling to leave and explore new things. Children impacted by war, natural disasters, family distress, or violence all have their curiosity crushed.  **Disapproval:** "Don’t touch. Don’t climb. Don’t yell. Don’t take that apart. Don’t get dirty. Don’t. Don’t. Don’t." Children sense and respond to our fears, biases, and attitudes. If we convey a sense of disgust at the mud on their shoes and the slime on their hands, their discovery of tadpoles will be diminished.  **Absence:** The presence of a caring, invested adult provides two things essential for optimal exploration: 1) a sense of safety from which to set out to discover new things and 2) the capacity to share the discovery and, thereby, get the pleasure and reinforcement from that discovery.   |  |  | | --- | --- | | |  | | --- | | **Teacher Tips**   * Recognize individual differences in children’s styles of curiosity. Some want to explore with only their minds, others in more physical ways — touching, smelling, tasting, and climbing. To some degree these differences are related to temperamental differences in the exploratory drive. Some children are more timid; others are more comfortable with novelty and physical exploration. Yet even the timid child will be very curious; he may require more encouragement and reinforcement to leave safe and familiar situations. * Try to redefine "failure." In truth, curiosity often leads to more mess than mastery, but it is how we handle the mess that helps encourage further exploration, and thereby, development. Redefine failure. When the 5-year-old is learning to jump rope and he trips a thousand times, this is not a thousand failures — it is determination. * Use your attention and approval to reinforce the exploring child. When exploration in the classroom is disruptive or inappropriate, contain it by teaching the child when and where to do that kind of exploration: "Tommy, lets play with water outside." | |   If we let them, children can reintroduce us to the world. When we truly allow a child to share his discoveries with us, we experience the joys of rediscovery — and in doing so, learn ourselves.   |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  | | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | | |  |  |  | | --- | --- | --- | | **Curiosity** | results in | **Exploration** | | **Exploration** | results in | **Discovery** | | **Discovery** | results in | **Pleasure** | | **Pleasure** | results in | **Repetition** | | **Repetition** | results in | **Mastery** | | **Mastery** | results in | **New Skills** | | **New Skills** | results in | **Confidence** | | **Confidence** | results in | **Self esteem** | | **Self esteem** | results in | **Sense of Security** | | **Security** | results in | **More Exploration** | | |
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| This article originally appeared in [Early Childhood Today magazine.](http://teacher.scholastic.com/products/ect/) |  |
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| **SIDEBAR:**  Dr. Bruce D. Perry, M.D., Ph.D., is an internationally recognized authority on brain development and children in crisis. Dr. Perry leads the ChildTrauma Academy, a pioneering center providing service, research and training in the area of child maltreatment ([www.ChildTrauma.org](http://www.childtrauma.org/)). In addition he is the Medical Director for Provincial Programs in Children's Mental Health for Alberta, Canada. Dr. Perry served as consultant on many high-profile incidents involving traumatized children, including the Columbine High School shootings in Littleton, Colorado; the Oklahoma City Bombing; and the Branch Davidian siege. His clinical research and practice focuses on traumatized children-examining the long-term effects of trauma in children, adolescents and adults. Dr. Perry's work has been instrumental in describing how traumatic events in childhood change the biology of the brain. The author of more than 200 journal articles, book chapters, and scientific proceedings and is the recipient of a variety of professional awards. |  |

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