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# Tools for Life – Lower School Coordinator Laura Guarino’s Address to Lower School Families on Curriculum Night, October 25, 2012

By **Laura Guarino**, Division Coordinator of the Lower School

A Bank Street education is one that nurtures the passion for life and learning that lives within every child. Ignited by curiosity, fueled by the joy of discovery, and sustained by an environment safe enough for risk taking—your children are embarking on an educational journey that is both developmentally appropriate and deeply engaging. And because we both support and stretch children, adults will become role models for *leaning into the discomfort* of a challenge. We remind children that setbacks are to be expected—even embraced. By doing this, we help them recognize where true growth occurs. It is our job to make sure that they also know that character matters; that manners matter; that who you are and how you treat others is as important as *what* you know; that kindness isn’t optional. We model compassion when we support the notion that it is possible to do well as an individual without it having to be at the expense of others in the group.

We *and they* are living in an increasingly fast paced, high-pressured world. One way to ease some of the pressure on us and on them is to relinquish the fantasy that if we just did our best to avoid some of the misguided, but well-meaning, nurturing that we received if we got it *just right* with our kids, it would somehow result in perfection, if not for us as parents, at least for them as kids! There is no way around it: to be human is to know that we are not (and never will be) perfect, and that neither will they be. But we also know from experience that success in life is often directly related to how well we learn the strengths and flaws of who we are as individuals and then set goals and take risks anyway.

So along with teaching the skills required to *do your best*, which we do, we need to teach the skill of recognizing when being just who we are, where we are, is *good enough*. It is a delicate balance, this striving for excellence without too much stressing. But it is well worth the effort to find ways to teach that balance now, from the very start. It is possible to offer the gift of an unhurried childhood by valuing their right to play, to have big feelings, and to need some down time. By embracing the inevitability of uneven early development, we accept that our children will grow and develop at their own pace.

A Bank Street education, a progressive education, has never been more relevant. Unlike any other time in human history, given the rapid pace of technological growth,

many of the skills needed for the jobs that our children will someday hold, cannot be taught, because those skills and jobs haven't yet been invented. So instead of focusing on standards designed to measure young children in terms of "data in and data out" in ways that really don't predict success or effectiveness, we have always focused on helping children develop their capacity to *be* learners, to be flexible thinkers and creative problem solvers.

And there is much we want them to learn. But we want that learning to take place through active engagement with a rigorous curriculum. Skill development is then anchored by firsthand experience. We believe this approach will serve them well and we know it fosters a passion for lifelong learning. We each have a role to play in shaping what life will look like as our children venture from the safety of your family to the community of school. Rest assured that they will work hard as they move from ego-centric to collaborative engagement with the world.

However, being a school kid is different than being a kid in a family. The axis of center shifts when you enter the social world of school. At school, children are learning how to be one within the many, how to hold onto their voices while making space for others.

Your child's job is first to get comfortable. We support them with separation and attachment during Phase-in and beyond. We are prepared for the October slump, when the novelty has worn off and coming to school may not be so exciting any more. It is their job to dig in—to get busy, take risks, figure things out, make mistakes, fix them. And try again. We expect them to learn autonomy and the pleasure of mastery that accompanies that. They will learn what it means to be a good friend and to respect differences. They will develop the fortitude to persist in the face of challenge and celebrate accomplishments, theirs and others'. They will spend years discovering who they are as learners and as people.

*Your job* is to partner with us generously. Ours is to earn your trust. You can support our work with your children by doing your best to arrive on time in the morning, by letting us know when routines are different or behaviors seem unfamiliar. We will ask you to lend us your parental expertise because no one knows your child as intimately as you do. We welcome your questions and observations and we appreciate a respectful dialogue.

We can offer you our professional perspective, strategies to consider, and our empathy, keeping in mind that some strategies will work and some won't, or that something you tried once that *didn't* work now, magically, does the trick, and vice versa. We know this because we have seen many, many children and because some of us are parents as well. We will do our best to offer you support and counsel with compassion and humor.

Children are well served when their grown-ups at home and at school are consistent. They need us say what we mean and mean what we say. Being child centered

doesn't mean that children should be encouraged to do whatever they want, whenever they want. Or be allowed to wear us down through endless negotiating. We can offer simple choices and be clear whether what we are talking about it is a kid decision or a grown-up decision. Perhaps the single most helpful thing for us to remember is that children need to do what we ask, but it is unreasonable for us to expect them to always like it! As my pediatrician once said, "Children need parents. They really don't need us to be their tallest friends."

Research shows that the *Number 1* thing that children want (and need, if you read Kristof's article in the *New York Times* on October 20 entitled "Cuddle your Children") is their parents' time and affection. Our children know the difference between when we are moving *through* the busy-ness of life with them and when we are truly present. They are asking us to find a way to quiet the To-Do lists in our heads, to occasionally put aside the seductive lure of all things electronic, to just *be* together. Being present doesn't require special planning. In fact, it can be most rewarding when you are engaged in the stuff of everyday life: playing, walking, sharing a meal, snuggling, giving a bath or reading a bedtime story.

Truth be told, being present isn't always comfortable or natural at first. Our minds wander. Sometimes it feels boring. The hundredth tea party or superhero game has understandably lost its luster for us. But young children are still using their play to figure things out. Their plots still have twists and turns that fascinate and surprise them. Through their play, they reveal what they think and feel, wonder and worry about. Sometimes being present is just plain exhausting. Like any skill, it requires practice and there is fatigue in working a muscle that needs strengthening. For however long you are able to do it, it is worth the effort. You can rely on the fact that it is these moments that our children offer us glimpses into how they are making sense of the world. And perhaps most important, it is in these moments that we show them what it means to be intimately connected to another human being. Being present and setting boundaries are acquired skills, and we can practice together.

Many of you know that my son, Nicholas, now 21, is a Bank Street alum and is graduating from Wesleyan this May. Four years ago after settling him in to his dorm room for his freshman year at college, parents were gathered together to hear from the Dean of Students give a pep talk and then to be told that it was time for us to go. I want to share with you the story they shared with us:

One day a couple taking a walk in the woods came upon the silky cocoon of a butterfly hanging on an overhead branch. The butterfly was in the process of breaking free, so they stopped to watch its progress. They noticed the diligent work it took to push open even the tiniest of holes from which it would soon emerge. They stood and watched, as the butterfly struggled to force its body through that little hole. After a while, it seemed to stop making progress. They waited. It appeared as if the butterfly had gotten as far as it could and would go no further.

Distressed to see the butterfly struggling so, the couple decided to help. They took a twig and made the hole a little bigger- ensuring that the beautiful butterfly would have an easier time. Sure enough, that is just what happened. But once out, the butterfly appeared heavy and lethargic. After several minutes, the couple noticed that instead of expanding its wings and taking flight, its swollen body seemed too large and the colorful wings seemed small and shriveled.

What the couple did not understand in their haste and well-intentioned kindness, was that the restricting cocoon and the struggle required for the butterfly to get through the tiny opening was nature's way of forcing fluid from the body of the butterfly into its wings. This process was necessary for the wings to grow strong enough to be ready for flight, once it had achieved its freedom from the cocoon.

In their desire to be helpful, they missed the fact that sometimes struggles are exactly what is needed. Without obstacles, we would not be as strong as we *could* have been, or might need to be. Without obstacles, we might not ever get the chance to fly.

Remarkably, one day and sooner than you can imagine, your children will be ready to leave Bank Street. They will all have learned how to read, write and compute, which says nothing of the kind of dynamic engagement, vision and thinking that will go along with that. And ultimately, we hope, they will be inspired to become change agents for good in the world they will inherit from us.

Whether or not we are ready to let them go, *they* will be prepared for whatever lies ahead. But our job will remain: lighting the way, while resisting the urge to poke around and make that hole bigger for them.

And having seen it myself many times before, I *know* they will have wings strong enough to fly.