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Those Magic Moments

Childhood is when kids pick up, learn, and absorb the most, so it is the best time to enrich your child physically, mentally, emotionally, socially, and spiritually. Irene Toh finds ways to do so.

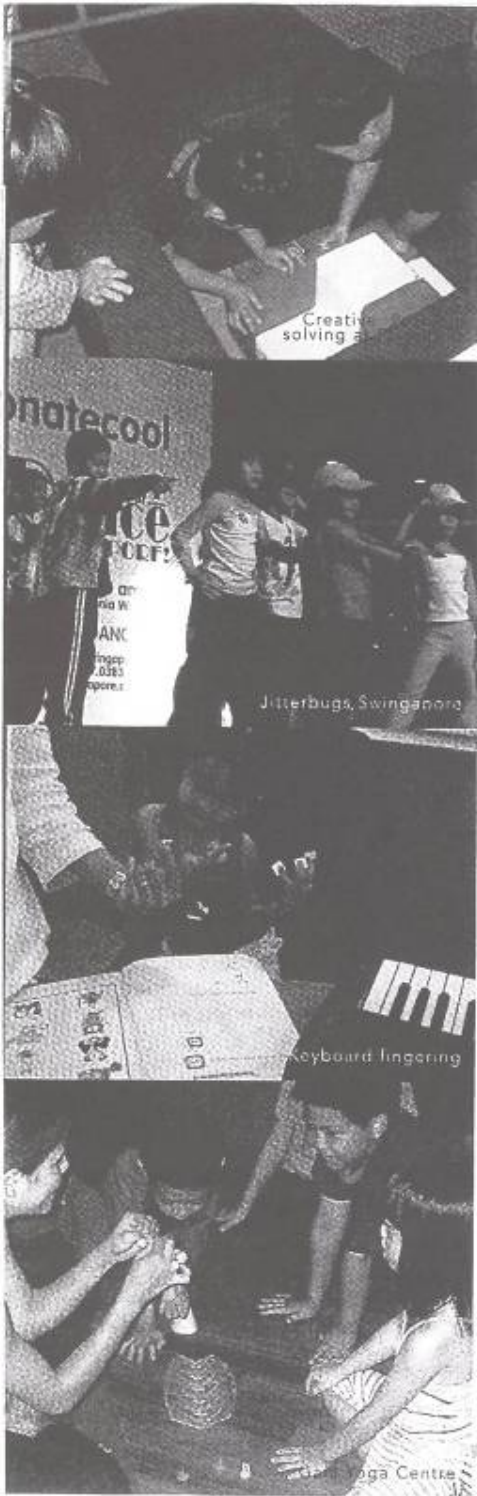


IN LEWIS CARROLL'S CLASSIC STORY, *Alice In Wonderland*, Alice decides to pursue the White Rabbit down a hole at the foot of a tree and finds herself in a very curious adventure indeed – one moment she shrinks, and another, she grows enormously! Your child's world is not unlike Alice's, full of transforming experiences. Not only does your child's body grow, so does his or her mind and spirit, and in a phenomenal way too. So very metaphorically, these are their magic years and as a parent, you hold the wand, providing nurture and opportunities for your child to grow physically, mentally, emotionally, psychologically and spiritually.

But will this brilliant tale of good intentions get sidetracked by the pressure of putting your child on the academic track? Your child has to know his reading and writing, in two languages, no less, by the time he or she starts primary one. So a structured curriculum already starts at preschool, doesn't it? It's all a matter of mindset, really.

As child psychologist Dr Clare Ong from The Pediatric Clinic at Thomson Medical Centre warns, "It is emotionally draining if the focus is only on academic excellence. It can create anger and frustration and early burnout. Anxiety and depression can set in if the child feels trapped," she says. Luckily, there's a way out of this – learning through fun and play. "Academic learning can be mainly rote learning. Younger children especially need to learn through fun. This makes it meaningful and gives better retention," she advises.

In the spirit of nurturing the magic years of learning, and transforming, we look at the ways in which you can enrich your child – providing



stimuli for your child's mental, physical, emotional, psychological and spiritual development. After all, research has shown that it is during these early years that 75 per cent of brain growth is completed.

The earlier the brain cells or neurons are stimulated, the more synapses (connection of one neuron to another) are created. It is these early neuron synapses that make our child remember, learn, talk, think, count and create better. We join hands with parents who provide meaningful early childhood experiences – frequent talking, reading, playing – that are critical to the emotional and intellectual development of our child. How can we wield the wand that will unleash our child's potential?

MENTAL DEVELOPMENT

Play-centred Learning

Today's parents are no strangers to the concept of learning through play. In fact, they buy into programmes that stimulate their child's learning in fun ways. It makes that trip to class on a weekend worth the trouble.

Isaac Shalin, Director of PlayWorkz, a centre that uses play as a learning method, says of their Positive Mindset Programme, "Our age-appropriate activities focus on different levels of social competence and interpersonal skills, and also call on children's collaborative skills and small group skills. All the activities are interactive, hands-on and involve the physical movement of the body. This makes the learning process enjoyable and raises the motivational level for children to learn."

The secret then is to develop your child's love for learning by engaging him or her in an enjoyable learning process. Short of or besides sending your child to a play-centred enrichment programme, how do parents do that? Dr Ong says, "A child at three is still learning language through listening. Expose him to fantasy stories and play with your child using lots of imaginative play or toys. From four years, read picture books. You can start to teach words through matching with pictures."

Reading And Speaking To Your Child

Reading to your child opens the doors of the imagination, and at the same time creates an emotional bond and a shared journey of learning between a parent and child. The best thing is, you can start reading to your child from infancy. This will help your child make new connections page by page – a great tool for his mental development. It is also a very natural way of language learning, and how my kids pick up vocabulary. My kids will ask, when an unfamiliar word crops up in reading, what it means, and I will explain the word as it comes along. I think a lot of mothers are hopeful that this will get our children onto reading themselves. Lecturer Ma Kheng Min says, "It was my top priority to get my daughter to read since young. Till today (her daughter's now 17) she still very much enjoys reading!"

Likewise, the child mimics the spoken English of a parent, so "if you want your child to speak well, you just have to speak good English and not Singlish," says Kheng Min. Parents who make a conscious effort to enunciate their words and speak grammatically provide a lasting minute-by-minute influence on their child's spoken English and their kids will pick up good English competencies. Kheng Min coordinates a free English learning programme for women called WISH run by the Society for Reading & Literacy,



a partner organisation of the Speak Good English Movement. "Many women in our programme are mothers who find it challenging to converse in English or understand their children's school report book. By learning to speak good English, they are taking steps to help their children speak better as well," she says.

Creative Expression

With the recent shift in emphasis to speaking skills in schools, it may be worth the while to put your child into classes that help them to practise oral communication skills. "Speech exercises and games allow children to learn to speak clearly and fluently and to use the muscles required for good diction. Story-sharing, songs and poems cultivate language and communication skills," says Jennifer Loy, General Manager of ACTphabets. Centres like hers integrate various aspects of the creative arts such as drama, puppetry, poetry, music, art and craft into the learning of language for kids as young as one-and-a-half-years to up to nine years old.

Six-year-old Lai Jing Yuan has morphed from "shy" to "confident" after joining a class called Creative Learners for three years. "She's a much better communicator now," says her mom. From better speaking skills, it's just a short step to acting, so whoa, you never know! Just look at another budding communicator cum actress, nine-year-old Poo Fang Rong, a pupil of Fly

Cover Story

Academy. Fang Rong actually clinched a role in the Yellow Ribbon Project film, *Coming Home*, which was aired on Channel Five, and participated in a Campbell Soup launch event.

"Kids who go through our programmes are encouraged to express themselves creatively, interact with other children through group activities and pair work, and learn to make decisions on their own. They also pick up skills like dancing, acting and social etiquette," says Fly Academy's Business Development Manager Ingrid How.

Research tells us, too, that music helps a child's brain development and has creative and healing power. Ange, mother to Isabella Faith Ong, thought it was just fun when she sent her three-year-old daughter to keyboard and piano classes in Sengkang Community Club. "I first thought that piano classes would be all drill. To my surprise, the classes are held in a fun and positive way. Two weeks into her lessons and Isabella has shown great interest in music and is able to tell me how many quants there are in a bar," she enthuses.

If creative programmes like these can turn your child from wallpaper to livewire, wouldn't you at least give your child a chance to transform into the butterfly that he or she is?

PHYSICAL DEVELOPMENT

Gym Play

It all begins with the body, and for a child slowly and surely gaining control over his or her fine motor skills, physical play in a rough and tumble sort of way is also good for developing a child mentally, socially, emotionally and psychologically as well. "A positive attitude towards physical play from an early age results in happier and healthier kids," says Penny Goh, Director of My Gym.

Children here partake in gymnastics (tumbling, running, jumping, balancing and hanging) which builds strength, coordination, agility, balance, flexibility and discipline. "The process of overcoming challenges like climbing, or negotiating obstacles, and making friends, creates a confident and happy child who is not afraid to socialise or face new challenges," says Penny.

Four-year-old Renata has been on My Gym's Fun Fitness programme for six months now, and is physically much stronger than before. Mum Serene, who wanted Renata to enjoy activities that she won't get to do at home, feels that her daughter is able to take 'accidents' better and that the lessons have reinforced Renata's self-esteem. Renata says, "I like the trampoline, the monkey bar and space flights! And I like to come to play with my friends too."

