



**Remarks given by Ms. Janet C. Rotter, Head of School,  
at Welcome Back Parent Meeting**

Wednesday, September 23, 2009

It has been nearly 10 years since the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century and in that time we have seen and experienced extraordinary amounts of changes, scares and threats, producing uncertainty, anxiety, new ways of relating and not relating, and much rhetoric about not only what we should be doing, but how we should do it – and while we are doing that we should be managing five other things at the same time. There has been a short-circuiting of the brain and a demoralization of the human spirit, as there is constant and increasing input – visual, auditory, and tactile. Let’s face it; holding on to one’s mind is getting harder and harder. Staying connected in the true sense of human relationships is nearly impossible. And furthermore, feeling peaceful and happy about who we are presents quite a challenge.

As parents and teachers, we do our best to shield our children from these stresses of modern living. The way children experience and cope with the stress are of particular concern to me as an educator. It has become clear to me that children need a new approach to acquiring and integrating certain learning skills and that, although our brains and nervous systems are constantly adapting, the present environment interrupts what children need and interferes with the development of their brains.

The brain’s ability to distinguish signal from noise, and synchronize neuronal activity, is crucial to proper perception and cognition, and to forming a unified, meaningful experience. Our emotional state affects and is affected by this process.

In addition, interfering with the brain and the mind is the extensive use of technology. As with any scientific advancement, the challenge is to take advantage of all its positive applications without losing the integrity of our experience and values, and our relationships. In other words, in order for the brain to evolve and for society to have some continuity of thought and spirit, we need to balance science with the humanities, and keep what’s worth keeping rather than discarding it. After all, we must remember that we are the people running the technology, not the other way around. We are the ones who can think.

Now is the time to truly understand and appreciate the mind and the existence of an internal life. With the turn of the century has also come marvelous research, particularly in neuroscience, revealing further knowledge of how the brain works; including the intricate nature of language, memory, and learning, as well as how they all interact.

The way in which we teach children to learn needs to shift as we take into consideration the environment in which we are living and the latest discoveries about the brain. The four major areas that are of concern to me in teaching children to think and to develop the necessary skills to become successful, confident learners are:

1. Play and imagination – the quality and type
2. Acquisition, processing, and use of language and memory
3. The ability to regulate their body, to attend and focus
4. Working with their hands, which establishes and connects important neural pathways in the brain

These four areas are essential to the growth and development of the mind, as well as the emotional well being of the person. Starting in early childhood, the integration of these areas is necessary for maturation.

Without this, children moving into and through adolescence will have greater difficulty making sense of themselves and the world. Therefore, at The Studio School, we set a structure and curriculum that provides particular experiences so that children may practice and build these necessary skills. Students can then move to higher levels of thinking and learning.

We begin with the premise that all ideas are acceptable. When students are comfortable with their thoughts, they are free to think and express themselves creatively. Our teachers lead children into analytical and critical thinking, and a deeper understanding, through the Socratic method of questioning. For example, analytical thinking is reached as students respond to questions about the literature they are reading, such as: What does this picture tell you? Why do you think this character did that? What do you think will happen in this story and how will it end? What is the theme or message? Can you think of a different ending? Critical thinking depends upon the ability to see things from different perspectives. Using their own experience to relate to various points of view, as well as listening to others, students are helped to see both sides of an issue and hold both ideas in mind at the same time. Similarly, they learn to consider different interpretations of a situation, or given information, and to determine among various methods how to best solve a problem.

This kind of teaching involves not only understanding how we process information to create meaningful experiences and responses, but also the need for human contact and attachment. Children need the experience of unconditional acceptance rather than control through judgments – whether praise or punishment.

Stress can easily compress and freeze the brain. In any learning experience, there needs to be room for mistakes, experimentation, patience from the adult when helping a child deal with frustration and work through to mastery, and support no matter what the outcome is.

We have to protect the development of the brain, as well as develop truly confident human beings who have a strong inner life that they can rely on to meet all the challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Cultural evolution takes place more rapidly than biological evolution, as learning is

passed on from one generation to the next through writing, teaching, tradition, and a multitude of methods and media.

What does not change, in this century or any, is that we are all in this world together; human experience is lived in community, as ours is here at The Studio School.

The highest goal of education is to shape the hearts and minds of our young people – knowing and thinking, striving for excellence in whatever they do, continuing to question and work in creative and original ways, and cherishing one another and the earth we live and love on.

We do well to remember what Paul Woodruff, professor of philosophy at the University of Texas, said:

We must all listen to each other because we are human, because we see only what we can see from where we stand, because there is more to be seen than any one of us can appreciate alone.