

# The Power of Ordinary Moments

We are teachers. We devote our professional lives to the study and support of young children as they venture forth into a complex world. This world may differ from culture to culture, but children all over the world express great joy in the ordinary.

It is true, almost by definition, that ordinary moments fill most of the child's day. Indeed, at the end of the day the ordinary moments constitute the child's story . . .

- An infant discovers her wiggly toes;
- A toddler balances food on a fork;

- A three year old pretends a shoe is a phone;
- A preschooler squeezes a popsicle out of a plastic wrapper;
- A kindergartener laughs because his opened book is upside down.

Ordinary moments are the pages in the child's diary for the day. If we could resist our temptation to record only the grand moments, we might find the authentic child living in the in-between. If we could resist our temptation to put the children on a stage, we might find the real

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by George Forman, Ellen Hall, and Kath Berglund



George Forman is professor of early childhood education at the University of Massachusetts in Amherst. He is co-editor with Carolyn Edwards and Lella

Gandini of *The Hundred Languages of Children, The Reggio Emilia Approach* (first and second editions). He designs participatory exhibits from children's museums and has directed an experimental preschool called The School for Constructive Play based on the developmental theory of Jean Piaget. He was past president of the Jean Piaget Society and currently is on the editorial board for *Early Childhood Research and Practice*, an electronic journal published by ERIC. He is a frequent consultant to Make A Mess and Make Believe, a Reggio inspired preschool in Boulder, Colorado.



Ellen Hall is the co-founder, co-owner, and executive director of a school for young children located in Boulder, Colorado.

The school, Make A Mess and Make Believe, serves 350 children between the ages of six weeks and six years and their families. Through a partnership with the University of Colorado at Denver, Ellen has developed and teaches an Intern-Masters course of study, which offers teacher apprentices the opportunity to receive a masters degree in Early Childhood Education or Educational Psychology. The Make A Mess and Make Believe school is inspired by the Reggio Emilia Approach to Early Childhood Education.



Kath Berglund is a kindergarten teacher and pedagogical coordinator at Make A Mess and Make Believe school

in Boulder, Colorado. She has been in Boulder since September, 2000. Before moving to Boulder, Kath taught preschool in Garmisch-Partenkirchen, Germany for a small U.S. Army-run child development center. Kath holds a masters degree in early childhood education from Cameron University's (Lawton, Oklahoma) overseas program.

work being done in the wings. If we understood the great value in the ordinary moments, we might be less inclined to have a marvelous finale for a long-term project. We appeal to educators everywhere to find the marvel in the *mundane*, to find the power of the ordinary moment.

## The Power of Peter's Moment

Take the moment of Peter playing with a toy car on the floor. Peter has just discovered that when he presses on the car and rolls it backward, then the car will launch itself forward when he releases his grip. Where is the power in this ordinary moment? Let's wonder with Peter as he watches the car roll forward . . .

■ *Will the car roll up an incline to the platform?*

■ *Will it speed away without rolling it backwards first?*

Focusing on an ordinary moment promotes inquiry and reflection between the child and the adult and supports a dialogue between them. The teacher and the child can wonder . . .

■ *Will the car roll all the way over to the chair?*  
And further . . .

■ *Does it have enough force to knock over this little block?*  
And even further . . .

■ *Can you aim the car so it will roll straight through that paper tunnel?*

Focusing on ordinary moments allows us to slow down and be still. To look deeply into a pool one must be still. So we watch Peter rolling the car repeatedly and are sufficiently still to notice his subtle variations. When we slow down and carefully study the ordinary moments of children, we honor those moments. We respect the moments for what they offer us in our quest to understand children constructing knowledge. A child rolling a car across the floor is certainly ordinary.

## The Ordinary Moment as a Theory in Action

Why should we give this moment more than a passing thought? The answer comes from what you see when you look closely. Most deliberate acts of children flow from a theory they have about the social or physical world. A child rolling a car can be studied to reveal the assumptions and theories that the child holds.

Ordinary moments reveal the concepts that children use to organize their approaches to problems. It is in the ordinary moments that we see the application and extension of knowledge. Peter attempts to launch his wind-up car to the top of a plastic ramp made by elevating one end with three flat blocks. The car does not make it all the way to the top. First he tries again, without variation. Once again he tries. On his fourth try he draws the car back further, as if to wind up the spring more tightly. The car stops just short of the platform at the top of the ramp. He repeats the exaggerated wind-up, but it yields the same result. At this point he pauses, then looks at how the ramp rests on three blocks at one end. He removes one of the end supports, thereby decreasing the slope of the ramp. With the confidence of a king, he launches the car and watches it roll to the top of the ramp and onto the platform.

Let's decipher the concepts that organize the strategies that Peter used. Concepts are assumptions that the child makes about what conditions or relations have to be present for something to work. The concept is not the goal itself (get the car to the top), nor the acts (eliminate one supporting block), but the child's understanding of the necessity of certain conditions (less incline).

Peter held several concepts. Consider his first strategy of trying to make the car roll up the ramp; he pulled the car back a farther distance. His assumption must have been that the length of the backward pull is directly related to the distance the car will travel in the forward motion. This concept can be called a direct functional relation (as opposed to an inverse relation where a decrease in *A* leads to an increase in *B*). When this did not work, Peter changed the slope of the ramp. His assumption must have been, the steeper the ramp's slope the more effort to climb, therefore, the lower the ramp's slope the more likely a given effort will get the car to the top. In this latter case Peter is using an inverse functional relation, the less of *A* (the slope), the more of *B* (the distance the car will travel).

*Concepts identify the child's move from success to understanding.* Concepts help the child to remember and to organize his actions so that he can more effectively apply and appropriate his intelligence in future ordinary moments.

## Why Identify the Concepts

**Greater Continuity.** There are good reasons to figure out the children's concepts and theories. When we understand the concepts, we can be alert to the similarities between

this ordinary moment and other moments. We make these connections by noting the common structure of the concepts, e.g., inverse functional relation. The ordinary moment, while small, is a microcosm of the child's way of thinking, a way of thinking that he might use in other situations, such as figuring out why the markers continually roll off a tilting table.

The deeper we go into the ordinary moment, the broader we understand the child. When we identify the concepts the child uses in one context, such as in the car and the ramp, we can better understand the educational value of another context, such as a child looking down at the legs of the table to see what is making it tilt. A deep analysis of a single episode brings with it the possibility of more broadly understanding the child in many episodes. We can, therefore, say *depth is breadth*.

**Better Conversations.** We also identify the concepts hidden in ordinary moments so that we can have higher level conversations with the children. What might we say to Peter shortly after he lowered the slope of the ramp? If we focus only on his success we might say, "Wow, you did it; you made the car get to the top." And then we might say, "Tell me what you did to make it work." Peter would simply say, "I made it lower."

But if you focus on the concept (inverse functional relation) you might say, "Wow, that's great. Can you tell me why lowering the ramp worked?" Peter might answer, "It's hard to get up a steep, steep hill." And such conversations can lead to follow-up questions about corollary assumptions, such as, "And the car is rather weak, is that it?" The focus on concepts asks the child to talk to us about theories and assumptions. The focus on success only asks the child to list the actions, such as, "I made it lower."

We can have longer and higher level conversations with children when we ask them to talk about their thinking and their reasons. When we ask them to talk about what they did there is not much more than details to talk about, and they may not remember these details anyway.

## The Competent and Autonomous Child

The child is in the moment and we are in the moment with the child. Giving strength and value to ordinary moments and believing in the power of these moments gives strength and value to our image of the child as strong, rich in resources, and competent. We give strength to our image of the child by making the experience of the child visible for study and communication.

Making the experiences of children's learning visible insists that we slow down and allow time for experiences to occur.

We can capture these experiences in photographs, slides, and video in order to analyze and interpret them. We revisit the work of the children, engaging in dialogue with our colleagues, with parents, and also with the children themselves. We study the work of the children in order to understand the ways in which they learn, in order to offer support to the process of learning, in order to learn along with the children.

Sensing the value of an ordinary moment gives the teacher confidence to let an experience unfold. Take as an example an ordinary moment of children encountering a pumpkin, actually captured on videotape and viewed by teachers, parents, and children (Hall, Oleson, and Gambetti, 2001). Two three-year-old children wanted to move a large pumpkin from the garden to the classroom. With great effort they succeeded, by rolling the pumpkin that was too heavy to lift. The teachers honored this moment by videotaping it and adding a sound track to their effort, Jimmy Cliff's song, "You can do it if you really want."

The children loved watching this video and knew that it documented their determination, teamwork, and accomplishment. Indeed, a few days later, when struggling to put on her jeans, one of the children paused in mid-effort to sing herself toward success, "You can do it if you really want." The teachers had confidence that even ordinary moments can become points of reference for the children when the unfolding moments are documented and revisited.

As teachers, we invite you to take the ordinary moments of your day, look closely at them, uncover the concepts that they reveal, revisit these concepts with the children, and use your documentation of this process as evidence of your good work.

*This article is largely based on G. Forman's keynote address by the same name given at the 5th Annual OMEP Hong Kong Conference in June, 2001.*

Please see the Beginnings Workshop article in the March/April 2001 issue of *Child Care Information Exchange* "Including Parents in the Process of Documentation" by Ellen Hall, Vicki Oleson, and Amelia Gambetti.

For more articles on related subjects, visit our web site: [www.ChildCareExchange.com](http://www.ChildCareExchange.com).

**Important Question!** These authors appeal to teachers to discover the "power of ordinary moments" for supporting children's construction of knowledge. Pose this question in your center's chat room to see what teachers think about the idea. Some other questions to ask: What is an ordinary moment? When do most ordinary moments occur? Can the teacher's recognition of ordinary moments lead to increasing teacher satisfaction with teaching?

**Observe to Discover the Ordinary:** Encourage teachers to observe for ordinary moments in the course of their teaching day. To practice this skill, ask teachers to do a short observation on one child in their classroom, looking for *ordinary moments*. Take notes to bring to a staff meeting. At the meeting, take one or more identified *ordinary moments* from the observations to see if you can discover the theory in action and identify the concepts children are learning. Repeat this process several times until teachers feel that they are becoming skilled in identifying *ordinary moments*.

**Creating Better Conversations:** Offer to mentor a teacher in creating better conversations. Audiotape a teacher and a child having a conversation in the classroom. With the teacher, listen to the tape, exploring the questions the teacher asked, the direction of the conversation, and the teacher's ability to follow the child's lead. Listen for questions that might have lead to longer or higher level conversations encouraging the child to talk about their thinking and the reasons for her or his point of view. Pose some alternative questions that might have directed the child to talk about his or her thinking rather than what they did. Once one teacher has experienced several opportunities to create better conversations, ask him to mentor another teacher in improving her conversations with children.

**Revisiting Competence:** At the heart of this idea of *ordinary moments* is helping children recognize and validate their own discoveries, enhancing their ability and motivation to continue to do so. How can teachers revisit children's recognition and validation of discoveries? With teachers, search for ways to document discoveries from ordinary moments that can be revisited.

How to Use Beginnings Workshop to Train

Teachers by Kay Albrecht