

# From Behind the Counter

## SOME THOUGHTS ON LEARNING. . .

Have you ever watched a child learn? I mean *really* watched? Do you ever wonder what goes on in those intent minds when they seem to have closed out our world and are involved in a world of their own?

Some parents tell me that their children are “never” quiet – but I’m not sure I believe that. I think they may just not be quiet when the parents would like them to be quiet. I’ve really never run into a child who when sitting in a sandbox alone, or standing by a felt board with a variety of interesting cutouts, doesn’t seem to go off into a world apart.

Years ago I thought that this sort of “daydreaming” was not productive. I even remember as a child being told that this sort of mindless activity was a waste of time. I now know differently.

Neuroscientists tell us that our brains construct knowledge by *connecting* tiny bits of information. A simple way to put it is that the brain is a “pattern recognizer and a meaning maker.” When we encounter something that fits into a pattern we have already learned – we connect the new information to what we have learned earlier. Then we instantly decide what that *means*, move on to the next bit of information, and the cycle of learning continues.

You can experience this happening for yourself by observing a newborn infant. At first *everything* is new – and none of it makes any sense at all. But even after a few hours if you watch carefully, the newborn infant has begun to “connect the dots.” The world isn’t quite so new and scary. It’s warm and safe again – just like when he was inside Mom. And there’s that familiar sound – Mom’s heartbeat. So it’s safe to go to sleep.

This process doesn’t stop in infancy. I own a toy store and I see it every day. Sometimes I can even tell what toys a child has at home . . . because those are the things that attract her first. Since the toy in our shop is a little bit different from the one at home, the child constructs NEW meaning as she plays with a variation on the familiar.

We can learn so much about learning by simply slowing down and watching our children. Regardless of how irritating a child may be at a given moment – remember that little brain is doing *nothing but learning!* When your toddler has dropped the spoon to the floor for the 20<sup>th</sup> time during one meal – he is not really trying to upset you. He is discovering gravity. And when your 6-year-old asks “why” for the seventeenth time – think about what she is learning about learning . . . and be careful about how you respond!