



SERIES 2 · PLAY, WONDER, AND LEARNING

Learning Lives in the Journey

How attending to children's questions, strategies, revisions, and discoveries can make learning visible without turning it into performance.

CONNECTED CAREGIVER

Series 2 - Play, Wonder, and Learning | 19-21 minutes

ABOUT THIS PUBLICATION

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AT A GLANCE

Estimated reading time: 19-21 minutes

Central idea: A finished product shows only one moment.

When adults pay attention to children's choices, strategies, questions, revisions, and discoveries, they can respond in ways that make learning easier to see - without turning every activity into a lesson or performance.

In this publication, you will explore how to:

- 1 Notice learning while it is happening.
- 2 Offer specific, honest feedback without replacing warmth with a script.
- 3 Document selected moments with the child's participation and consent.
- 4 Treat mistakes, help, rest, and changing direction as possible parts of learning.

This publication includes small actions and questions for reflection.

FEEDBACK IS RELATIONAL, NOT A FORMULA

Warm, sincere praise is not a problem that must be eliminated. “I love it,” “Good job,” or “I’m proud of you” can express genuine connection. The goal is to add useful attention - not to monitor every action, force reflection, or turn “I noticed...” into a new performance demand. Some children want questions and conversation; others prefer quiet company, a simple acknowledgment, or space.

Notice the Learning in Motion

Imagine receiving a work review that says only, “Good job.” The words may feel pleasant, but they do not tell you what was effective, what the reviewer noticed, or what you might carry into the next project.

Children can have a similar experience when every drawing, structure, discovery, and helpful act receives the same quick response:

- “Good job!”
- “You're so smart!”
- “That's beautiful!”

These comments are often loving and well-intended. They can also end a conversation just as a child's thinking is becoming visible.

An adult does not need to ban praise or produce a perfect educational response. Sometimes the most useful change is simply to pause long enough to see what the child is doing.

Big Idea: The Product Is Only One Moment

A drawing, repaired object, planted seed, folded towel, meal, weather chart, puppet show, or cardboard construction may be finished. The learning that surrounded it is harder to display.

It may have included:

- choosing among materials;
- remembering something from an earlier experience;
- testing an idea;
- coordinating hands, eyes, words, or tools;
- noticing that a plan did not work;
- coping with frustration;
- asking for help or using an accommodation;
- watching someone else's method;
- changing direction;
- collaborating or negotiating;
- deciding that the project was complete; or
- deciding that it was not worth continuing.

The final product does not tell this whole story. A sturdy tower may have followed one familiar method. A leaning tower may contain ten new experiments. A carefully colored page may have been joyful; it may also have felt pressured. A half-finished project may represent distraction, fatigue, a better idea, a boundary, or a deliberate choice.

We cannot determine the meaning from appearance alone. We can observe, listen, and leave room for the child's account.

Look for Decisions, Not a Hidden Lesson

Across earlier briefs, children packed adventure bags, observed weather, explored approved nature materials, learned about compost and plants, helped prepare food, participated in laundry, and created puppet stories.

In each experience, the visible result was only part of what happened. Consider the decisions beneath the surface:

- Which item belonged in the bag, and why?
- Where should a weather tool be placed?
- Which safe object had a surprising texture?
- What conditions might help a plant grow?
- How could everyone take a useful role in preparing a meal?
- Which laundry task matched the child's access needs?
- How did a character respond when the story changed?

Careful observation does not mean hovering, recording everything, or assigning developmental meaning to every movement. It means being available enough to notice a few significant choices and curious enough not to assume what they mean.

Three Useful Things to Notice

1. Strategy and effort

Effort matters, but “You worked hard” is not always the whole story. Notice what the child actually tried:

- “You held the bottom while you joined the two pieces.”
- “You compared three lids before choosing that one.”
- “You slowed down when the water reached the line.”

If the effort was intense but the strategy was ineffective, respond honestly and support a new option:

“You have tried pushing it together several times, and it still comes apart. Would you like another idea, a different tool, or a break?”

Persistence is not a requirement. Resting, stopping, switching tasks, or asking for help can be thoughtful decisions.

2. Adjustment and support

Learning is not always solitary. A child may use a model, request assistance, accept a reminder, watch a sibling, use adaptive equipment, or change the environment.

- “You moved the bowl closer so you could reach it.”
- “You asked me to hold the paper while you cut.”
- “You and your brother made room for both ideas.”

Needing instruction, access, resources, safety support, or accommodation is not evidence of a poor mindset. It is part of real learning.

3. Discovery and revision

Children often reveal learning through surprise:

- “You expected the larger block to balance, and it tipped.”
- “You noticed the two leaves have different edges.”
- “Your first ending was sad. Then you gave the character another choice.”

An observation can stand on its own. If the child seems interested in talking, follow with an open invitation:

“What did you notice?” “Do you want to tell me about that change?”

Keep Warmth in the Conversation

Specific feedback should not sound like a report from an inspector. Tone, timing, facial expression, shared delight, and affection matter.

You might say:

- “You made it! You kept changing the base until it stood.”
- “I love the colors you chose. What do you like about them?”

- “Thank you for bringing the towels over. That helped us finish together.”
- “You look pleased with that. Do you want to show me your favorite part?”

The child may not want to explain. Accepting “no,” a shrug, silence, or a move to another activity protects the interaction from becoming an oral examination.

Learning Stories: Save a Small Piece of the Process

A **Learning Story** is a short, respectful record of something the child did, said, wondered, or revised. It is not a grade, diagnosis, social-media post, or comprehensive account of development.

You could:

- write down one question the child wants to remember;
- save a draft beside a later version;
- record the child's description in their own words;
- photograph a project at one meaningful stage; or
- make a two-sentence note about a strategy that changed.

For example:

What happened: The first bridge bent when the toy animal crossed. Maya placed two short boxes underneath and tested it again. ***Maya's words:*** “It needed legs in the middle.”

Keep the child involved:

- 1 Ask before photographing, recording, saving, or showing the work.
- 2 Explain who will see it and where it will be kept.
- 3 Let the child correct the adult's description.
- 4 Accept a request not to document or share.
- 5 Store records privately; do not post them online by default.
- 6 Revisit whether an older photo or story should still be kept or shared.

Documentation should serve the child and family. If it begins to interrupt play, create pressure, expose private information, or make ordinary life feel observed, put the notebook or camera away.

What Adults Learn Too

When adults slow down, they may discover that encouragement begins before any words are spoken.

We learn which materials invite sustained interest. We notice when a task is inaccessible, overwhelming, repetitive, or ready for a new challenge. We see strategies we would not have chosen. We hear the child's own definition of success.

Sometimes the most supportive response is:

“I see your thinking.”

Sometimes it is a smile, practical help, shared celebration, or silence.

ONE SMALL CHANGE

During one ordinary activity, wait a few seconds before responding. Notice one concrete choice, action, or change.

If the child welcomes conversation, describe it in one sentence. Then pause again.

PAUSE AND REFLECT

- Do my comments describe something real, or could I say the same words about any activity?
- Am I noticing strategies and support as well as visible effort?
- Can the child disagree with my interpretation or decline to explain?
- Does documentation belong to the child and family, or has it become a performance record?

- When might quiet presence be more useful than feedback?
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Offer Feedback That Helps

Start with Curiosity

Adults often ask, “If I stop saying ‘good job,’ what should I say instead?”

There is no required replacement phrase. Begin with a different question:

What response would help this child in this moment?

The answer may be celebration, information, comfort, assistance, a question, a boundary, or no comment at all.

Natural Feedback Is Useful - and Incomplete

Many activities provide direct information:

- a tower stands or falls;
- water stays in a container or leaks;
- a fastener holds or opens;
- a seed sprouts or does not;
- a puppet fits through the stage opening or catches on the edge.

This feedback can reduce the need for an adult to judge every attempt. But a result does not always explain itself.

A fallen tower does not identify which force or design choice mattered. A seed may fail to sprout because of age, moisture, temperature, light, planting depth, disease, or another condition. A child can form an incorrect conclusion from a real result.

Adults still have important roles:

- protect physical and emotional safety;
- provide accurate information;
- demonstrate tools and techniques;
- make materials and spaces accessible;
- help separate observation from interpretation; and
- intervene when repeated trial and error would be unsafe, wasteful, humiliating, or unlikely to teach the intended idea.

Let the result speak first when it is safe. Then help the child investigate what it may mean.

Describe Before You Interpret

A useful response often has two steps:

- 1 Describe something observable.**
- 2 Invite the child's meaning, if they want to share it.**

For example:

- “I see three shades of blue here. Did you choose them for a reason?”
- “The second ramp is lower than the first. What happened when you tested it?”
- “You moved away and covered your ears. Would you like it quieter, or would you rather stop?”
- “You crossed out the first line and started again. Do you want me to look at both versions?”

Avoid turning an observation into disguised evaluation:

- “I noticed you finally did it correctly.”
- “I noticed you didn't give up like last time.”
- “I noticed you made the good choice.”

Those statements tell the child what the adult values while borrowing the language of neutral observation. If evaluation is needed, be clear and explain the reason:

“Putting the knife down before reaching was the safe choice.”

Ask Fewer, Better Questions

Questions can help children organize ideas. Too many can make play feel like a quiz or require language the child does not want to use.

Begin with permission or interest:

- “Would you like to tell me about it?”
- “Can I ask what you tried there?”
- “Do you want an idea, help, or more time?”

Then choose one question that matches the moment:

- What were you trying to make happen?
- How did you decide?
- Which part felt tricky?
- Did anything surprise you?
- What changed between the first try and this one?
- Is there anything you would change next time?
- What would you like me to notice?

Wait. Children may answer through speech, gesture, drawing, demonstration, a communication device, or action. They may also decline.

Make Feedback Fit the Child

People differ in how much attention they want while working. One child may enjoy narrating every decision. Another may lose concentration when questioned. A child who is proud may want the whole family to look; another may want the project kept private.

Offer choices:

- “Do you want me to watch, help, or give you space?”
- “Would you like a comment now or after you're done?”
- “Should I ask questions, or would you rather show me?”
- “Do you want advice, encouragement, or just company?”

Adjust for communication, sensory, motor, attention, and learning needs. A child does not have to make eye contact, speak spontaneously, tolerate public praise, work independently, or persist for a certain length of time to demonstrate learning.

Be Careful with Effort Praise

“You worked so hard” can recognize real investment. Used indiscriminately, it can sound untruthful, reward struggle for its own sake, or imply that success depends only on trying harder.

Broaden the focus:

- **Strategy:** “You sorted the pieces by shape before starting.”
- **Revision:** “You changed the plan after the first test.”
- **Help-seeking:** “You knew when another pair of hands would help.”
- **Collaboration:** “You checked whether Sam agreed before moving the pieces.”
- **Care:** “You carried the container slowly so it stayed level.”

- **Boundary:** “You noticed you were tired and chose to stop.”

Effort cannot replace effective instruction, suitable tools, enough time, rest, safety, nourishment, access, or accommodation. If a child is stuck, do not use encouragement to withhold help.

Create a Family Learning Conversation

Once a week - or whenever it feels natural - invite the family to share something they noticed, tried, changed, or want to understand.

Try one prompt:

- What surprised you this week?
- What did you change your mind about?
- When did someone or something help you?
- What question are you carrying?
- What did you decide to stop doing?
- What would you like to try next?

Adults participate too:

- “I learned that parsley and rosemary need different amounts in that recipe.”
- “The feeder design I copied was not suitable for our location, so I looked for safer wildlife guidance.”

- “I kept folding the towels one way, but your method fit the shelf better.”
- “I learned that I need more information before deciding what that storm cloud means.”

Keep the conversation voluntary. Family members can pass, draw, demonstrate, use a device, share privately later, or simply listen. Do not rank discoveries, compare children, or require a cheerful lesson from a difficult experience.

ONE SMALL CHANGE

The next time a child shows you something, ask:

“Would you like me to celebrate, listen, ask a question, or help?”

If a menu of choices is not useful for that child, offer one simple response and watch how it lands.

PAUSE AND REFLECT

- Am I using questions to understand, or to steer the child toward my answer?
- Does my feedback identify a strategy, discovery, contribution, or safety choice?
- Am I expecting effort to solve a problem that requires instruction, access, or rest?

- Can a mistake remain private rather than becoming a family lesson?
 - What kinds of feedback help each person in this family feel respected?
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Keep Learning Open

A Family Learning Practice

Choose a comfortable time every week or two. It might be during a meal, on a walk, before a story, or while looking through a few family notes.

Invite each person to complete one sentence:

- “I noticed...”
- “I wondered...”
- “I tried...”
- “I needed...”
- “I changed...”
- “I am still thinking about...”

The practice can take two minutes. Its purpose is not to produce an inspiring answer. It is to make room for curiosity, uncertainty, support, and revision.

Some weeks, the honest reflection may be:

“I do not know yet.” “I need more help.” “That was not worth continuing.” “I enjoyed it, but I did not learn anything I can name.”

Those answers belong too.

Big Words, Clear Meanings

Growth mindset

A **growth mindset** is the belief that some abilities can develop through learning, practice, effective strategies, instruction, and support.

It does not mean that everyone can reach the same outcome, that ability changes without limits, or that a positive attitude overcomes disability, discrimination, illness, poverty, unsafe conditions, or missing resources. People differ, tasks differ, and environments matter.

Research has linked some forms of process-focused feedback with children's later beliefs about learning, but the evidence does not justify large promises. A longitudinal study of 53 children found that parents' spontaneous process praise in the toddler years predicted more incremental motivational beliefs at ages seven to eight; because the home observation was correlational and the sample was small, it cannot by itself prove that the praise caused the later beliefs. A large meta-analysis of growth-mindset interventions found a very

small average academic effect that was no longer statistically significant after correcting for publication bias, alongside substantial concerns about study quality.

The practical message is modest: speak truthfully about the possibility of learning, draw attention to useful strategies and support, and avoid labeling a child as permanently smart, bad at something, lazy, or naturally gifted. Do not expect a phrase or mindset lesson to repair a poorly matched environment.

Practice

Practice means repeating or revisiting something in a way that helps the brain or body learn.

Useful practice may include:

- changing the strategy;
- receiving instruction or feedback;
- breaking a task into smaller steps;
- using an accessible tool;
- resting between attempts;
- practicing in a safer or quieter setting;
- watching a demonstration; or
- deciding that another goal matters more.

Repetition without information, recovery, or an effective strategy may reinforce an error or create frustration. “Try

again” is most helpful when the child has a reason to believe the next attempt can be different.

Mistakes Can Inform Us; They Do Not Need to Be Celebrated

A mistake may reveal a misconception, suggest a design change, create an unexpected possibility, or become part of a story. It can also cost time, damage something, hurt, embarrass, or simply feel disappointing.

Adults do not need to insist that every error is “beautiful.” Instead:

- 1 Attend to safety and emotion.
- 2 Describe what is known without blame.
- 3 Ask whether the child wants comfort, help, information, repair, or space.
- 4 Look for a lesson only if one is available and useful.

Beautiful Oops! by Barney Saltzberg offers a playful story connection: a tear, spill, fold, or smudge can become part of a new picture. Read it as an invitation to creative possibility, not a demand that children enjoy every accident.

The Product May Be Finished. The Learning May Continue.

When a project ends, the child may carry forward:

- a question;
- a physical or communication skill;
- a strategy that worked;
- a method that did not work in that setting;
- new language;
- a memory of collaboration;
- a clearer preference or boundary; or
- confidence that help is available.

Learning may continue later, in a different activity, or not at all. Adults do not need to extract a measurable outcome from every experience.

The deeper family habit is attention: seeing children as thinkers whose choices are worth noticing and whose interpretations are worth hearing.

Try This for Two Weeks

Once on most days, notice a moment when you might offer a quick, familiar compliment. Choose the response that best fits:

- offer the compliment warmly;
- add one specific observation;
- ask whether the child wants to talk;

- acknowledge a strategy, contribution, boundary, or request for help; or
- remain quietly present.

Examples:

- “You did it - and you look delighted.”
- “I noticed you left a space for everyone at the table.”
- “That took several approaches. Want to tell me which one worked?”
- “You asked for a break before it became too much.”
- “I am here if you want me to see it.”

At the end of two weeks, reflect privately:

- Which responses opened connection?
- Which sounded scripted?
- When did questions interrupt?
- Which child preferences became clearer?
- What support mattered more than words?

Keep what strengthens the relationship. Let go of what turns family life into a feedback exercise.

ONE SMALL CHANGE

Choose one family reflection prompt and use it once this week. Let every person - including adults - pass.

“What is one thing you noticed, changed, needed, or still wonder about?”

PAUSE AND REFLECT

- Do I talk about growth as a possibility supported by conditions, rather than a guarantee?
 - Can I respond to frustration before searching for a lesson?
 - Does this child have the instruction, access, tools, time, and rest the task requires?
 - Can stopping or changing goals count as thoughtful reflection?
 - Which family moments deserve attention without being documented?
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WHERE THESE IDEAS FIT

The Invitation to Play provides the environmental foundation for exploration and participation. *The Story Worth Saving* deepens careful observation and reflection. *Everyday Treasures, Endless Possibilities* shows how open-ended materials create room for experimentation, creativity, and revision. Read together, this package provides broader context and helps caregivers choose where to explore a particular idea more deeply.

Key Takeaway

The finished picture, tower, meal, chart, or performance is only one part of the experience. Learning also lives in the choices, questions, strategies, supports, revisions, discoveries, boundaries, and relationships that surround it.

Notice a little more. Describe what is true. Stay warm. Ask less and listen longer. Offer help when help is needed. Let the child decide what their work means and whether it should be shared.

The goal is not to find the perfect phrase.

It is to help create a family life in which thinking can be visible, mistakes can be handled honestly, support is available, and no one has to perform growth for approval.

Learn · Connect · Grow

LEARN

What is one idea from this publication that you want to remember?

CONNECT

What did this publication help you notice or reconsider about the person in your care, your relationship, or your circumstances?

GROW

What is one small, safe, manageable action you may try, practice, or pay attention to next?

Research Foundations and Further Reading

- 1 Gunderson, E. A., Gripshover, S. J., Romero, C., Dweck, C. S., Goldin-Meadow, S., & Levine, S. C. (2013). Parent praise to 1- to 3-year-olds predicts children's motivational frameworks 5 years later. *Child Development*, 84(5), 1526-1541. This small longitudinal study found an association between early process praise and later motivational beliefs; it did not establish a simple causal rule for family feedback.
- 2 Macnamara, B. N., & Burgoyne, A. P. (2023). Do growth mindset interventions impact students' academic achievement? A systematic review and meta-analysis with recommendations for best practices. *Psychological Bulletin*, 149(3-4), 133-173. This review found that average achievement effects were very small and sensitive to publication-bias correction and study quality.
- 3 American Academy of Pediatrics. Perfectionism: How to Help Your Child Avoid the Pitfalls. Practical guidance on focusing feedback on process, effort, learning, and reflection rather than flawless outcomes.
- 4 American Academy of Pediatrics. Sharenting: 5 Questions to Ask Before You Post. Questions for protecting children's privacy, dignity, and future control over family photos and stories.

- 5 Rinaldi, C. (2006). *In Dialogue with Reggio Emilia: Listening, Researching and Learning*. Routledge. An influential perspective on listening to and documenting children's thinking.
- 6 Dweck, C. S. (2006). *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success*. Random House. An influential introduction to fixed and growth mindsets; broad claims should be read alongside later systematic reviews.

A FINAL REMINDER

Choose and adapt any idea, reflection prompt, activity, or suggested response based on the individual needs, abilities, circumstances, and safety of the person in your care. Seek guidance from an appropriately qualified professional when a situation calls for individualized support. If anyone may be in immediate danger, contact the appropriate local emergency or crisis service.

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