

# Children as Teachers: Changing the World by Expanding Perceptions of Children

By Michael Alperstein

Children teach life lessons and simple truths by example. They teach the importance of play, spontaneity, curiosity, staying present, and authentic connection. With every breath, they live what they teach.

How well do adults tap this rich wellspring? In our society children are almost always seen as students—open vessels for adults to pour new knowledge into or to influence in some way. Sure, we need to guide, inspire and enrich children, but maybe they are meant to do the same for us. We are all teachers and students for each other. The view that kids are the students and adults are the teachers leaves a lot of doors shut and I feel it is time to reopen them.

For many years I taught juggling to children in after school programs. Typically, on the first day of class I was the teacher. I taught basic hand-eye coordination skills using juggling games, obstacle courses, and fun movement exercises. But by the second class meeting, I turned the tables around and gave the kids a chance to lead. *The kids were the juggling teachers and I was the klutzy juggling student!*

Wow, did they shine. With the roles reversed, they seemed to shed a lifetime's worth of fear and disempowerment. Teaching as a unit, the children would embrace and echo back to me all the suggestions I gave them during the previous week's lesson:

*“Don't worry about dropping!” “Juggling is like a puzzle; pay attention to one piece at a time.”*

*“Concentrate on making your throws and the catch will take care of itself!”*

I was inspired and in awe. It was as if they had been waiting for an adult to ask them to teach something. Even though their teaching was in the spirit of fun and role playing, the experience planted a seed in me. It was first-hand confirmation that kids can be the greatest catalysts for change and inspiration.

**“...and a little child shall lead them.” (Isaiah 11:6)**

Though I am not a devoted reader of the bible, the above quote sparks a ‘knowingness’ in me. I *know* children are teachers, even if I forget it sometimes. For example, children are teachers of unity. Their simplicity of action and words that they bring to all that they do is a powerful connecting force.

I had an epiphany once about how kids connect. My nephew Nicholas was in pre-school at the time and every morning when I’d drop him off I had about fifteen minutes to play with the group. In general, I found it easy to relate to the other kids in the school. But with a handful of them, I just couldn’t find a way to connect, especially upon arrival.

Then suddenly I had a revelation: I’ve been saying “Hi” to the kids! “Hi Sylvie,” “Good morning Dylan,” and all I got were blank stares.

Now, if you watch small kids relating and playing together, they almost never say “Hi” to each other. They just jump right into the current game!

So as an experiment I stopped saying “Hi” to the kids. Instead, I simply met their eyes with mine and started right into the current game or activity. This immediately broke down all barriers and I started getting more smiles and having more fun than ever

I feel the lesson here is about the dissolution of chit chat and the limitations that every day ‘grown up conversations’ create. Words get in the way. Kids intuitively know this. Either they use an economy of words and

communicate with body language, or, more common with girls perhaps, if they do talk a lot, they keep their focus. There is nothing superfluous about their actions. Everything they do relates to the present. They also seem to know how silence and sharing the same kinds of feelings—not necessarily expressing feelings just experiencing them together—creates connection.

Could it be that there is something adults have forgotten from their childhood that makes communication and life so hard? Do adults have enough fun, play, and connection in their lives? I think most do not, and if we want more of these experiences in our lives, we can learn from kids by stepping into unfamiliar territory. On the one hand, the new territory involves purposely setting up ways for kids to be seen as teachers. At the same time, it involves a change of perspective on the inside. We have to dig deep.

Here are two ideas to help start:

1. We can build community of like-minded adults. For example, on my website, <http://kidsasteachers.webnode.com//>, adults can post their stories and ideas about how to view children as teachers. This site is a forum for people to share stories and offer ways to take new actions, either in school, at home or in society. We can use the wisdom of the collective to brainstorm and change hard situations for the better.

2. We can spark change in education. Pioneering schools or teachers might be willing to change their approaches, exploring and experimenting with radically new class formats that reflect the idea that kids are teachers.

But in order for any of these ideas to succeed, adults must come up with *true ways* for children to teach adults. It would do very little to support lasting change if ‘kids as teachers’ were merely a staged production. To pretend that a child can be a teacher, and give them a mocked up opportunity to teach, but all the while still

believing they are really just the student, is unlikely to create lasting change. It does not really change the underlying mindset. We need a fundamental shift, a deep return to a sense of equality and unity between all ages.

So how do we create such a shift? I believe it starts within. We have to question and weed out long-held unconscious assumptions. For example:

Would you take a class taught by a child? Why or why not?

Would you read a book written by a child? Why or why not?

We can question our perspectives internally and simultaneously organize avenues for children to teach adults. When we are all teachers and students for each other, society will restructure itself into a unified whole and cooperation will increase. We can start within ourselves by taking simple new steps. We can start by letting ourselves see children in a new light.

The catalysts that will deeply shift the old mindset ought to be experiential. We need to *see* kids teaching: watch videos of them in action, read stories of how they inspired someone, contemplate what they have to offer. Adults need to go after what we really want.

What do we really want? I think we want what kids have so naturally: fun, play, laughter, curiosity. I think many adults wish to return to the simplicity of childhood, the sense of living carefree and spontaneously. When adults are asked what they want, they typically come up with a list of things: More money, more travel, a good relationship, a better job, greater health.

Why do adults want these things? The answer is not hard to see: We want what we want, so we can be happy. Trace any want to its core, and it will be a desire for pure joy. Well guess what?! Children are expert teachers of pure joy, play, spontaneity, laughter, and honest emotional acceptance. Kids have what we yearn for. How can we possibly ignore this perception and think that adults are the true teachers?

What else will create change?

New kinds of toys and games could be developed, toys and games aimed to help bring out “the teacher” in the child and “the student” in the parent. These could be anything from board games, to a science kits, to sporting goods equipment. But they would be presented in a new way, a way that fosters teamwork and equality. The products would get people purposely exploring role-reversals. One key to this would lie in the instruction booklets for the products. The adult would be required to take the back seat, and the child would lead the process every step of the way. These toys and games would foster a new dynamic. They could incorporate a lot of the wonderful ideas found in corporate team-building workshops.

Here is another idea: Elementary school kids could learn about writing and publishing by taking a field trip to a publishing company. During this lesson, their goal would be to write a book, teaching something they are good at.

Opportunities abound. As the old view that adults are the teachers starts to disintegrate, the new mindset would filter into many areas. I feel it would have positive affects in theater, the arts, and athletics. When kids are supported to teach and the playing field has been leveled, the world will be a better place.

Want to learn more? Ready to expand your perception of children? Please visit <http://kidsasteachers.webnode.com//>

**Michael Alperstein** is the founder of Kids as Teachers and welcomes hearing comments and suggestions.