

Parenting 101: Being Specific -- Parent Power

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One of the keys to development and education revolves around the word *specific*. How specific the input is, and how appropriate it is to the individual child, largely determines how much impact it has on the brain. Random, disorganized input, which I call “stuff,” does not develop brains; specific, appropriate input does. Understanding the importance of being specific and *how* to be specific can aid tremendously in the educational process.

Historically, parents interacting one-on-one with their children have provided the majority of the specific input crucial to their children’s development. Imagine a parent looking at a book about dinosaurs with their child. The parent intuitively knows how to speak so their child can process what they say. If the child is three years old, the parent uses short sentences and point to lots of pictures. If the child is six, the parent knows to speak in longer sentences and short paragraphs, and to look for the child’s feedback. The child will give constant feedback as to whether or not the parent is being appropriately specific to the child. If the parent is being successful, the child is engaged, excited and wants more. If the parent starts talking too much and does not engage the child with the pictures, the child will start to fidget, yawn, or need a potty break. The parent, however, will often sense the shift in the child’s attention before it goes too far astray and will modify what he or she is doing without even being aware of it. Because the parent is able to respond and react to the child in this one-on-one situation, the parent is able to tailor their input to fit the child. This is being appropriately *specific*.

The younger the child is, the more he or she needs one-one-one interaction with a caregiver offering specific input and stimulation. The further we get from one-on-one interaction, the further we get from being able to deliver specific, brain-changing input.

Now think about the challenge facing a schoolteacher who is attempting to provide her students with specific input. Consider an algebra teacher, for example, with thirty children in her class. Scores on her students’ standardized math tests span a range of five grade levels. Some of her students could cover the year’s curriculum in a month, and others don’t even know their math facts. She has children who love learning and others who hate every minute they have to spend in the classroom. Her class includes strong visual learners as well as students who have visual learning issues. Some have great auditory learning

skills while others can't follow a three-step direction. There are children who have attention issues and those with long-term memory issues. And, as in many classrooms, there is a child who cannot speak the teacher's language. How can this teacher be specific? The reality is that for many of her students she can't.

If input is not specific, it tends to be just so much "stuff," which is why many students fail to learn algebra and other subjects. Learning occurs only when information is delivered in a way that the brain can receive and process the information. How a child's brain receives, processes and remembers information depends upon their stage of development and the degree to which their unique neurological system has become properly organized. Specific input appropriate to the individual student is imperative to the learning process! Until our educational system reflects this essential truth about how children learn, we will continue to have children slip through the cracks and drop out of school. The more parents and educators understand the key principles of learning, and demand that our educational system incorporate those principles, the more we can help all children learn and fulfill their potential.

As parents, one of the best things we can do for our children is to spend time interacting with them. Ironically, in an attempt to provide our children with "opportunities" we run them around to piano lessons, gymnastics and soccer games when often the most enriching thing we can do for them is just to be with them, talk with them, read to them, and play with them. Parents who give their children focused, one-on-one interaction on a daily basis provide vital stimulation their kids need to thrive and succeed.

In the next article I will discuss the power of "talk" and the price we are paying as a society because we are doing less of it.

Bob Doman