



# River Valley Current

May 10, 2016 No. 445

"What if our educational systems were to insist that teachers be poets and storytellers and artists?  
What transformations would follow?" -Mathew Fox

## School Calendar

### This Week

#### Wednesday, May 11

Parent Council High School Round-up 6:30-8:00 pm

#### Thursday, May 12

School Tour 9:00 am - 11:30 pm  
EC Parent Enrichment Evening 6:30 pm  
6<sup>th</sup> grade class play, Robin Hood 10:50 am & 6:30 pm

#### Friday, May 13

No School – Faculty In-service – Records Day

#### Saturday, May 14

EC Workday

### Looking Ahead

#### Tuesday, May 10

Visiting HS Series in the Garden 3:30 pm

#### Wednesday, May 18

8<sup>th</sup> grade Community Service Projects 6:30 pm  
September, 2016 1<sup>st</sup> grade Class Meeting 6:30 pm

#### Thursday, May 19

Diversi-Tea 8:15 am  
5<sup>th</sup> grade Pentathlon

#### Friday, May 20

2<sup>nd</sup> grade Camp-out

#### Saturday, May 21

EC Open House 10:00 am-noon  
5<sup>th</sup> grade Workday  
Visit from Lotus School of Liberal Arts 4:00-6:00 pm

#### Monday-Friday, May 23-27

6<sup>th</sup> grade Astronomy Block Class Trip

#### How to Contact Us

info@rivervalleyschool.org  
lc@rivervalleyschool.org  
bot@rivervalleyschool.org  
pc@rivervalleyschool.org

### Reminder:

There will be no school this Friday, May 13<sup>th</sup>  
due to faculty in-service – Records Day

### Parent Council Corner:

Next PC meeting is Wednesday,  
May 18<sup>th</sup>, 2:00 pm in the Garden

### What's Next? - School after River Valley Roundtable Discussion – Tomorrow, May 11<sup>th</sup>

Many of us have questions or would like to hear about what's next after River Valley in our child's educational career. For instance: Public, or private? What high schools are out there to choose from? What financial aid options exist? How is the transition from here to there?

Parent Council is hosting a roundtable discussion on this very topic at RVWS on Wednesday, May 11, 2016 from 6:30-8:00 pm. We are inviting alumni parents (and alumni themselves, if they're available) who have experience with both public and private high schools. We plan to gather some literature from various schools to have on hand that evening. Please send us questions that you have on this subject so that we can make sure we have answers for you.

Email: [pc@rivervalleyschool.org](mailto:pc@rivervalleyschool.org)

### RIVER VALLEY AUCTION GALA SATURDAY, JUNE 4, 5:30 pm BBQ, BLUEGRASS and FUN

This is the biggest night of our school year and this year promises to be a blockbuster! Fantastic Auction Items and Great Friendship!

Did you love the First Grade Bluegrass Band at Parent Stage? Then Come On Home on Saturday, June 4 for more! Great Food by Grandy's Kitchen, Nellie Rae's and a Parent BBQ Cookoff between John Wesp, Tony Stuart and Paul Smith! That's HOT! Chicken, Brisket, Steak Tacos, Pork, Salmon!

Tickets can be purchased online at  
[https://rvws.ejoinme.org/Auction\\_Tickets](https://rvws.ejoinme.org/Auction_Tickets).

We need your donations in the days ahead. Please bring your auction items to the school lobby no later than Wednesday May 18 and please be sure to fill out your donation form completely. Forms are available at the front desk. For reservations or questions about the Auction Gala, email [auction@rivervalleyschool.org](mailto:auction@rivervalleyschool.org).

See you on the 4th!

### Ticks are Everywhere

Ticks are out in full force. Please be sure to check your children and yourselves every day. Don't forget to look in hidden spots behind ears, under arms and on the scalp.

## From Administration

### Thanks from the Lord's Pantry

We received a note from the Lord's Pantry, our local foodbank, thanking RVWS for donating 304 pounds of food as part of the Operation Helping Hand Food Drive last March. Many thanks to all who contributed.

### BoxTops for Education

We received a check for \$275 from Box Tops for Education this week. Thank you to everyone who brought in box tops and thank you to Jennifer Sosa (mom of Noah Buggel in the Star Room) for organizing and submitting all of them. Your help is appreciated.

### Found

A very nice adult black raincoat was found after Parent Stage. If it is yours, please come to the office. It is hanging on the back of the office door.

### Cello Case Available

Free, hard, full-size cello case for anyone who needs it. It was owned by a lifelong concert cellist and is still in pretty decent condition. Contact Tara Bowers (Alice's mom, 2nd grade) at bowersbetara@gmail.com and I will bring it to school for you.

### SNOWDAY IN MAY?!?

Yes friends, River Valley is having a snow day in May. There will be no school on May 31, 2016.

The calendar for this school year had several days in reserve for emergency closures, most of which were not used due to our relatively mild winter. The faculty proposed adding a second Records Day to our calendar; both the LC and the AT have approved this request.

This additional Records Day will help make the remaining weeks of school a bit easier for all as teachers will not feel the pressure to take time away to work on year end reports and still be able to get them in, in a timely fashion.

For the 2016-17 school year, we will take the opposite approach – include 2 Records Days in the calendar, but remove one as a snow make-up day if we go over our allotted number of emergency closures. (Speaking of the 2016-17 school year, you will be happy to know that the calendar is in the final stages of refinement and approval and will be made public very soon!)

In the meantime, we wish you a wonderful, extra-long Memorial Day weekend (May 28, 29, 30 and 31)! We have pre-ordered sunshine, blue skies and pleasant temperatures for your enjoyment.

### Save the Date: Saturday, May 21, 4-6

A chance to meet the teachers of The Lotus School of Liberal Arts

View the curriculum and discuss classroom approaches with the staff. Come and participate in a discussion of how martial arts and yoga can help keep kids grounded. Enjoy wonderful food typical of the school day. Find out how meditation and related practices encourage healthy emotional development.



The time is now!  
Order your  
2016  
Yearbook

Pre-Order by **May 13th** for only **\$32**  
After May 13th the price will increase **\$10**,  
so drop your form  
in the folder on the office door today!



### RVWS Summer Camp

It's time to register for Summer Camp. There are four programs to choose from depending on the age of your child. Descriptions and registration forms are on the front desk and available on our website.

[www.rivervalleysschool.org](http://www.rivervalleysschool.org)

## Diversity Committee

We're happy to announce that a group of parents, faculty and administration have started a committee to explore issues of race, culture and diversity in our school.

We invite parents to join us on Thursday, May 19th for an informational, gathering of interest "Diversi-Tea" during morning drop-off.

Some questions we're contemplating and share with the community are:

- What has brought us to this committee? Why are we interested in this work?
- What experiences in our own biographies have affected our view of oppression, privilege, or inequality?
- What have been our experiences with issues of cultural competence, privilege, oppression, or inclusiveness at the school?
- What are our goals?

We look forward to beginning a community wide conversation around these questions, and using these questions as the mortar that will develop a strong foundation as the committee grows and supports the community.

This group's initial focus is race and we'd like to broaden our scope in the future. We've been working from a study of American Waldorf Schools called Paths Toward Racial Diversity by Vernon Dewey. One of our guiding quotes from the study has been by Michael Soule' who reminds us that "it is clear that when a school puts its intention for diversity into action, the results are positive. The schools that enjoy the greatest diversity are the ones that have paid attention to it in their development."

If you have questions, please contact any of us who have initiated this committee: Alison Goodman, Holly Low, Cindy Schretlen, TreeAnne McEnery, Molly MacDonald, Carol Diven, Laura Birdsall

## Courtyard Mowing Needed

The grass in the courtyard needs to be mowed. We have a lawn mower but could use a weed wacker as well. This is something that needs to be done periodically so if you are available, please let the office know.

## Help us Find the Right People

Needed: An energetic cleaning team to keep our school clean. During the school year, 5-6 man hours, 5 evenings a week. During summer and breaks, 15-20 hours per week. Pay: \$12-\$14 per hour, must be able to pass background checks. Know of anyone? Call Lynne Allbaugh 610-955-5405.

## VISITING HIGH SCHOOL SERIES

RVWS is excited to present the first in a series of visitors from area high schools. The series is expected to continue this spring and into the fall. Be sure to watch the CURRENT for additional dates, as they are confirmed. If you'd like to learn more about what options are available to students when they leave RVWS, plan to stop by! Please RSVP to Cindy: stop in the office, call or email: [cschretlen@rivervalley.school.org](mailto:cschretlen@rivervalley.school.org)

### Tuesday, May 17th, 3:30, Solebury School

Solebury School is a place where young people can explore the intellectual world and grow as students and as thinkers, where they can think creatively and be creative, and where all students have the chance to participate in all facets of the school – academics, athletics, clubs, and the arts. It is a place where students find the confidence to be who they are and to let their talents and personality enhance the school. It is a place where each individual is known and where faculty mentor students in and out of the classroom so that they become not only the best students, but the best people, possible. We have been fortunate to watch many River Valley graduates thrive here, and are excited to continue to work with you and your children.

### Tuesday, May 24, 3:30, Kimberton Waldorf High School

## Thank yous

Super thank you to John Wesp for Grandparent's & Special Friend's Day creative parking shenanigans! You've got it down.

Thank you to all the wonderful parents who supplied finger food for the Grandparents Day reception. Administration could not do it without you! And a special thanks to Beverly for coming in and helping with set up and welcome.

A hearty thanks to our hearty Mayfaire Committee. Your grace under pressure, your calm in the midst of difficult decisions and your dedication to making this a beautiful, festive Mayfaire in spite of weather uncertainties are to be applauded. Kymm Phibbs, Erica Nichols, Erica Gustavson, Dayana Henwood and Martina Venini thank you for the wonderful job you did leading the way. To all who helped with set up, clean up and everything in between we appreciate all of your hard work. And Grandy...cooking for 500 people...amazing, thank you!!

## From the Faculty

### What the Children are Learning:

First Grade – Language Arts

Second Grade – Math

Third Grade – Social Studies/Shelter Building

Fourth Grade – Local History & Geography

Fifth Grade – Ancient Greece

Sixth Grade – English/Class Play

Seventh Grade – Renaissance

Eighth Grade – Meteorology

### After-School German

A final three week round of After-School German will begin next Wednesday, May 18. It will have the usual songs, games and conversation, as well as an after-school snack. Kids in all grades are welcome to join. Contact Peter Ray, peter.ray@comcast.net, or 215-794-5816.

### 8<sup>th</sup> Grade 5K Run

Perhaps you have noticed the 8th Grade gearing up for our weekly training runs after drop-off or before pick-up? Wondering what we're up to? We are training to run the Finish the Fight 5K on Saturday May 14 at 8:30-9:45 am at Dimmick Park in Hellertown, PA. It's the same race Miss Hummel's former class ran in 7th grade a couple of years ago and it is a small, fun run to raise money for the American Cancer Society as part of their Relay for Life event. There is a \$25 registration fee per runner (price increases after April 30) which includes a free tech running T-shirt commemorating the race. We would LOVE to have as many River Valley families as possible join us! Here is the link to register: <https://runsignup.com/Race/PA/Hellertown/FinishTheFight5K>. Email Renell (renell@rcn.com) with questions or to let us know to look for you there!

## From Development

### Our Annual Fund Giving Tree is Growing!

Thank you to the following individuals for generously supporting the Annual Appeal!

Melody Birdsong

Renell and Will Carpenter

Carol Ann Diven

Sharon and Ron Ferguson

Jami and Shawn Goonan

Joy and Noah Jarrett

Patricia and Richard Kroth

Emily and David Lovely

Jesse Markowitz

Kamran Ozair

Hillary and P J Murphy

Jillian and Paul Ritchie

Lorraine Jonathan Sharaf

Eric Shubert

Julie Smith

Louanne and Brian Willard

Betsy and Larry Willey

Anonymous Happy Parents

A leaf has been placed on the Giving Tree for each of these donations. Each class, Grandparents, friends, faculty and staff have their own leaf color. Watch our tree bloom, from the roots to the canopy, as our Annual Fund grows!

Did you know that your tuition only accounts for a portion of the funds needed to operate our beloved school? Because we are a tuition-based school, we are not eligible for most grants and subsidies that other schools may qualify for. Additionally, we offer financial assistance for many of our families. Our ability to invest in our programming, support our faculty, serve our students, and maintain our facilities depends upon additional funding from events, gifts and sponsorships. This is why we ask our community to support the Annual Fund each year. In the next several weeks, you may receive a letter, note, email or call asking for your support of the Annual Fund. Please give what you are able so we may provide all the wonderful things that enrich your children's education in a way that no other school can. Thank you for your continued support and generosity!

Development Committee

## From the Capital Campaign Committee

### The Tile Store Is Open!

Please go to [rivervalleyschool.org](http://rivervalleyschool.org) and click on "Support RVWS" and then "Buy a Moravian Tile." Thank you for supporting the Building Our Future Capital Campaign!!

## Building & Grounds

### School Work Days

Below is the calendar of the upcoming workdays. Please note that some changes have been made from the school calendar. Please RSVP to Mary K. Till ([mtill@rivervalleyschool.org](mailto:mtill@rivervalleyschool.org)), to let us know if you will attend. This way we can plan what projects can be undertaken. Mary K. Till and Lynne Allbaugh - Building and Grounds

### 2015-2016 Work Days

May 14 - Early Childhood and 5<sup>th</sup> grade

## From the Community

### Purely Farm

Purely Farm is back again this Thursday, May 12th offering pasture-raised pork and turkey! Joanna and Marc Michini of Purely Farm, parents of Clover in the Sun Room, have a long history of providing the best meats in the area. Their farm critters thrive on life out on pasture and a diet supplemented by mineral rich, organic grains that are locally grown and GMO free.

Purely Farm has the perfect foods to fire up your grill. Spare ribs, sausage, pork chops, ham slices are just a few delicious candidates to cook outdoors. Please take time to review the attached price list and stop by Friday morning to purchase your pork and turkey! Joanna always has tons of cooking options for quick weekday meals or slowing it down for a family feast on Sunday. Contact Marc or Joanna with any questions at [purelyfarm@gmail.com](mailto:purelyfarm@gmail.com) or 215-317-0889.

### Nutcracker Auditions for the River Ballet

Will be held on Saturday May 14th. We need boys and girls who dance, Tumble/Acro, Hip-Hop, Lyrical, etc. Auditions will be held in Peddlers Village in Lahaska at Doylestown Dance Center (next to Gigglyberry Fair). Rehearsals will be Saturday afternoons starting in October. There will be 1 Saturday afternoon performance in December at Frenchtown Elementary. Bring along your friends!!

Boys and Girls ages 4-6 10am

Boys and Girls ages 7-11 10:30am

Ballet Focused Students ages 8 & up 11:30am

Boys and Girls ages 12+ (no ballet experience/Adults welcome) 12:30pm

Please arrive early to fill out audition paperwork, Audition Fee \$10, Questions; email Vickie at [vszeplaki@yahoo.com](mailto:vszeplaki@yahoo.com)

### Screenagers: Growing up in the Digital Age

Showing at The Waldorf School of Philadelphia  
Wednesday, May 18th, 2016 @ 7.00 p.m.

**Screenagers: Growing up in the Digital Age** is selling out audiences around the country. Screenagers is the first feature documentary to explore the impact of screen technology on kids and to offer parents proven solutions that work.

Physician and filmmaker, Delany Ruston decided to make Screenagers when she found herself constantly struggling with her two children about screen time. Ruston felt guilty and confused, not sure what limits were best, especially around mobile phones and social media. Hearing repeatedly how other parents were equally overwhelmed, she realized this is one of the biggest, unexplored parenting issues of our time.

### **Housesitter needed!**

Former RVWS family (Lauri, Chris, Lucia and Raiven) is looking for a house sitter to care for our two Labs and one Siamese cat, as well as light weeding and watering as needed for our flower and vegetable gardens between June 26 and July 22. Our home is full of light and is situated on 15 acres of fields, woods and swimmable creeks! Please let me know if you have an interest by emailing me at [lauribunton@gmail.com](mailto:lauribunton@gmail.com) or calling (215) 768-4913. Individuals or families are welcome.

### **Education Discussion: A Conversation about Self-Directed Learning**

What is Self-Directed Learning? Why do teens thrive in this learning model? What paths to college are available if you leave high school? River Valley parents Scott Gallagher (Loie 3rd grade) and MaryBeth Healy (Jaida 1st grade) invite you to participate.

Wednesday, May 18 @ 7p  
Flemington Library  
118 Main Street, Flemington

Hosted by Raritan Learning Cooperative, offering a new way to approach living and learning.  
[www.RaritanLearningCooperative.org](http://www.RaritanLearningCooperative.org)  
[info@raritanlearningcooperative.org](mailto:info@raritanlearningcooperative.org)

### **River Town Radio Theatre Teen**

Summer Workshop July 2016

- Always wondered what it would be like to perform on the radio?
- Looking for something different to do this summer?
- Join RTRT for a Radio Theater Summer Workshop.

When: Tuesday and Thursday evenings July 5, 7, 12, 14 and 19 at The Book Garden in Frenchtown from 6:00pm to 8:00pm. THEN on July 21 st – a LIVE performance on WDVR!

Who: Teens interested in discovering the world of radio theater! Cost: \$125 per student

A portion of the tuition will go to support WDVR radio. Ask Caroline or Robert for details. Space is limited.  
[caroline@bookgarden.biz](mailto:caroline@bookgarden.biz) [robert@bookgarden.biz](mailto:robert@bookgarden.biz)  
Register Today!

### **Muck and Gold Camp Homebody - for ages 8-11**

A creative movement, physical theater and visual art extravaganza! Run by Christine Bodwich, (mother of Loie Gallagher, G-3). June 27 - July 1, July 5 – 8. Stockton, NJ.

For details and registration: [muckandgold.com](http://muckandgold.com)

### **At Yoga Loka**

Yoga for Healthy Aging

Thursdays 8:30 am-9:30 am with Deb Kline

Begins 5/5 for 4 weeks, \$55

Calm Stress and Anxiety Through Hypnosis

Thursday 5/12 with Judy Consentino. 6:30 pm- 8:30 pm.

\$35

TRE (Trauma and Tension Releasing Exercises) and Meditation

with Bonnie, Wednesdays 5/18 and 5/25, 11:00 am-12:00 pm. \$15 per session

[www.Yoga-Loka.com](http://www.Yoga-Loka.com) to register

### **Special offer for River Valley Families:**

I recently completed a training in a therapy called Craniolsacral Fascial Therapy. You can read about it on founder Barry Gillespie's website:  
<http://gillespieapproach.com/>.

This approach is similar to TRE, which I have been working with for more than 2 years. I am particularly excited about CFT due the success rate it has had with targeting chronically tight and often painful places in the body, healing concussions and sinus issues and TMJ, helping with headaches and traumatic injuries and regaining range of motion that is compromised from surgeries and scarring. Children benefit immensely from this work. Barry specializes in treating children and has seen a lot of positive results.

As this is still a relatively new modality for me I am offering a limited number of first sessions at half price, \$42 for a session that will run about 45 minutes.

If you are interested in scheduling a session please send me an email at: [Bonnie@yoga-loka.com](mailto:Bonnie@yoga-loka.com)

### **La Leche Leagues of Hunterdon County, NJ and Hillsborough/Bridgewater present:**

"Portraits of Motherhood" Mini Session Fundraiser  
Saturday, May 14 from 9 am - 4pm \*\*Additional times may be added.\*\*

20 minute mini session for Mothers & Children

\$150 Sitting Fee includes 3-4 digital images

LLLHC/LLLHB Member Price: \$125 with 5-6 digital images

Photographer Hilary Murphy is donating her time & talent to support this fundraiser. Sessions held on location at her private & peaceful 30 acre farm in Pittstown, Hunterdon County, NJ.

[www.hilarymurphyphotography.com](http://www.hilarymurphyphotography.com)

REGISTER TODAY:

<http://www.signupgenius.com/go/30e0a48a9ab2ea2fb6-breastfeeding>

\*\*Proceeds from this fundraiser will benefit two local LLL groups in their support of breastfeeding mamas.\*\*

## Ottsville Traditional Arts Center

Every Wednesday  
Open Jam with Richard Finch  
6:00-8:00 pm • \$5 suggested donation

More at [ottsvilletradarts.weebly.com](http://ottsvilletradarts.weebly.com) • 250 Durham Rd. Ottsville Pa.

### MUSIC for your Child

RVWS alumnus and currently Berklee College of Music student, Kris Ramakrishna, is offering Guitar lessons (beginners to advanced, all styles), Music theory and music history, Introduction to composition, song writing with professional software. From mid May to mid August at your house or ours in Riegelsville. Reasonable rates! For more information please email [stramak@aol.com](mailto:stramak@aol.com) or call 610 217 6942

### The Art of Equitation

Jen Diedrich (mom of Addison in 4th grade) is offering a lesson program individually designed for each rider's expectations, goals and dreams. With attention needed to be safe and have FUN. Safety is always the first priority.

Jen is a lifelong equestrian with a passion for teaching that brings out the best in beginning and developing young riders. Students focused on the show arena as well as those who simply love riding and understanding horses are very welcome. Lessons, trail rides, horse shows and camp offered. Ages 5 and up. Reach Jen anytime at 215-603-9999.

### Join Youth Orchestra of Bucks County

Audition for placement in a YOBC ensemble!  
8 large ensembles (3 bands, 3 strings, 2 full orchestras)  
8+ chamber ensembles: string quartet, woodwinds, brass & percussion Open to students in grades 3-12.  
Auditions May 14-15, 2016 at Bucks County Community College, Newtown  
Special Events: Winds coaching from US Coast Guard Wind Quintet, Master class with composer/musician Chris Brubeck, Philadelphia Orchestra field trips  
Special Gala Celebration and Performance with Chris Brubeck and Triple Play ...and more Now Scheduling Auditions for all instruments, all levels, all ensembles.

REGISTER ONLINE [WWW.YOBC.ORG](http://WWW.YOBC.ORG)  
Questions? [info.yobc@gmail.com](mailto:info.yobc@gmail.com) 215.945.5105

### Eggs for Sale

Sustainably raised, Pastured, GMO free eggs. Chicken \$5, Jumbo duck \$8. Durham Glen Farm 6200 Durham Rd Pipersville Shawn (973)207-0848.

### Knife Care

by McCaslin Miles

A knife is the most important tool in your kitchen, so taking care of it is just as important. With proper maintenance a knife will stay sharp and last much longer than if the knife is handled incorrectly. Here are six ways to keep your knife sharp:

1. Never put your knife in the dishwasher. The hot water can cause the knife to lose its hardness and refuse to keep an edge.
2. Always wash your knife right after you use it. Keeping your knife in water will rust the blade although at first it may not seem obvious. Clean your knife with warm soapy water and then dry it with a soft clean cloth.
3. Do not keep your knife in a drawer unless it is in a sheath, otherwise it could get damaged and chipped.
4. The most common mistake people make with knives is using cutting boards made of glass, ceramic, marble, etc. This dulls the blade on the first cut, and makes your knife unusable. Boards made of wood and plastic are much better for cutting as they are much softer on the edge of the knife.
5. Steeling the knife. Most knife sets come with a long steel rod used for steeling the knife. To use the steel simply slide the knife in a sweeping motion against the steel at about a 15 degree angle five to ten times on each side.
6. A dull knife is much more dangerous than a sharp one. That's why having your knives sharpened professionally will save your fingers and make cooking much easier.

McCaslin Miles is in the sixth grade at RVWS and operates his own knife-sharpening business. For information on his sharpening please see the flyer on the bulletin board or email him at [edgesharp2003@gmail.com](mailto:edgesharp2003@gmail.com).

From The Atlantic

## The Power of Thinking Like a Preschooler

**Adults often have trouble understanding young children's needs and inner lives—but paying closer attention to the way they experience the world can be valuable.**

What is it like to be a 4-year-old human? Trying to remember this experience with any accuracy is difficult. Memories are hazy flashes of sensory experience and emotion that fail to coalesce into something coherent: the red piped icing on a birthday cake, the sticky static of plastic wrap on mom's dry cleaning, overwhelming waves of sadness from a Disney-movie soundtrack.

It's no wonder that at an individual level, trying to talk and relate to a small child can feel like grappling with a foreign species. It's also, perhaps, no wonder that a society of adults has trouble figuring out how best to design a preschool environment.

Erika Christakis has spent many years on the ground (literally) with children in a school setting, studying them as both educator and scientist. Previously a preschool teacher and director, she is now a child-development specialist at Yale University.

While Christakis earned media attention last year for an email she sent to college students at Yale that unintentionally ignited debates about free speech and "safe spaces" on campuses, she has been vocal about America's youngest students for far longer. In a piece for The Atlantic last month that was distilled from her book, *The Importance of Being Little: What Preschoolers Really Need From Grownups*, Christakis identified and analyzed what she sees as troubling trends in the American preschools today—where an increasing number of children now spend part of their time each day.

As a consequence of what she described as an "academic takeover" of early learning in America, kids, she argued, are becoming less inquisitive and engaged than kids of earlier generations, often failing to develop sophisticated language skills. But these early-education issues rarely are a result of parents and preschool teachers lacking goodwill, she said. Rather, they stem from, and perhaps in some ways symbolize, the trouble adults have in understanding children's needs and inner lives—a deficit in the "recognition of young children as unique people with their own ideas, their own feelings, their own thoughts and tastes and experiences." I spoke to Christakis about how paying closer attention to the experiences of young children might help not just little humans, but older ones, too. Below is a lightly edited and condensed transcript of our conversation.

Lauren Cassani Davis: What are some of the biggest misconceptions adults have about how a preschooler thinks and feels?

Erika Christakis: I think we have a mismatch problem, where we both underestimate and overestimate children. I think we underestimate kids' intelligence. We often think they have short attention spans, but this is really not true if you've ever observed a child in nature who can watch something really slow that's very captivating, and can be very attentive and still for a long period of time. A child can hold a vulnerable animal or a plant with real delicacy and care. We assume that kids have short attention spans in part because we don't give them enough time to engage in something—we whisk things away very quickly. We also overestimate them pragmatically. It's quite exhausting to be a preschooler. There are lots of very rapid transitions and logistically it can be quite taxing and overtiring to be a young child.

Davis: Is there something about adult psychology as a whole that makes it so hard to go "deep into the mindset of a child?" You noted that young children lack "adult conceptual schemes"—like social norms that we rely on to guide our behavior and dictate what is or isn't appropriate. Is that part of it?

Christakis: Well, I do think children have an extraordinary ability to zero in on the truth or authenticity of something. So sometimes children can be very disarming. I remember when I was newly post-partum and a little child came up to me and put his hands on my belly and said, "Why is your tummy so fat if you don't have a baby in there?" Which was probably what my neighbors and colleagues were thinking, too. I think children have a kind of brutal authenticity to them.

*(Continued on next page)*

The other thing is, because we tend not to understand how profound children's thoughts are, it can be really disarming when they talk about issues related to death, to spirituality, to intense anger—even aggressive feelings, or feelings of deep love and passion and friendship.

I always think that we sometimes make a mistake, as grownups, by assuming that children are cognitively the same as adults, and yet somehow have different emotions. Personally I think it's almost the reverse. I think a young child really does think quite differently—their thinking is more concrete and less abstract. But my belief is that children actually have really similar emotional lives to adults in terms of the depth of their feelings and the types of feelings they have, the sorts of existential questions that concern them.

Davis: This mismatch you described in adults' perception of young children—is this a uniquely American thing? Are any other countries or cultures where people seem to have a better ability to understand and empathize with the way small children perceive the world?

Christakis: I don't think it's uniquely American. That said, I think we can point to cultures where young children are living in a more child-sized world. And some of them are quite clichéd examples. I vowed that I wouldn't utter the word Finland in this conversation—but the preschoolers there do seem to be inhabiting a more child-sized world.

There are certain features of American culture that lend themselves to the mismatch—[for one], we are a very hurried culture. But I think it would be too simplistic to suggest that this is entirely, or uniquely an American phenomenon. My friends and family in other countries report similar concerns. I think our society has changed—in the U.S. almost 75 percent of 4-year-olds are in non-family care of some kind—and our lifestyles have changed. That doesn't mean we can't be attentive to children, but it just means we have to pay attention to how to do that, how to create the [right] habitat for children.

Davis: You've argued that spontaneous, meaningful conversation—whether between a preschooler and a teacher, a child and their parent, or between two children—is crucial for young children's development, but high-quality conversations are hard to come by in preschools. Do you think that research suggesting that technologies like smartphones are eroding conversation between adults is relevant here?

Christakis: I just read a study recently showing that children playing with blocks or simple toys, what I would call open-ended toys—[that children can use] to represent things symbolically—invites higher-level language use than electronic gadgetry that might have just one function. The study showed that when parents play with kids using blocks, there's more conversation. It makes sense, because it's open-ended, more imaginative.

The cognitive process of symbolic thinking is so critical in the early years to sound cognitive development—and that's what fantasy play, imaginative play, dramatic play, are all about. And we are absolutely changing the habitat. This is something that is rapidly becoming, if not obsolete, certainly harder to support. And I think parents do have a role in that.

Davis: Are there any good rules of thumb for trying to have a meaningful conversation with a young child?

Christakis: I think there are a few good rules of thumb. The first one is to ask open-ended questions. We tend to predetermine the boundaries of a conversation with young children by commenting on something very specific. So we might approach a child who's drawing and say, "That's a nice house." Well, that's a way of closing a conversation. But if you ask questions, or you make open-ended declarative statements: "Tell me about your picture," or, "Do you think we could do it this way?"—that's a really small tweak but it's actually really significant for opening up conversation.

I also think sometimes we close off emotion, which can be such a great fuel for conversation. The classic way is to tell a child who's whining, "I'm sorry, we have to be home, we can't stay any longer at the playground." And a way you can tweak that is to say "Wouldn't it be great if we could stay at the playground? Wouldn't that be fun?" That might open up, first of all, a more pleasant conversation, but it also opens up more fantasy and more reflection on the part of the kid.

Opening up conversations and making them less adult-driven is a habit. It doesn't just come overnight, especially if a child is in a very scripted early childhood setting at school, where there's a lot of teacher-directed talk, or if parents aren't familiar talking to their kids in that way. You can't suddenly turn on the switch and expect your child to be a great conversationalist. But it's an approach you can adopt and practice over time.

*(Continued on next page.)*

Even before asking open-ended questions, one of the most important ways to feed conversation is to actually observe children. I always try to adopt this phrase [from] a psychoanalyst who said that he approaches his patients with this idea of “no memory, no desire.” I think observation in as neutral a way as we can is really key. And that means you need the time. You can't be just watching your kid judgmentally when you're rushed and tired. You have to find a time when you can just focus in a very lovingly non-judgmental way. And I think that's another way to open up conversation, because you see things that might not be as visible.

Davis: These ideas about open-ended versus closed conversation also seem analogous to the two approaches to teaching that you discuss: a direct instruction approach, where learning is highly scripted and teacher-driven, versus a more self-directed type of learning, where the teacher plays a supporting role. Do you think the importance self-directed learning holds true of students across all ages?

Christakis: To be clear: It's easy to assume that there's a dichotomy between scripted education with clear goals, on the one hand, and then some kind of free-for-all. The kind of teaching I'm talking about is very intentional. But it's inquiry-driven. And I do think that is very important at all levels [of education], because there's just no limit to the number of facts we can acquire, and we need to equip young people of all ages with what I would call a sort of cognitive sequence—a cognitive approach to questions—rather than just giving them the content.

To me, that cognitive sequence in the early years is observation, questioning, exploration, reflection. It's a process you go through whether you're fooling around playing in the mud, building a fort, or experimenting with cooking.

And within that sequence, skills emerge, of course—and they need to emerge. Whether it's reading skills or mathematical concepts.

Obviously in high school that's very different, because there is a content base that's very essential. If you don't know arithmetic, you can't do algebra. But I think we need to equip young people of all ages with basic tools: how to have a conversation, how to listen to other people, how to you express yourself, how to observe and then explore and then reflect on what you've explored. Those kind of inquiry-based practices are really no different whether you're 4 or you're 50.

Davis: Overall, what do you think adults can learn from taking the time to think more like a preschooler? What elements of the optimal preschool experience also apply to a well-lived adult life?

Christakis: You're getting me to reflect on something that, bizarrely, I haven't really reflected on. I guess the primacy of relationships. Young children learn in relationships. And we know when they're securely attached [by having a strong bond with a nurturing adult], and when they have opportunities to talk and to listen, they feel better, and they learn more. And to me that's a lesson that we really shouldn't lose as adults. I think the centrality of human relationships and human connections is something that is powerful at all ages.

In addition to the centrality of relationships, I think the way that children approach the material world is so different than adults. They really use— especially pre-literate children—materials, whether it's drawing materials or building materials, as an expression of themselves. These materials become a form of communication. As adults we view materials as products, and we have a very instrumental view of making things to create a product. And when you really talk with little kids you see that they're so much more connected to their physical environment, and it's very unfiltered. I think adults need to get more in touch with that. And maybe that's where the interest in [adult] coloring books comes from. That we're always looking for some way to release this inner voice that is really, in children, quite easy to release—if we create the right kind of environment for them.