

All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten

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As far back as I can remember, I wanted to be a schoolteacher — more specifically, a kindergarten teacher. I still remember my own kindergarten teacher, Mrs. Justice, and how much I looked forward to spending time in her class each day. I used to “play” school at home growing up — and no doubt drove my siblings crazy when I made them pretend to be my students and forced them to learn what I thought they should know. I grew up and went off to college to pursue my dream: following a path of study in elementary education and child psychology. I was inspired by the thought of shaping formative young minds.

There was a glut of teachers at the time I graduated, and finding a teaching job was not easy. So I started out as a substitute teacher filling in when the regular teacher was out. One such opportunity involved teaching a third/fourth grade combination class while the teacher was out on a medical leave. I vividly remember being introduced to the class by that teacher — who actually shared with me (in front of the students) that “these are the slower fourth graders and the brighter third graders.”

Her comments made me wonder how much “brighter” those fourth graders could have been if they weren’t always hearing that they were slow. And I have to admit: I also wondered why someone like that had a teaching job when I didn’t.

Shortly after that substitute teaching experience, I was hired to teach kindergarten in an ethnically diverse, low-income community in the Seattle area. It would prove to be one of the best jobs of my life. Something about those inquisitive young minds and fresh young faces made me feel like I was really making a difference in their lives.

I remember one young boy who became so enamored with his teacher (me) that his parents had to move him to a different kindergarten class because he wasn’t learning anything. Or Byron (his real name) who came into class late the first few mornings, loudly slamming the door and announcing that he had missed the “[expletive] school bus again.”

My shocked reaction the first few times Byron made his announcement only made it worse. I quickly figured out that he was only looking for attention, and my response was certainly giving him that. Eventually, my newly acquired teaching skills helped me figure out that if I ignored that negative behavior and instead focused on and recognized the more positive behavior I

wanted from him and what he did well, he would come around — and he did. I could go on and on telling stories about my wonderful experiences as a kindergarten teacher and all that I learned from those young students, but suffice it to say I was very disappointed when I lost that job after just two years due to budget cuts.

I'm often asked how I went from teaching kindergarten to a career in banking, and whether or not I think my college education was a waste of time since I didn't continue teaching. It's actually quite the contrary. While I certainly learned a lot about how children learn and about early childhood behavior from my college classes and short time teaching, I also like to think I learned a little bit about how to work with people at any age.

Kindergarten kids are full of energy with short attention spans and are not always easy to quiet down. In my class, they knew when I turned out the lights in the classroom, it really was time to be quiet and pay attention. Imagine how surprised my team (of adults) was when during one of my first months as a supervisor in banking, I did exactly the same thing when I couldn't get their attention to start our meeting. No surprise, it worked then, too.

Although I only taught kindergarten for a short time, my education and teaching experience made a lasting impression on me. I've worked with grown-ups for a long time now — I'm one myself — and no matter the age, we all like to be recognized when we do something right (not just when we do something wrong), we like to feel like someone is paying attention to us, and we like to feel like we are making a difference in some way.

One of my favorite books is by Robert Fulghum. It tells us that all we really need to know we learned in kindergarten. Play fair. Clean up your own mess. Don't hit people. Say you're sorry when you hurt somebody. And no matter how old you are, when you go out in the world, watch out for traffic, hold hands and stick together. Oh, yes — and take a nap every afternoon, and warm milk and cookies are good for you. Can't argue with that.

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