

3 Teaching in early childhood education as seen in several real-life examples

Here we will present some examples of real-life early childhood care and education situations to provide a concrete illustration of the “children’s development in early childhood care and education” described in Chapter 2. Through the examples and a commentary, we will discuss the activities the children are actually doing in the kindergarten, what they are feeling, and what they are learning, and how the teachers support and assist those processes.

Paper Airplanes

Ever since this morning, Masato has been hard at making paper airplanes. I wonder what he’s up to, and decide to wait and see... Taku happens along and shows an interest, and the two of them now are having a contest who can fly his the farthest. I weigh the idea of waiting a little longer, but – paper airplanes in the classroom... I blurt out, “Show me how to build those airplanes too!” and, having built one à la Masato, take the activity outside.

I start out flying mine from any old place, when Masato draws a line in the sand and says, “You have to start here!” Although my paper airplane is made exactly like Masato’s, mine doesn’t land at the same distance as his.

“Why doesn’t it?” he wonders, “I showed you how to build it...” and he tries giving mine a running start, or fiddles with the wings... Just then Yoichi and Kanae join in. Now then, things are getting interesting. But Yoichi’s paper airplane alone flies really well, far better than expected. So then we all decide to make our paper airplanes over again.

Now, with newly folded paper airplanes in hand, we take up the contest where we left off. Yoichi, who is very competitive (one of his strengths!), makes a big fuss when the paper airplanes land at about the same distance.

“Mine flew the farthest!” he says.

“No, no, mine did,” says the teacher (me).

“Okay, let’s do it again.”

“Okay!”

And the paper airplanes land at about the same place yet again...

“This time I really won!”

“Really? I’m not so sure...”

“Yes, really! See?”

And he moves the paper airplanes sideways, lining them up to compare. Everyone else nods in agreement, “Yoichi wins.”

On the next try, three paper airplanes land where it’s hard to compare. This is my chance. “Yay! I win! I come out TOP!” I cry, intentionally moving mine diagonally forward as I line the paper airplanes up to compare.

“No fair, you moved it up!”

“Okay, one more time.” I move it back to where it was, line the paper airplanes up again, and this time, the three of them are about the same. I hear someone saying, “Oh, good, all of them win.” Oh, no, I think (especially because we had just discussed in last week’s study group on practicum of early childhood care and education that the children seem to lack competitiveness in the positive sense), it’s not good for everyone’s to be the same here. So I remark, “I have a surprise for the winner, so there’s a problem if everybody’s the same.”

“What? A surprise?” All the faces light up, then turn dark and serious. Now what, somehow children have to decide accurately who won. “Hmmm... Now what do we do...” the children rack their brains.

“Hey, I have an idea! Let’s draw lines all the way across, like at 100, and 200, and...” And drawing the lines, the child starts writing: 1, 2, 3, 4... Beating myself up for not having thought of this activity before the summer, I butt in again. Because the child is drawing the lines freehand, the scores(?) are all at random intervals.

“Oops, the spaces look different. Look, between 8 and 9 here, and between 9 and 10 here...”

“What? Oh yeah...”

“Okay, so now what do we do?”

Just then Masato says, “I know! Remember when Yuri and Wataru were drawing up that chart? What they were using? How about using that?”

“No, that’s for indoors only,” pipes up Kanae.

“Hey, I know!” exclaims Yoichi. “You know, at athletic festival. Remember with the color cards? How we drew the lines? Let’s use that!”

“You mean the measuring tape?” I offer.

“Yeah! Yeah! That’s it!”

We quickly borrow one from the teacher’s room, and immediately set about marking off the intervals.

“Let me do it!” says Yuri, and she starts out enthusiastically, measuring 10 centimeters, 20, 30... 90 centimeters...

“Yoo hoo!” Masato and some others are waving from the other end of the playground. “You measure up to here!”

Yuri is aghast. “All the way there? No way!” The honest sentiment of someone marking off the playground ten centimeters at a time. The marking comes to an abrupt stop. Now what? Everyone tries to think of something, when Wataru comes up with, “How about just marking the red parts (the tape is marked with red at every meter)?” Yuri also agrees that this is a great idea! Now the two of them mark off every meter, up to 18 meters. The lines are now complete!

We decide the tallest goes first, and our paper airplane contest is off and running. This time around, the children mean business. Each time one person flies a paper airplane, the others all run to where it lands.

“Twelve meters. Okay, twelve points.”

“Four meters. That’s four points.” We have a scoring system now too.

“Okay, so that’s three meters on the first try, and five meters on the second... that makes... eight points.” The children start writing this down in the sand. But when there are more numbers, things get complicated. It’s not that easy to tally the points...

“Teacher, let me use your hands,” says one child, using my fingers to count one by one.

“Twenty-five. No, twenty six? Um, twenty-seven,” says another, making rough guesses while glancing at my face for hints. Still another says the answer instantly. Each child is different, but they are all dead serious. At any other time, they would have given up such a difficult activity a long time ago, and yet, here they were, so engrossed in their play they were concentrating fiercely. Even lunch time had come and gone... I now have a renewed appreciation for what it means to be truly absorbed in play.

We continued the contest after lunch. On this day, we spent the entire day with our eyes glued to the paper airplanes and the ground.

Commentary (Paper Airplanes)

Concentrating on an activity, and thinking. Are such feats possible for small children? They can be – they become possible through skillful guidance when the child's activity begins to expand.

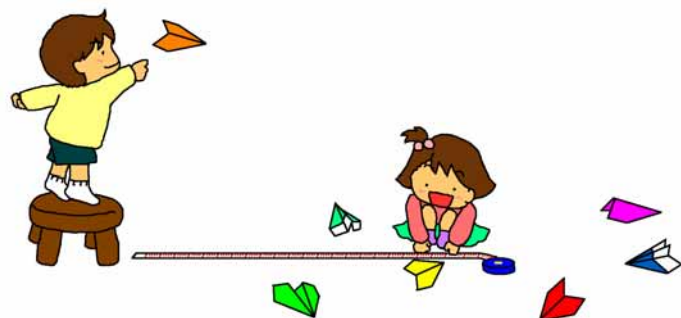
The children fly paper airplanes and start a contest to see whose goes the farthest. At first the paper airplanes are flown randomly, to see which goes the farthest, so one child decides where to fly them from. We make the paper airplanes over, and fly them again. When it is a close call whose flew the farthest, there is a dispute. After all, this is a game the children started themselves. Some feel they are good at it, while still others have competitive personalities, and insist on finding out who won.

Three of the paper airplanes landed where it was hard to judge whose went farthest. The teacher, sensing a golden opportunity, proposes that a decision be made as to who is the winner, because there is a prize. From there, an innovation: drawing horizontal lines, and counting points. But the widths are haphazard: someone remembers the use of the measuring tape, and they go to fetch it. Meters and centimeters are marked onto the ground to measure the distance. A scoring system is devised, with points awarded depending on how many meters the flight was. The points are tallied, and the one with the greatest total wins. This again is a tricky task. Some children count on their fingers, some do sums in their heads, while still others try to decide by the expression on the grown-up's face.

Did these children become engrossed because they would get a prize if they won? Or is it because they love to count? While both are probably correct to a certain degree, I don't think that is the main point. I believe it is because both of these factors helped to focus the children's activity, and gave them a detailed look at what they needed to work on and try for. The wish to be No. 1 is a wonderful goal, and elicits the strong will to work toward it. Of course, flying paper airplanes for long distances is not the only thing children enjoy. In this case, it was only because the children began the activity themselves, and felt they were good at it, that the teacher decided to provide some stimulation.

Next is to formulate the idea of measuring a subtle difference in a proper manner. The children must have recalled the track and field races or some similar situation they saw on television. They hit upon drawing a number of lines to determine the distance. If the lines cannot be drawn accurately, all that needs to be done is to use a length of measuring tape to measure the distance from the starting line. Furthermore, they mark off the ground in units of measure. Through that action, an image is created: the paper airplane flies above those calibrated marks, and lands on one of the notches at a certain distance. The children then try to identify accurately, the notch the paper airplane landed on. The paper airplanes are lined up and compared because they are set against those notches. The smallest difference is made distinguishable on a single line.

What are numbers for, anyway? One major advantage is that they allow us to capture reality in a meticulous manner, and conduct comparisons on the basis of numbers, which are simple and crystal-clear. Here, that advantage is exactly what the small children tested and appreciated.



Paper Poppers

Shuta, who joined us this year for junior kindergarten, was full of apprehension about his first experience with kindergarten life.

“What are we going to do now?”

“Why are we going to the play room?”

Every single thing had to be confirmed. His interaction with friends during play was limited, and had to be mediated by the teacher.

Then one day Shuta approached me with a newspaper flyer in his hand.

“Teacher, Teacher, make me one of those things that goes ‘Bang!’”

Apparently he had asked his grandfather to make one for him, but his grandpa hadn’t known how.

So the two of us, Shuta and I, immediately got down to making a “paper popper.” Shuta watched like a hawk while I made the popper, and once the object was complete, I went first with a trial run.

“BAAANG!!!”

“Whoa!! Awesome!” Reeling a little from the spectacular noise, Shuta nevertheless grins with satisfaction: “Let me try!”

But he doesn’t know where to apply force, and the paper popper doesn’t even open, let alone give a bang.

“Hold on to it here, and go like this...” but even with instructions, and my doing it with him, he is unable to produce that excellent noise, and he seems rather downcast at the anemic effect. Just then Kengo, who has been standing nearby observing us carefully, offers, “How about jumping up a little, and swinging it down really hard?”

Worth a try. The center of attention, Shuta gives it all he’s got.

“YAAAHH!”

“Bang!” goes the popper, and “Yay! That was awesome!” the three of us are beside ourselves with triumph. Shuta is beaming, and Kengo is rejoicing as if the accomplishment were his own.

Meanwhile, the “Bang!” has attracted a throng of children around Shuta, who are all milling around saying, “Make one for me too!” “I want one, too!” The children have formed a long line, each with a flyer clutched in the hand...

“Mind if I make one for everyone else too?” I ask Shuta, and he replies cheerfully,

“Sure! No problem!” Before I start making poppers for the others, I make “popper #2” for Shuta. And one for Kengo. Kengo is a quiet, somewhat shy child, who tends to be overshadowed by his more boisterous classmates, but he has the capacity for coolheaded observation and thought.

Afterward, Shuta learned how to re-fold an opened-up popper, and enthusiastically taught the skill to the children who hadn’t yet mastered it. Meanwhile Kengo became absorbed in making paper poppers using all sorts of flyers.

Paper popper play continued for days, with children coming up with all sorts of ideas about how to produce an excellent sound.

“When you lift one leg up in the air, it makes a really cool ‘Bang!’” and they are all lifting their leg as high as it will go: “Bang!” And again, and again.

Then Takahiro approaches me with a large flyer. “This should make an awesome noise!” I fold it up into a big paper popper, and he tries it out: “YAH!” But the popper rips apart at

the first try. Takahiro and the other children, who had been anticipating a great big noise, are surprised and disappointed: “No way! Why’d that happen?”

“I wonder why?” I ask the children, and Katsuji suggests, “Takahiro was too strong.” Hiroshi agrees, “Yeah, you had your leg up THIS high.”

But then Kengo, who has been observing carefully nearby, comments, “Takahiro’s paper, it’s thin.”

Bingo. While Takahiro’s flyer was certainly large and impressive, it was made of thin, flimsy paper. At Kengo’s words, everyone immediately zeroes in on Takahiro’s torn popper, feeling the paper between their thumb and forefinger, checking its thickness.

“Wow, Kengo’s right. Your paper is thin, Takahiro.”

“Hey, it’s thinner than mine.” The children start to understand.

“Kengo,” I say, “I’m amazed you were able to figure that out.” Kengo looks very bashful, but somehow the air around Kengo seems to turn warm and fuzzy.

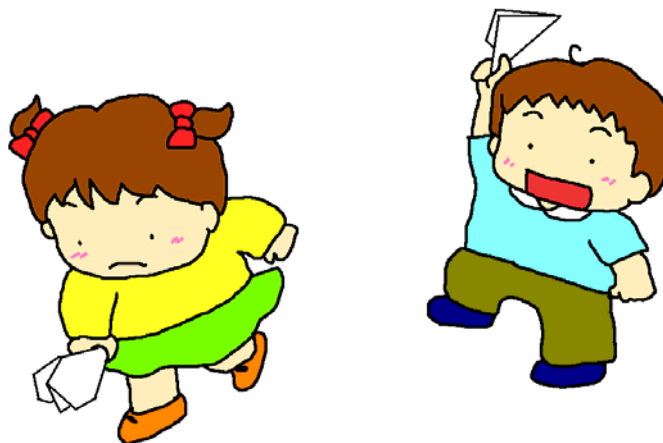
The children, armed with the knowledge that thin flyers make lousy poppers, now come to me with small, thick sheets of paper.

“Teacher, make me one that won’t rip this time. See how small and thick this paper is,” Takahiro says proudly. While I suspect that this time, his paper is much too thick for the popper to open up, I nevertheless oblige, and we try it out. My suspicion proves correct and the popper stays folded, much to Takahiro’s chagrin. A little ways away, Shuta and Kengo are producing wonderful, reverberating noises.

“I wonder why mine didn’t work... I know, I’ll ask Kengo!” and Takahiro runs off to the play room to join the twosome.

Playing with paper poppers allowed Shuta to discover the joy of playing with compatible friends, and he has stopped clinging to the teacher all the time. Of course he is great friends with Kengo. And Kengo, through winning the recognition of his classmates, has begun to express himself more, at times surprising me with how big a voice he is actually capable of producing.

We will continue to cherish the realizations and discoveries that are born from children’s play, and will try to provide the kind of assistance that enables children to deepen their relationship with their friends through play.



Commentary (Paper Poppers)

Paper poppers are easy to make, and when moved with force, produce a loud, satisfying bang. With instructions from the teacher, the child attempts the activity, but success eludes him. A different child, who has been observing nearby, gives a tip. The first child takes the advice and tries again, and this time, succeeds in producing the right sound. The teacher and the two children are delighted. This play then begins to spread amongst the children.

One child brings a large piece of paper, and a large paper popper is made from it. However, without making much of a noise, it rips apart at the very first try. The child is disappointed, but also mystified as to why that happened. Was it because he applied too much force? One of the children who started the paper popper play points out that it was because the paper was too thin. Everyone feels the paper, and finds that indeed the paper is flimsy.

The children now bring the teacher thick, small pieces of paper. One child brings one that is too thick, and the popper refuses to open. Perplexed, the children go to seek an explanation from the child who is the paper popper expert.

Paper poppers are great fun. But playing with them can be a short affair, lasting only for one round of noise. That is because the grown-up folds it, the child swings it, a sound is produced, and that is that. It is actually quite difficult to introduce elements of innovation and challenge for the children.

In this example, the children stumbled upon an important discovery when the popper failed to produce the desired noise. When the paper is too thin, it rips apart, and no noise is made. On the other hand, when the paper is too thick, the popper does not open properly, and again, no noise is made.

In this way, discoveries in play can take the form of thinking about why when something does not go as desired. An attitude of observing closely, and thinking, becomes necessary. It appears that there was significance in the fact that several children were making their own poppers, and that the child who encountered the stumbling block was not alone, but was accompanied by the presence of another child, who was watching and thinking. Perhaps it was because the thinking child was able to do so relatively cool-headedly. Another factor may have been that the child who made the discovery was one of the children who first started the game, and so may have felt himself to be savvy about paper poppers.

The teacher also plays a part. When the children are faced with failure, the teacher refrains from telling them to try again, or making a new popper, or otherwise telling them the answer. Instead throwing the question back to the child, asking them why they think what happened. By taking the stance that asking why and understanding are valuable, the teacher supports the children's exploration.

It also cannot be overlooked how a child's confidence can be built through identifying how to play a game, becoming good at it, teaching it to other children, and being able to figure out why things happen. The point is not just dishing out praise, but letting the child acquire the actual capability, and experience the understanding process, with the teacher providing the function of pointing it out. The broadening of that play, and the connections made through that joy, then help to enrich the child's friendships.

Rolling Marbles

From dirt balls to the dirt maze

The children love to make dirt balls. They are diligently trying to make one that doesn't break open. They mix water into dirt, a little bit at a time, and knead their creations with care. Dirt comes in all varieties (the black earth in the grassy fields or the fine, pretty dirt made by rubbing with a ceramic bowl...), and the children are devising all kinds of ways to make strong dirt balls, such as by using very wet, muddy soil at first, then working up to the earth from the fields, and applying the finishing touches with smooth, dry sand. It is interesting to watch them, as each child has their own way of making their creations, and are using different kinds of soil. When, after it is complete, the dirt ball develops a crack, the children gently smooth the surface with water.

Five-year-old Isamu is on the dirt hill in the playground.

"Come on, let's see whose ball is the strongest!"

The children respond to his challenge, urging "Oh, please don't break," as the balls roll down the hill under their earnest gaze. Once some of the balls survive intact, "Great! Now let's try it from here!" – the balls are rolled from an even higher position.

"This time let's see how far they can go! Ready – GO!" When the balls withstand the rolling without breaking open, the children's interest shifts to the distance the balls can be rolled. The children then began to search for places on the dirt hill that were relatively free of bumps and allowed the balls to roll for longer distances, and for a while the game continued.

"I know! I'm gonna make a road!" says a child, and starts to create a road to make the balls roll more easily. The child digs with a shovel for a bit, then pours water from higher up on the hill, then digs again. The road is straight and monotonous.

"Hmm, could be more interesting," I murmur, and five-year-old Atsushi says, "Okay, how about a curvy road, like this?"

"Yeah, a curvy road might be fun," I say. But when we try it, we find it is very difficult to make curves on a dirt hill. Atsushi continues to pour and dig. Every time a bit of road is completed, he checks to see whether the balls will roll along it.

"Oh, Atsushi, the ball stops here," I murmur disappointedly, and Atsushi comes with the shovel and fills the bit in with some dirt. We try again, and this time the ball rolls. The children seem to be discerning through their play that the amount of dirt on the road can be neither too much nor too little for the balls to roll properly. And while the children seem to have wanted to make a really zig-zagging road, they find that the dirt balls won't roll down properly, and the road changes into one that curves smoothly along the side of the hill. Eventually the children seem to understand that a zig-zagging configuration is too hard, and begin to dig so that the road is a smoothly curving one.

Finally we experiment to see whether the balls will roll from start to finish. But there's one place partway through where the ball comes to a stop. The dirt has formed a little mound there. The children remove the dirt, and this time the experiment is a big success.

"Teacher, we did it! We made a dirt ball maze!" exclaims Atsushi in delight.

From that day forward, the dirt ball maze game continued for days on end. Eventually, the children started to do things like creating a couple of pit traps partway through the maze, or turning a small shovel upside down to use as a tunnel, or connecting several bobbins for the balls to roll through – the maze evolved into a very interesting dirt ball maze.

From dirt ball maze to marbles

Apparently having developed a taste for rolling things, more children began to bring marbles from home, and the children started rolling marbles down the dirt ball maze they had made. They also began to make more narrow mazes to suit the smaller size of the marbles. “You can’t crack these!” the children boasted of their marbles, and at this juncture, the dirt ball maze, which was an exclusively outdoor activity, underwent a change into an indoor activity through the use of marbles. Perhaps because they had experienced rolling the dirt balls down a hill, the children initially used large blocks to create a slope for their marbles. They created an incline with a triangular block, and continued the course with square blocks – not a smooth course for the marbles, which tended to bounce when they got to the large square blocks.

In time the children started to change their approach, using the large blocks only for a small portion of the maze (the starting platform) and using small blocks (five-centimeter cubes) for the rest. That made the slope stable and rattle-free, allowing the marbles to roll down smartly.

“Let’s build a tunnel here. Let’s make this the goal line!” their creation knew no bounds. As the marbles would roll down very briskly, the children decided, “Let’s put blocks up over there too!” and placed blocks on both sides of the marble’s path to prevent their escaping.

“Look at what I’ve made!” the children would say, assembling all sorts of marble mazes. Some noteworthy variations included the use of doll-shaped plastic erasers as targets for the marbles to bump into, or the arrangement of thin blocks like dominos for the marbles to knock over. The children spent days playing together with the mazes each of them made. To compensate for the monotonous movement of the rolling marbles, they began to devise ways to make the course more difficult: mountains or slopes made of blocks, for example. Realizing that the marbles now needed more momentum to reach the goal line, the children started rolling their marbles with more oomph.

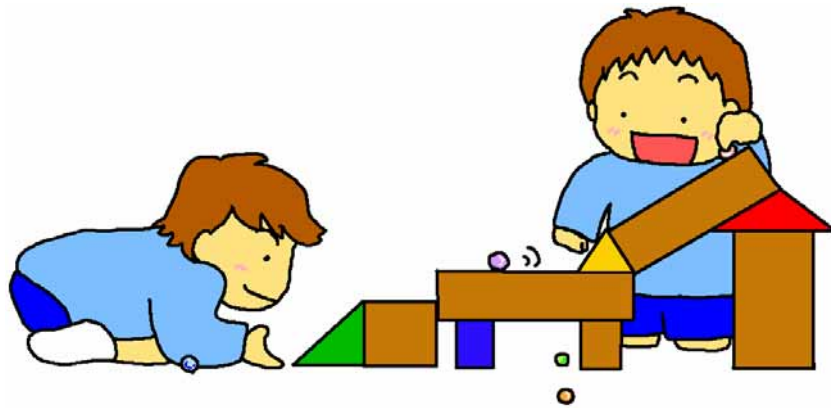
Transformation of the marble maze

In an effort to make mazes that were even more fun, the children started thinking again. Their creations took on a great deal of variety, including mazes that took advantage of the hole in the handle of the box the blocks were kept in, mazes that were made up of collections of slopes and bridges built of blocks, and ones that were constructed so that you could not see how far along the marble was. One that particularly astounded me was the maze Yosuke dreamed up. His was created using cube-shaped blocks, and constructed so that when a marble was dropped in, it would travel down the zig-zag formation inside making a pleasant, clattering sound. From the outside, it was absolutely impossible to see how far down the course the marble was, as the maze was completely enclosed with blocks to obstruct the view. The completed marble maze tower was about one and a half meters in height: Yosuke had stood on a chair to build the uppermost parts of it. And inside this creation, the marble clattered down an astonishing 14 flights of zig-zag stairs!

When the marble emerged at the goal line, “Awesome!” We all burst out in admiring applause.

“Yosuke,” I told him, “This is just amazing. It’s so exciting, waiting for the marble to come out. I’m so impressed you thought of something so complicated all by yourself. This is truly one of a kind.” Peering inside to see how the tower was configured, I found that he had used triangular blocks so that they alternated from left to right, arranged so that the marble would

roll down the block on the right, hit the block on the left, drop down, then start rolling down the block on the left. It was a truly remarkable marble maze, a masterpiece beyond the imagination of any grown-up.



Commentary (Rolling Marbles)

This is an example in which the making of dirt balls developed into a game of rolling them, which then evolved into rolling marbles as the children devised ways of rolling their balls more creatively. Making dirt balls involves quite a bit of creativity, with the accompanying satisfaction of creating a finished object. The children decide to roll the balls from the top of a hill to test how strong their balls are. When the balls roll to the finish line without breaking apart, the children gain confidence, and focus their attention on distance, that is, how far they can be rolled. Further, they hit upon making a road for their balls to roll down. The road, which starts out as a straight one, begins to curve and wind, as the children realize that a smooth, gently curving road seems to work the best. They find that the balls come to stop when there is too much dirt piled up, or when there is a dip in the path; the road must be made level. Eventually, the game of rolling dirt balls develops into a game of maze-building, as the children start building obstacles along the route, such as pit traps and tunnels.

Then the children start bringing in marbles instead of dirt balls, and the game goes through a major shift. With marbles, the game can be brought indoors; and indoors, the children can use blocks. The game evolves in a myriad of forms, including the use of small blocks, and dolls for targets. Unsatisfied with merely rolling now, the children begin to make the course more challenging, by placing slopes and hills along the way to make it difficult to reach the finish line. One child in particular devised a highly complex course, in which the progress of the marble was completely obscured from view by an enclosure of building blocks, and constructed so that the marble would emerge from an unexpected location.

What is extraordinary about this example is that the children's play developed naturally to reach an extremely advanced stage. It was absolutely not the case that the end was in view from the beginning. This is true for both the teacher and the children. The game developed through a process of searching for something new that can be devised, some new twist that can be added to make the game more interesting. No doubt the children wanted more difficulty, more challenge, to savor the joy of achievement. And there is no doubt that the teacher also stayed by the children's side, at times with heart a-flutter, at times offering encouragement and advice.

In that process, the children engage in the tasks related to the game at hand, and search for places and things around them that would make the game more interesting: interacting with dirt, searching for a place to roll them, creating a road to roll them better, and so on. They make clever use of the characteristics of the places and things, and when that is not enough, they apply new adjustments to those places and things. The children are in an environment that enables them to interact with things and make adjustments and additions on their own. Such is the kind of place these children play in on a daily basis.

Through repeated experience of such play, the children gradually refine and compile their innovations, which grow more advanced. The children also begin to search for materials that are easier to innovate with. By using marbles instead of dirt balls, the children broadened the scope of their creativity. But it was probably significant that they had had plenty of experience with dirt balls before the transition.

Jumping Rope

Several girls in the five-year-old class are jumping rope and bouncing on the trampoline. The boys scuffle by in a nondescript jumble, sometimes happening to join the jump rope game. But none of them can jump – after one or two tries, they’ve slipped away from the scene.

In such cases, it is unacceptable for the teacher to leave things as they are. But a forced invitation would not do much for children’s motivation. Some kids just seem to grudge the effort to make something bear fruit, and simply avoid doing things they don’t feel like doing – they only engage in simple activities that they prefer, whenever and for however long they feel like it. These children are found around us. Tsubasa appears to be such a child. But he also appears to have a rich sensitivity. His physique is clean and compact. How to motivate such a child?

After about 20 minutes of turning the long jumping rope for the girls, I spot Tsubasa hanging by both hands from a two-meter-high, indoor-use horizontal bar – for a pretty long time. This is my chance. Although he had already dropped to the floor by then, I say to him, “Tsubasa, that was pretty good. That’s such a high bar, and you were hanging for a REALLY long time. Even first graders can only go for 30 seconds maybe, and here you were, going on and on like it was nothing. I would fall off by the time I got to twenty. Could you show me again?”

Hearing this conversation, the other children gather round. The jump rope and trampoline experts all try their hand at dangling from the high bar, but for the most part, they fall off after ten or twenty seconds.

Finally, it’s Tsubasa’s turn. I tell the children, “I’m going to count exactly as fast as the second hand on my watch, so everybody listen, okay?”

Tsubasa grips the bar.

“One, two, three, four... sixty, sixty-one... seventy, seventy-one, seventy-two, seventy-three. Wow, that’s one minute, thirteen seconds. Amazing! You’re the champion! This is just awesome. Tsubasa, now come on, let’s jump rope!”

Tsubasa can’t jump rope, and is probably not too keen on trying. But without giving him a chance to refuse, I grab him by the hand and bring him to where the jump rope is. I ask the other teacher to hold the other end, and start to turn the rope.

Taro, another one of the boys who can’t jump well despite some effort at practicing, and Tetsuo, who was late this morning, had been sporadically joining in and wandering away, but they now joined in for real.

Tsubasa can’t jump. We turn the rope, calling out, “here we go!” and timing the turn to his rhythm, but he still can’t jump. “Okay, again!”

“Again!”

“Here we go!” Flop. That’s one jump!

“Okay, jump when the rope comes in front of you. Here we go!” Flop. Flop.

“That’s right! Again!”

The other two are also silent, with clenched teeth. I like the expressions on their faces. Children don’t smile when they are serious.

“Again!”

“Again!” Flop. Flop. Flop. Flop. flop.

“Wow, Tsubasa, that was three times in a row!”

“You’re doing great, Taro!”

“You too, Tetsuo, here we go!”

One hour, an hour and a half... I urge the other teacher,
“Please, keep your turns solid. Make it easy for the kids to jump. Look closely at each child’s timing. Turn the rope with everything you’ve got.” It would not be too much to say your life is on the line. At times such as these, the teacher abandons everything else and faces the children, concentrating on turning the rope so that it is easier for these children to jump. Eventually, Tsubasa starts to jump. He successfully enters the rope, and one, two, three, four, five, six... Taro and Tetsuo, too.

“Great, guys! Tsubasa, Taro, Tetsuo, you guys are all doing great! You’re jumping! You’re jumping!”

“Here we go, again!” All three of them enter the moving rope, smoothly, and start to jump with good rhythm: hop, hop, hop, hop.

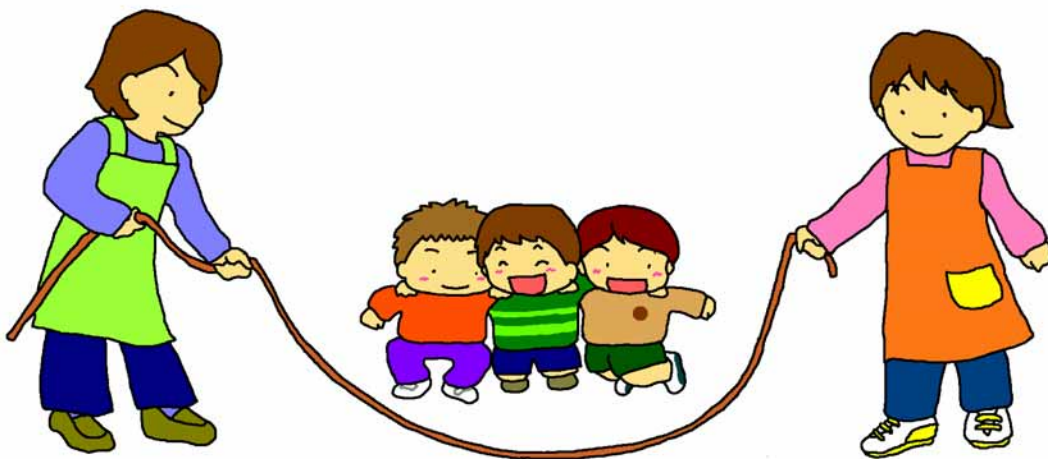
It’s already past noon.

“We’re running out of time, guys. Just one more time, and we’ll wrap this up,” No sooner have I said this than Tsubasa gives a shout.

“Hey, guys, let’s all three of us jump!”

With Tsubasa in the middle, Tetsuo and Taro grasp each other’s shoulders and begin to jump, hop, hop, hop, hop... in the long rope. Afterward, the three of them roll around on the floor, hugging their shoulders and squeezing themselves together in a roly-poly bundle.

The other teacher’s indifference about turning the rope notwithstanding, I am also surprised that there are teachers who have never spend two or three hours turning the rope. I would suggest that it is part of the teacher’s job to continue playing until the children say they want to stop.



Commentary (Jumping Rope)

Feeling unskilled at something, the child avoids doing it. Because the child doesn't get any better, there is no motivation. If it's something they like, they never tire of it, but come, come, we think, these are small children we're talking about here, isn't that only natural? Indeed, there are those difficult matters that are not accomplished easily, or things that are far beyond the child's present capacity. But there are actually quite a few things that are a breeze for most of the other children, and the child in question wants to do it too, and gives it a try, but since it takes a while to get the hang of it, the child promptly gives up. Perhaps it is within the teacher's ability to guide the child to acquire the ability.

Nothing starts without motivation. But perhaps that motivation can also be elicited boundlessly, depending on the situation. At times, a forcible pull might make things interesting. Or a small success can suddenly fill a child with motivation.

Here, the teacher first notices that the child is able to keep hanging from the high bar for a long time. The teacher elicits this action, in a highly concrete manner, counting the seconds to enhance the feeling of anticipation.

The important point may be the way the teacher got the child to jump rope after that. The teacher asks the other teacher to pay attention, to focus on turning the rope in a way that is best for each child. The teachers turn the rope, adjusting their timing to the child. First, the child succeeds in jumping once. They repeat the process. Next, the child jumps three times in a row. More than two hours of the same activity is a long time, both for the teachers and the children. Both teacher and child focus all their energy onto the rope, and the jumping starts. A rhythm is born. All three children enter the rope, and start jumping. Finally, the three newly successful children grab each other by the shoulders and jump together. Afterward, according to this report, the same three squeezed themselves into a ball and rolled around on the floor.

It is remarkable that everyone became successful jumpers. However, there is no point in focusing only on the successful outcome. What is important is how hard the teacher concentrated and turned the rope for each child during the process leading to that success. That is not something that can be described by a pat phrase like "valuing each and every child." It is concrete; it is observing the state of the child as the rope is turned, and timing the turn to suit the child. In all likelihood, the child's rhythm shifts subtly at every jump – that is why the child is unable to jump. The child may hesitate and partially stop, or move suddenly, or show total un-coordination between the upper body and legs, or move in a way that is difficult to adjust to. The teacher who adjusts the movement of the rope to such a child is probably using his or her whole body in a desperate effort to catch the child's movement and turn the rope accordingly.

The child and the teacher share their movements, through means of a rope. Through that action, the movement of the teacher is conveyed to the child, and furthermore, other children are drawn in. Such a process can be seen here.