

The Importance of Being Little: What Young Children Really Need from Grownups

By Erika Christakis

Reviewed by Julie K. Biddle
Antioch University Midwest

I must admit the first time I heard about Erika Christakis' book I was a bit put off by the title: *The Importance of Being Little*. I have a deep respect for young children and so the adjective little seemed somewhat condescending to me. I thought: Why not focus on the importance of being a young child instead of being "little"?

I mentioned this to a colleague who had read the book who assured me that I'd get over this first impression, and I did. Once I started reading the preface, Christakis had me at the first sentence: "The important thing about young children is that they are powerful" (p. xiii). I know this to be true and I read on:

. . . schooling and learning are often two different things. Young children aren't blank slates delivered to the preschool classroom by storks, but rather they are complex persons who arrive already connected to families, communities, and cultures – environments where they have done an awful lot of learning before they set foot through the door. (p. xvi)

This book is important because it challenges the perception that schooling and learning are the same things. The two concepts are co-mingled and misunderstood when issues that are all too familiar to early childhood educators arise (e.g., red-shirting, kindergarten readiness, quality rating and improvement systems, high stakes testing). Christakis' book is important because values, structures, and politics in the United States often keep us from thinking deeply about our youngest citizens. Mainstream thinking in the U.S. doesn't offer young children the respect they deserve; a clear sense of what it is like to be young (little) in 21st century in the United States is missing. Christakis offers the reader a better understanding of the world from a young child's perspective and clearly states:

In this book, I'm applying a kind of forensic analysis to the whole system of early learning with the hope that, in peeling back the layers of pedagogy, policy, and even mythology that drive the care of our *youngest* (my choice of words) citizens, a new vision of early childhood might emerge that better reflects our young children's needs and aspirations. The good news is that, with relatively few and relatively easy changes, we can restore childhood's diminishing habitat and make it better than at any point in human history. By happy coincidence, we have a striking consensus of scientific evidence and centuries of common sense to guide us. Even more fortunately, young children themselves contain within their brains the ingredients for their development. If we observe them carefully, they will show us the way forward. (p. xx)

Overview

Three themes permeate the text: the significance of relationships with young children; the importance of the image of the young child and how that governs our relationships with them; and the role the environment can have on the learning and development of the young child. Christakis consistently advocates for simple, everyday, unmanufactured opportunities that allow room for children's secret, creative, social, and emotional lives to grow and develop.

Christakis' style of writing is infused with a critical eye, grounded in respected research and accompanied by her personal experiences as a preschool teacher. She has a good sense of humor that at times borders on sarcasm. This is somewhat understandable given the recurrent uphill battles that have been fought by early childhood educators for decades (e.g., equating early care and education as babysitting and not a profession; an over emphasis on cognitive development rather than meeting the needs of the whole child) as well as the ambivalence that the U.S. has about children and their rights (for example, the fact that the U.S., Somalia and South Sudan are the only countries *not* to sign the U.N. Declaration of the Rights of the Child).

Christakis, a self-proclaimed optimist, never strays too far from her own wonder for and fascination with young children. She readily extols their capabilities, curiosities, and rich potential. In the first few chapters Christakis lays the foundation for why preschool is important and what it ought to provide to and for young learners, as well as why not all preschools are good for all children. She provides vivid examples of how children, who are natural-born artists, become disenchanted with and disengaged in learning due to adult-inflicted choices (e.g., a focus on the *products* from learning vs. the *process* of learning). The author advocates for the inclusion of the arts as an important learning domain for young children, at a time when the arts, which foster creativity and imagination, are being removed from or minimized in public school programs. This is due in large part to the increased focus on measurable outcomes, scripted curricula, pacing guides, and standardized teaching now being seen earlier and earlier in classrooms. Such interventions mean that all children are doing the same thing, at the same time, and in the same way—the exact opposite of creativity.

Based on the work of multiple researchers, Christakis describes the key elements of a quality classroom climate. These key elements are revisited in subsequent chapters but are listed early in the text to set the stage for the reader. Quality classrooms are characterized by:

the importance of close, affectionate interactions between caregivers and children, including frequent laughter and hugs; plenty of natural, spontaneous conversational language between children and teachers; opportunities to learn socially, from peers; . . . a teaching staff that speaks confidently about young children and can link curriculum to developmental milestones and the realities of children's lives rather than to testaments about how fun and cute a given activity might appear to be; classroom materials that invite open-ended, not closed, forms of play and exploration; and classroom schedules that given children adequate time to do all the things we know they are capable of. (p. 81)

These characteristics of quality classrooms support what we know from brain research. Christakis weaves knowledge from this research—namely, how young children's brains grow

and develop—throughout the text (e.g., Galinsky, 2010). She confronts perceptions of childhood and delineates some of the ironies found in these perceptions. As adults gain new knowledge, we become more sensitive and responsive to children and their needs. However, in this sensitivity there may be a tendency to highlight children’s vulnerabilities; to use more labels and an expanded vocabulary filled with deficit thinking (e.g., learning disabled). The irony, of course, is that this causes children’s competencies to be minimized while making their vulnerabilities more visible. Christakis forces the reader to think carefully about what this way of thinking means. If we believe children are capable, competent, curious, and creative, then we focus on what they can *do*. If we focus on what they *can’t* do, we focus on their vulnerabilities. The dynamic of the environment is shifted significantly depending on which image of the child is adopted.

She reminds us that the young child needs time for play. The young child needs time to be in and with nature (discussed in chapter six) no matter where they may live. Christakis emphasizes the necessity for a “learning habitat,” and makes clear the tragedy that our young children face today in the loss of that habitat “that includes both the ability and the opportunity to explore and connect” (p. 31), seeing this loss as a real threat to our society’s future.

The Relevance of Reggio Emilia

It’s clear from reading this text that Christakis is familiar with the Reggio Emilia approach to teaching children. I have studied the work of Reggio Emilia educators (located in the Emilia Romagna region of Italy) since 1991 and have written about and continue to examine my own work as an early childhood educator through a Reggio-inspired lens. The work of these educators began after World War II and has a rich history influenced by John Dewey, Maria Montessori, Jerome Bruner, and other historical and contemporary scholars. The work in Reggio is based on a few fundamental principles (some discussed below; see also Cadwell’s *Bringing Reggio Emilia Home* (1997) for more in-depth discussion of these principles) that resonate with themes and suggestions offered by Christakis.

As I read Christakis’ text I learned that we had much in common in terms of perceptions about children. We both are optimists. We both believe that young children have the potential to change, that childhood is dynamic, and that young children are endlessly surprising. We are both encouraged by the quality and quantity of research that teaches us more about how young children learn and develop and are thankful for the increased public attention paid to the lasting results a quality preschool experience can have in their lives. Despite what seems to be positive movement on behalf of young children (e.g., pre-kindergarten becoming more available/affordable; recognition that quality preschool experiences have significant impact) we both recognize we have a serious problem in the United States’ early childhood landscape.

The problem is grounded in what my colleagues would call “the image of the young child”—one of the key principles of the Reggio Emilia approach. Those of us who are Reggio-inspired view young children as competent, capable, and curious. They are active participants in thinking and learning. Christakis uses the word “powerful” to describe them. It is essential that we examine what educators, policy makers, and adults in general believe about what the young child can and can’t do. Continued ambivalence about children’s capabilities is unacceptable.

Loris Malaguzzi, often referred to as the founder of the Reggio Emilia approach, said that the image of the child is where teaching begins (Malaguzzi, 1994). He noted that every teacher (and I'd suggest every adult) has an image of the young child that directs the relationship. If, for example, a grownup views the young child as a blank slate, then the interaction with that child will be one of *telling* the child things about the world, rather than having a *conversation with* the child as the child discovers that world. The adult will dominate the interaction and determine what is important for the child to know and understand, rather than incorporate an image of a child who has interests and self-directed curiosities. The deficit image of the child diminishes the opportunities for building positive relationships between adults and children, and we know that one of the central developmental challenges of a young child is to learn how to relate to others. As a former teacher of young children, I cared more about how children got along with others, were able to self-regulate, and take turns and participate in a group than about their knowledge of letters and numbers. The importance of relationships cannot be overlooked, and Christakis argues in several places in her book that young children need positive relationships with grownups.

A second Reggio principle views the environment as a child's third teacher. This principle highlights how the use of space, design, natural light, color, and materials can encourage encounters, communication, and *relationships*. Christakis highlights the "preschool paradox," which is the misalignment between children's inborn ability to learn in any environment and the inadequate learning environments so often found in early care and educational settings (p. 6). She poignantly states that "children can learn, and always have been able to learn, in any setting" (p. 27). The tension of this paradox is what young children learn from being in misaligned environments; that is, that they should listen and not speak, stay within the lines, color the sky blue and the grass green. Misaligned environments tell young children there is only one right way to do something. Compliance, not creativity, is fostered in such an environment.

The importance of a quality classroom environment is a recurring theme in this text. If we value childhood and believe that being a child is an important state in each human's development, then we must design and prepare environments that reflect this. Currently, opportunities for young children to be children and to play in unhurried environments, without structured schedules, are very limited. This is true both at home and at school. We know that young children learn best through discovery, trial and error, asking questions, and interacting with others, but turn our backs on this knowledge. When children don't have opportunities to explore and connect with others and their environment, they don't readily learn key lessons for life. They struggle to learn self-regulation, the art of negotiation, how to take another's perspective, to wait their turn, to listen, to reason, and to relate appropriately to others. These are essential skills to have as an adult and are best learned early in life, and Christakis doesn't let the reader forget this.

Significance for Grown-Ups

Seminal research studies have been done (e.g., Schweinhart, et al., 2005) that highlight many of Christakis' points, such as the importance of home visits as well as the ability of even young children to plan what they will do, do it, and then review what they've accomplished. Resources grounded in research that support classroom interactions and the building of essential skills are

readily available,¹ and yet, as Christakis argues, “the edifice of early education in the United States feels like those boring prefab castle pails. It’s not all bad, but it’s dull, it’s ersatz . . . it could be so much better” (p. 299). It is “the so much better” that all of us (i.e., grown-ups) need to pay attention to. Making early education right for young children is not just an educator’s responsibility. It must be every citizen’s responsibility. We need to prioritize the importance of childhood and an understanding of both young children and their capabilities and how grownups can support a healthy childhood. Christakis’ text is a step in the right direction, but more needs to be done. Additional research needs to come from a variety of fields: education, economics, psychology, and medical and public policy, to name a few. The American people need to develop a much higher regard for young children and what it means to be *little*. Advocacy for our youngest citizens and a resistance to a rhetoric that *belittles* young children is essential. We must observe young children carefully and follow where they lead. We must persist in promoting quality early learning opportunities for all young children.

If adults take time to build relationships with children, then their image of the child will likely change. They will see how powerful children can be. Children’s rich potential, capabilities, competencies, and ideas will amaze them. When this happens, adults will become better advocates for children’s right to learning environments aligned with how they think and learn. As Moyer (2017) states:

We need to invest much more richly in our preschool workforce, understand the research on how young children learn, and stop worrying so much about tests and other useless proxies. It is time to put aside the worksheets and curriculum kits and let our nation’s preschoolers learn the way they do best—by engaging meaningfully with others and the world around them. (p. 34)

If we do this, then our youngest citizens will really get what they need from us!

Author Notes

Julie K. Biddle is Chair of the Early Childhood Education and Middle Childhood Education Department at Antioch University Midwest.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Julie K. Biddle at jbiddle1@antioch.edu.

¹ See, for example, the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (<https://curry.virginia.edu/classroom-assessment-scoring-system>) or Galinsky’s *Mind in the Making* (2010).

Reference List

- Cadwell, L. (1997). *Bringing Reggio Emilia home: An innovative approach to early childhood education*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Christakis, E. (2017). *The importance of being little: What young children need from grownups*. New York: Penguin Books.
- Galinsky, E. (2010). *Mind in the making: The seven essential life skills every child needs*. New York: HarperCollins.
- Malaguzzi, L. (1994). Your image of the child: Where teaching begins. Retrieved from <https://www.reggioalliance.org/downloads/malaguzzi:ccie:1994.pdf>
- Moyer, M. (2017). Getting preschool right. *Scientific American Mind*, 28, 26-34.
- Schweinhart, L., Montie, J., Xiang, Z., Barnett, S., Belfield, C., & Nore, M. (2005). *Lifetime effects: The High/Scope Perry Preschool Study through age 40*. Ypsilanti, MI: High/Scope Press.