

# **Kindergarten at LWS Portal to Lifelong Happiness & Success**

## **Why Kindergarten Counts**

**By Living Wisdom School Director Helen Purcell**

Can kindergarten influence your child's chances of success and happiness in later life? Most definitely! – but perhaps not in the ways you imagined.

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## **What kind of education do you want for your child?**

I would like to make a case for a complete, well-rounded approach that takes into account not only the child's physical, mental, emotional and spiritual well-being, but their *individuality* as well.

## **Play & Learning – Essential Partners**

When we're talking about a four- or five-year-old, the first thing we need to take into account is that they absolutely need a playful, loving approach to learning. It's the single most important key to preparing these little children for success now and in the years ahead.

Once we have that playful, happy foundation, we find that the children feel inwardly free to achieve

amazing things. For example, it enables our kindergarteners to happily acquire math concepts two to four years ahead of their grade level.

Many of our parents have come from rigid school cultures where the children were forced to sit at their desks all day and were allowed very limited playtime.

Some of the schools in our area that have adopted that system give their kindergartners just 20 minutes away from the classroom at lunchtime. Learning is reduced to something incredibly formulaic and dry, even at the earliest age. And because it isn't creative, it utterly fails to produce learning in the most efficient and natural way, because it doesn't make use of the child's natural enthusiasm. It's pounding information into their young brains without opening their hearts to receive it.

It harkens to the industrial era when all instruction was directed, even with four- and five-year-olds, to how it would affect their SAT scores in high school. But what unfortunately happens is that it sets up tremendous resistance in the child, because it's fighting against the way they are made. And it runs completely against the way they can best be drawn into the learning experience, and the way they can absorb learning most naturally and efficiently.



*The day begins with Circle Time, just before math class. The children sing and share, and practice breathing exercises to calm themselves and focus their attention – priceless skills for all of life!*

In his wonderful book [\*Where You Go, Is Not Who You'll Be: An Antidote to the College Admissions Mania\*](#), Frank Bruni, a long-time New York Times columnist and feature writer, laments the tragic failures of the traditional approach of forcing children into a system that ignores the way they are made. He excoriates today's approach which is oriented toward improving the children's high school grades and SAT scores and preparing every child to be accepted at Harvard. I think it's a wonderful sign that St. Francis High School has made Bruni's book required reading for every parent.

I often talk with parents of kindergarten-age children who are deeply concerned about this very false and misleading kind of rigor, which fails to tune into the child's actual needs at each developmental stage, and which, in kindergarten, must include play.

In the very early years, they should *not* be learning, first and foremost, that learning is torture. They should be learning that learning is *fun*. At that age, they do not need to understand that learning, in later years, may require hard work to reap the joys of mastering academic challenges.

At this age, they are very open to whatever is going on in the classroom and at school. And an instructor who can bring together the twin threads of learning and play, and do it in a happy, loving way will be very successful. As we demonstrate in our book, [\*Head & Heart: How a Balanced Education Nurtures Happy Children Who Excel in School & Life\*](#), our kindergartners are *not* falling behind their Harvard-acceptance competitors. Quite the opposite, as a direct result of the playful approach, they are able to absorb concepts at the third and fourth grade curriculum level.

I'm sure that most of us, when we visualize a kindergarten classroom full of four- to six-year olds, imagine a squirming mass of young bodies and a harried, red-faced teacher who's yelling at them to behave. But parents and educators who visit our kindergarten are confronted with a very different picture.



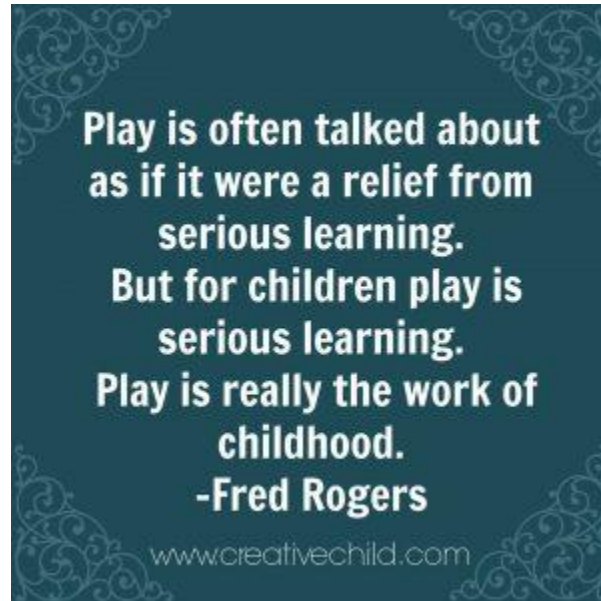
*During the first months of PreK-K, the students learn that learning is great fun when they are challenged at their own level. At that point, they are able and eager to spend time learning quietly together – a most unusual and happy accomplishment for a classroom of four- to six-year-olds!*

First of all, when learning is delivered in a format that matches the children's natural development, they become deeply engaged. Thus – believe it or not! – you will find four or five tiny tots working silently together, heads bowed in deep concentration.

We are intent on helping each child be comfortable and happy within the school environment. With this goal in mind, a practice that helps us greatly is the inclusion of yoga and meditation at the start of the school day. If you can help children discover an enjoyable state of calmness and concentration within themselves – a state of happy, relaxed mental attention – they will be gaining a powerful tool that will help them be successful throughout their school years.

The kids start the day with yoga and meditation, just before math class. When you can set a tone where they are comfortable and at ease in the environment, a

great deal becomes possible in math, phonics, writing, art, and science. Anything is possible when the children's hearts are open and eager to dive into the day's lessons.



## **The Incalculable Benefits of A Stress-Free Learning Environment**

When you can give a child an experience every day at school of being comfortable and relaxed in the environment, and with the teacher and the other kids, it means that they will never have to fend off the distractions they would find in schools that are focused entirely on academics, and that spend little time creating an optimal learning environment.

Most schools do little, if anything, to steer the kids away from forming cliques and treating each other badly, with the upshot that each child must deal with these extremely negative and harmful factors that can

make school too stressful and tense to give full attention to their studies.



*During partner walks, the youngest children spend time with the older ones, forming happy bonds of respect and caring.*

It's well documented that generalized stress at school interferes with learning. In a *Washington Post*

article, "How much does stress affect learning?" (June 10, 2011), education and foreign affairs reporter Valerie Post quotes Catharine H. Warner, a lecturer in sociology at the University of Maryland:

"Our findings indicate that stress in the classroom environment affects children's likelihood of exhibiting learning problems (difficulties with attentiveness, task persistence, and flexibility), externalizing problems (frequency with which the child argues, fights, disturbs ongoing activities, and acts impulsively), problems interacting with peers (difficulties in forming friendships, dealing with other children, expressing feelings, and showing sensitivity, or internalizing problems (presence of anxiety, loneliness, low self-esteem, and sadness in the child). These findings suggest that stress – in the form of negative classroom conditions – negatively affects the way children pay attention in class, stay on task, and are able to move from one activity to another."

The tremendous energy that we devote to creating a calm, peaceful, joyful, accepting classroom and school environment frees each child to be exactly who they are. And who they are will be exceedingly individual. When you're allowed to be who you are, and you're challenged at exactly that level, the result is that you will have daily successes that will give you a joyful experience of learning. But if you're just trying to meet somebody else's rigid demands and requirements all the time, at somebody else's level, it creates a tension that *prevents* learning by shutting down your energy and enthusiasm.

As a teacher for more than fifty years, it has been my experience that tension is never a positive factor when it comes to learning. On the other hand, feeling free to make mistakes, and to have those mistakes accepted as a natural part of the learning process, is an amazing, blissful and extremely helpful experience for the child.

In our school, we achieve that freedom by combining learning with play, and by making sure our kids have exposure to free time. We fight against the misguided compulsion to structure every minute of the child's day. It can create a very stressful situation for a kindergartner, when their teachers and parents are scheduling their every waking moment. Even during our after-school program, where the kids are mostly working on homework, there's a relaxed sense of freedom, and the children love being there.



## Children Can Be Happy *and* Successful in School

Parents and educators who visit our school invariably remark on how every child is completely him- or herself, and how they show a remarkable level of maturity and confidence. It's an extremely rare and extraordinary experience in schools today, to see how centered they are in themselves, in a natural and real way.



*Krunal focuses on his math classwork. The photographer held his video camera less than a foot from Krunal for more than 30 seconds, yet Krunal remained entirely focused on the task at hand. It was not a rare or a posed event! It is simply part of the natural flow of the day, once the children become deeply engaged with the curriculum. A fringe benefit is that discipline problems become rare, even at this young age.*

You can see it in their eyes and in how they carry themselves. A child will walk into the principal's office, not at all intimidated, and say, "Helen, I need an ice pack." Somebody was hurt and they are eager to help,

and there's no fear or hesitation. Or they'll come in and share a birthday donut with me.

If it's a difficult situation, where they aren't feeling well, or somebody needs to call a parent, they'll come in and have absolute trust. And this is true of every adult in the school, including all of the classroom teachers and PE teachers and music teachers and math tutors – because there is a family atmosphere that's very consistent and that we cultivate very consciously every day.

It happens in every situation – in class, on the playground, and in extracurricular activities such as music and the theater program.

## **Theater Magic – An Extraordinary Experience of Learning and Growth**

Our theater program includes every child from grades K through eight. It creates an extraordinary atmosphere for learning, and for cultivating personal success qualities. The kindergarten children are on stage, rehearsing and performing with the older children, and they develop a level of comfort and confidence that is far beyond what most kindergartners get to experience at school. It allows them to walk in the world of school in a very different way, when they can engage with an adult or an older child and they can both be very playful. Partner reading and partner walks are an extension of the confidence-building practices the children experience every day.



*Young elementary children dance during a Theater Magic performance.*

Our methods come to fruition most clearly for the kindergartners during spring quarter, when you can watch a child get out of the car in the morning, brimming with confidence, and it's the same child who wouldn't look at you six or seven months earlier, or who would cringe and hold their mother's hand tightly and be very shy.

I'm thinking of a child who was extremely fearful at the start of the school year, and now her father will say, "Have a great day!" and she'll turn and look at me with a big, confident smile and say, "Good morning, Helen!"

It's a maturation that is possible because there is no exclusion. There's a definition of self here that allows for the inclusion of everybody, not just their own classmates and teachers, but every single teacher and child.

## **Choosing Happiness**

We don't have an intimidating or fearful culture. This morning, I was explaining to a parent that the fundamental principles on which our school is based

are most clearly expressed by two of our [School Rules](#): “Choose Happiness,” and “Practice Kindness.”

*Practice kindness.* Learn to practice kindness with one another and to recognize that in doing so you help create a loving and safe atmosphere.

*Choose happiness.* Learn that you have the power to choose how you will respond to life’s challenges. Learn to focus on the positive rather than the negative. Learn to control your moods and raise your energy to meet difficulties that arise.

These two rules define the culture of the school. If you choose happiness, it means that you don’t have the right to take out a bad mood on anybody – you have an obligation to use your will power and your understanding to turn the energy around, with the ready and willing help of your teacher and classmates.

It’s amazing to watch the rules in action. A child will come to school, and maybe they aren’t feeling well. Maybe they’re feeling a little moody or snarky, and everybody is sympathetic. The teacher says, “I’m so sorry you’re not feeling well. Go over to the safe spot and take a moment, and take your teddy.” So there’s sympathy, but there’s also an expectation that at some point, and it should be pretty soon, you need to choose to be happy.

And they do, because they’re shown how to do it. They are given the specific steps they can take to be kind and choose happiness. And when you articulate the steps, they learn that they have the power to choose positive feelings and behavior.



*Partner reading.*

All of the children in the school know each other well, and the older ones love to help the kindergartners.

It's an incredibly valuable lesson for now and for the longer term. And the other children have the opportunity to practice kindness, because they aren't going to be saying, "Oh, stop being such a chump." The right behavior is constantly modeled for them, and the teachers deliberately take time to give them instructions on how to choose happiness every time the need arises.

Over several months the older children work with the younger children at play rehearsals, and they are very sensitive about their well-being. They want to take care of them, and they'll help them and guide them. It's a spirit of friendship that includes a sense of responsibility for the other person, especially the little ones.

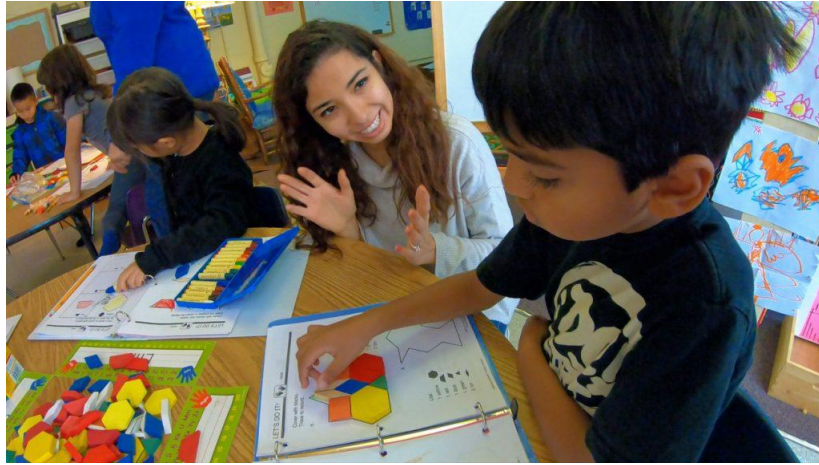
It's so easy for children to be selfish and self-involved. Especially when they're kindergarten age, it's

all about them. They need to grow into a sense of the other, and to be able to learn how to do it at a young age, and to see it constantly modeled for them by the adults and the other children in the school environment is a priceless gift. It's an invaluable foundation for acquiring the maturity that we must all achieve to be successful at every level, and it's an awareness that we're instilling in them starting on the first day of kindergarten – the awareness of another's reality.

## **Does Living Wisdom School Over-Emphasize Soft Skills?**

There's a huge question that parents ask about our school. "You have a wonderful school culture, but how does it translate to grades and test scores?" And, of course, the proof is in our graduates' high school and college grades, and in their adult successes.

In our book [\*Happiness & Success at School\*](#), there's a wonderful account of how, in the military and in sports, individual attention, individual freedom, individual acceptance, and a culture of what's best for the individual produce the highest success. We were able to show how, at Harvard, Stanford, and Google, happiness and success go together. We are not simply spouting wishy-washy, unrealistic ideas that we haven't tested and that don't work in the real world. The interplay of happiness and success is a real-life experience at our country's elite universities, at major corporations, and in sports and the military.



*Constant individual attention and encouragement help the youngest children learn to love learning. TK-K intern Ava Magholi encourages a young math student.*

I received an application recently from a parent of a fifth-grade boy. It was very unfortunate that the class was full and we weren't able to take him. The parent was sad because the child's predisposition is to self-judge himself to an extent that he becomes paralyzed – he's afraid to try anything new because he's afraid to fail. And to build a culture and an attitude toward learning that includes the ability to “fail happily” is a wonderfully liberating gift.

In the late 1980s, a professor of computer science at MIT, Seymour Papert, published a book called *Mindstorms* in which he pointed out that the most wonderful lesson children can take from learning to program computers is that mistakes are a natural and necessary part of the process. He pointed out that professional programmers make, on average, at least 10 mistakes per hundred lines of their first code drafts.

Papert called it “the debugging approach to life.” Kids today have so much stress around success, and on getting it right the first time. There’s a tremendous competitive and comparative emphasis in the typical approach to learning, where you’re always wondering if I’m as good as somebody else. As opposed to “What am I learning?” And “Was it fun?”

In our school, the kids know who’s good at this or that subject, because we celebrate their successes. But the fact is that we constantly celebrate their small, daily, individual successes as the most important kind of success. We are celebrating their small experiences of mastery as artists, poets, singers, scientists, dancers, and mathematicians.

There isn’t a child in our school who doesn’t have an area of success that we can celebrate. I’m thinking of a boy who had some very significant challenges at school, until he began rehearsing for the all-school play, whereupon he flourished amazingly. The success he enjoyed in the theater program translated to an ability to self-regulate in class, where he now wants to do well because he’s experienced what it feels like.

Each of us has an inborn drive to experience happiness and to be free from suffering. And the universal spiritual law is that whenever we expand our awareness by learning something new or by overcoming a challenge, we experience a corresponding inflow of joy. And if you’re having happy learning experiences every day, you’re going to want more and more of them.



## The Straitjacket of Modern Education

I often wonder how our culture went wrong, when it failed to take account of the link between learning and happiness. Children are so elastic, and so ready to learn, including learning which thoughts and actions will give them joy. And instead, they suddenly find themselves bound in straitjackets of expectations that may or may not be realistic. And it's tragic.

Learning by rote and learning by drill no longer needs to be the foundation of a child's school experience. What is necessary is to cultivate imagination, resourcefulness, and creativity, starting at the earliest age, and then remove the limits. We need to support the children who are learning at the bottom end and take the limits off each child's horizons, so that they can surprise themselves and keep growing every day.

We have a first grader who has artistic ability beyond all imagining. He made several sketches of a ship, beautifully executed with lots of fine detail, and we put them on the cover of our annual literary magazine. We had a choice – we could celebrate excellence, or we could impose some false standard of egalitarianism. But it's absolutely clear that what that little boy has achieved is *not* equal, and we feel that it's a false imposition to pretend that his work isn't exceptional.

Everybody in the school acknowledged and celebrated the boy's talent. The older kids were saying, "Whoa, who did that?" But the truth is, we celebrate

*every* child's successes, and we ensure that there are plenty of successes to celebrate, by having them operate at the tip of their ability, mastering challenges at their level.

A girl who came to us in the fall absolutely flourished in the school play. She took to her role and developed it amazingly. That little girl, who has so much talent, was very unhappy in her former school, until she came here and felt embraced by the energy, and realized that she could let loose and be as creative as her abilities allowed.

This morning I spoke with parents who are brain researchers at Stanford. They chose our school because they have friends whose children go to our school, and they recognized the level of acceptance and individuality that exists here, and the happiness of the children. But, more than anything else, they simply want their children to be happy during their time in school.

The father was educated at a school in Israel that was very progressive, but the mother had a more standard education, and they both just want their children to be happy while they're learning.

One of the biggest tests for our parents is that when their children reach third or fourth grade, they're tempted to buy into the culture that is constantly pressuring them to think, "Oh my God, how am I going to get my kid into Harvard, Stanford, Yale, Princeton, or MIT?"

The parents I spoke with this morning understand the theoretical and practical aspects of our system,

but they really didn't want to talk about that side. They wanted to tell me how the families of children in our school had told them that their kids have never been happier, and that a great deal of learning goes hand in hand with a great deal of happiness.

It's really that simple. And what parents everywhere need to realize, and our government and schools need to realize, is that happiness and school success are *not* mutually exclusive – that, in fact, the opposite is true: happiness is indispensable for the most efficient learning to take place.

We need to help children leverage their natural gifts. And maybe the process won't be as linear as our culture would prefer, and maybe we won't always be able to quantify it with numbers. But our successes have proved our methods year after year, in terms of our graduates' high school and college grades and their adult successes.

## **Learning Priceless Personal Success Qualities**

Another factor that makes our kindergarten so special and powerful is that from the first day we practice leading with the heart. We teach each child what it feels like to appreciate another person's reality, and how happy it makes *them* feel.

If a kindergartner gets to someplace first, it's their nature to let everyone know that it's *their* place. They are very territorial, and it's all about "mine." My toy, my place, my pencil. Yet they also have very open

hearts, if they're allowed to. And it's bringing those two together, by showing them that the greatest happiness comes from being unselfish, that creates a wonderful learning environment. It's a learning that may take people a lifetime to acquire. But whether it's in the sandbox or on the tricycle, it's something that they're learning here every day.

Two kids were arguing over a bike. We did a conflict resolution, and one child said, "Okay, how about five minutes for him and five minutes for me?"

The teacher said, "That seems reasonable."

The other child thought about it and said, "Well, what if we had it at the same time?"

The teacher said, "I don't think that's possible."

He said, "Oh, yeah, it is, because one of us could drive and the other could stand on the back and then we could switch places."

It's a defining story, because it illustrates how, once they understand the principle, they can be creative and take it a lot farther than we might imagine.

We help them have many experiences of happiness, and we teach them how to find it for themselves. And they begin to look for it all the time, and they become very expansive.

I was talking with one of the eighth graders here in my office, when he suddenly said, "Oh, hey, Helen, I gotta go!"

I said, "Well, I'm not quite finished."

He said, "I know, but the younger kids are about to show up, and they want me to hide the ball for them."

What's interesting is that RJ is so connected with the younger children. They are these tiny kindergartners and first graders, and RJ is a big, hulking kid, almost six feet tall, who's very strong and buff and athletic, and he's wanting to play this game with the little ones where he'll hide the ball and they'll have to find it.

For an older child to hide the ball might be considered hostile, but what's happening here is very different. And in this environment everyone knows that it's an expression of friendship. The little tots adore RJ, and he was willing to break off a conversation with me to go help them.

## **“No Bullying!” – More than Just Empty Words**

I talked yesterday with the principals of two of our local high schools. They were asking me about the culture at our Living Wisdom High School, because I'm on the school board and we're up for certification.

When the conversation came around to what makes our school different, I very boldly said, “We do not have bullying at our school.” And I noticed a sudden change in the atmosphere. The men sat quietly and had nothing to say, and I knew why – because they couldn't say the same about their schools.

I said, “It's not allowed, and it's not that we have to come down punitively in order to enforce it. It's that we teach a culture of kindness, and our children

understand from the inside that it gives them the highest happiness.”

I would say that 75 percent of the parents who sit in this office who are looking for a suitable school for their children are trying to escape bullying.

And, well, don't you think that it comes from the extremely one-sided, highly competitive atmosphere in the schools at all levels? I'm not talking about sports, I'm talking about grades and social advancement and test scores, and how there's a constant, brutal sense of competitiveness that permeates the social culture in schools today. The culture, particularly in high school, can be cruelly competitive and stratified.

Many parents in Silicon Valley have had to struggle to get to where they are, and they naturally value material success. And when you can have an efficient and balanced environment such as we have here, and a culture that brings the whole child into the educational process, and not just their will power and their brain, it can look a little suspicious to them initially, if they're consumed by anxiety about the child's chances of getting into Harvard – even though we can hold our heads high when it comes to our graduates' successes.

Our supportive culture frees a child to do extraordinarily well. I've seen kids who were extremely introverted and fearful and were not able to thrive in the highly competitive cultures of other schools, and who come to us and blossom, to a point where they are respected, accepted, and naturally part of the group.

I'm sure that we will reach a tipping point in this country where parents will wake up to the simple truth that we have demonstrated for 45 years – that kids can be highly successful at school and be happy at the same time.