

BETTING ON EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION TO SAVE THE WORLD

by Denisha Jones, Ph.D., J.D.

I know it may sound Pollyanna-ish but I believe early childhood education can save the world! Not the current state of early childhood education drowning in the push down of academics and ignoring the power of play, but my vision of early childhood education that capitalizes on children's unlimited imagination, boundless energy, endless curiosity, and faith in

fairness to create a space where they can be free. Ever since I taught kindergarten and I got paid to spend my days listening, observing, and engaging with young children, I realized that Robert Fulghum got it right, "all I really need to know I learned in kindergarten." Early childhood education lays the foundation for the world we want children



to experience. The messages we want them to keep close as they get older and grow stronger. The relationships we model, so they come to recognize love, empathy, nurturing, and joy. Despite the misplaced notion that children must be ready for kindergarten, we who specialize in knowing young children know that we must ready kindergarten for them.

In these uncertain times, we live in, it may seem natural to want to shield children from the news. Protecting children is an innate response that often seems like the best choice. But I fear that our rush to protect has resulted in our inability to see children for who they really are, what they really think, and what they really need to know. Children are innocent in the sense that their brain does not jump to the same logical (or illogical) conclusions as an adult brain. But they are not blind to what is happening around them, and they can sense when something big is going on. I suggest that we use our desire to protect children as a call to help them process

what they see, feel, and know. Protection doesn't mean removing all the risks or sanitizing our language. It can mean creating a safe space to have a real conversation to assure that the adults are here to offer support and guidance.

I reviewed the [guidelines](#) we recently issued on how to talk with young children about the insurrection at the Capitol on January 6th. And though I agree with everything stated, I believe we must push our thinking from wanting to shield our children from this event to prepare them to critically explore what happened. We must remember that children learn just as much from our silence as they do from our words. When we don't talk about the things they feel, know, and hear, we teach them not to question, not to wonder, and not to notice. Silence can reinforce thoughts we don't even know children have because we didn't take the time to ask. Silence allows oppression, hate, and pain to flourish in good communities. If we genuinely want to protect our children, we must break the silence and provide opportunities to have rich and honest discussions. We must fill their early years with an understanding that yes, there are big problems in the world, but together we can work towards solutions.

In my vision of early childhood education, children are free to take risks, engage deeply, enact intricate designs, laugh aloud, think quietly, and talk freely with the people in their lives. They are asked to think about power and privilege, fairness and justice, peace, and freedom. They are guided to see the problems, hear from people who experience life differently, and recognize the power in their words and actions. They witness others sharing with strangers, caring for those in need, and respecting our humanity. And as they get older, they continue to build upon this foundation adding depths of knowledge, expanding their worldview, and reinforcing their moral and civic identities. I know this vision is possible, and that's why I'm all in and betting big for early childhood education to save the world!

What's your vision for early childhood education? Send me your thoughts at denisha@dey.org.