

Make and Model

Recently, I made the acquaintance of a five-year-old boy named Aaron who possesses an unusual ability. This young fellow can identify practically every car on the road by make and model. “There’s a Honda Civic,” he’ll say as he points a chubby little finger.

Aaron’s dad, a professional mechanic, loves cars, and he has shared his passion with his son. Automotive matters have provided the context for much of their life together. Once I learned that, Aaron’s unusual skill made perfect sense.

Since meeting Aaron and his vehicularly impassioned family, I’ve been thinking about Aaron’s categorization skills and how far they will take him in school. While other preschoolers are circling “objects that are alike” on worksheets, Aaron is applying far more sophisticated concepts in a way that engages him ferociously. He has no idea that he’s getting ready for kindergarten. He only knows that he and his dad really love cars, and he enjoys the power his knowledge about them affords.

When it comes to getting their children ready for kindergarten, parents often focus on learning academic skills. They may create artificial exercises designed to teach children their colors, shapes, letters and numbers. While there’s nothing wrong with these exercises, they bleach the life right out of concepts that children can learn in more meaningful ways. They provide a kind of stilted learning that represents such a small bit of all that kids want to learn.

Children can learn those same concepts through many real-life experiences, such as self-help skills. Dressing, tying shoes, grooming, and feeding all provide countless opportunities for shapes (what shape are your buttons?), colors (what color is your shirt?), and counting (how many green beans on your plate?).

Children feel like they belong as they see themselves contributing to the real work of the family. Household tasks such as setting the table, sorting laundry and picking up toys promote family connections at the same time they teach critical skills such as one-to-one correspondence, categorization, and fine and gross motor skills.

Aaron’s parents have discovered how much they can teach their son by sharing with him their own personal interest. When a father shares his love for woodworking, his child learns about tools and resourcefulness. When Mom describes her process of weaving on a loom, her child learns about textiles and patterns and planning ahead. When parents share their love for bowling, their child learns how to keep score, and how to make recreation part of his life.

This sort of knowledge prepares a child for success in school and life more than any colors or letters. It prepares him for rich contentment, something more precious than an A on a report card.