

# Early Years

Vol. 46, Issue 3. 2025



The Journal of the Texas Association for the Education of Young Children

## Table of Contents

<i>Editor's Column</i> .....	3
<i>A Message from the Board President</i> .....	4
<i>Can We Just Talk About Stuart J. Murphy? Transforming Early Mathematics Education Through Story-Based Learning</i> .....	6
<i>Building Number Concepts in Early Childhood</i> .....	9
<i>Adultism and Redefining Adult-Child Relations through Constructivist Pedagogy</i> .....	18

We extend our sincere gratitude to the reviewers for their invaluable contributions to this issue. Their expertise, insightful comments, and thorough reviews have significantly enhanced the quality of the published works. We appreciate their commitment to maintaining the high standards of our publication.

Melissa M. Mifflin

Karen Rodman

Melissa Brown

Rhonda Crabbs

Sicily Whetstone

## Editor's Column

By Karen Walker, *Early Years* Editor

---

As we close out 2025, this third issue of *Early Years* brings together insights that remind us why our work matters so deeply.

My own reflection on Stuart J. Murphy's transformative work reminds us that children learn best when mathematical concepts are woven into engaging stories that capture their imaginations. His MathStart series exemplifies how we can make learning both rigorous and joyful – a philosophy that resonates throughout this issue's contributions.

*Building Number Concepts in Early Childhood* explores how young children naturally develop mathematical thinking through hands-on experiences, play, and meaningful contexts that honor their innate curiosity about quantity, patterns, and relationships.

*Adultism and Redefining Adult-Child Relations through Constructivist Pedagogy* challenges us to examine power dynamics in our classrooms, inviting us to move from controlling children to genuinely respecting them as capable thinkers and co-creators of learning communities.

As we enter the holiday season and reflect on the year behind us, I'm grateful for a community of educators who remain committed to seeing children as whole people, honoring their voices, and creating spaces where every young learner can thrive. Here's to the new year ahead and the countless moments of discovery, growth, and connection that await us all!

## A Message from the Board President

By Audrey Rowland, *TXAEYC Board President*

---

This year's TXAEYC Annual Conference in Round Rock was a powerful reminder of what is possible when our community comes together with purpose, passion, and a shared commitment to young children. With more than 1,200 early childhood educators, leaders, advocates, and partners in attendance, the conference reflected the strength, diversity, and collective impact of early childhood education across Texas. From meaningful conversations and learning sessions to moments of celebration and connection, our time together affirmed the power of community.

One of the greatest honors of our time together was the opportunity to recognize outstanding leaders whose work continues to shape the future of our field. We are deeply grateful to each award recipient who joined us and allowed us to celebrate their impact:

Lorie Compton-Betty, Teacher Educator of the Year  
Dr. Julie Thompson, Susan Hargrave Trainer of the Year  
Scott Wille, Administrator of the Year  
Representative Armando Walle, Elected Official of the Year  
Ann Butler, Advocate of the Year  
Khali Shaw, Jacquie Porter Teacher of the Year

These leaders represent the very best of early childhood education—dedicated professionals, advocates, and champions for children, families, and the workforce. Their presence at the conference created meaningful opportunities for connection, inspiration, and shared learning, reminding us all why this work matters.

As we look ahead, the momentum from this conference calls us to continued action. In the coming year, TXAEYC will be launching and expanding initiatives designed to strengthen and support our members and the programs they serve. These include the development of our Shared Services Alliance, new and enhanced member benefits, and expanded professional development opportunities that are responsive, accessible, and grounded in the realities of today's early childhood workforce. We look forward to sharing more details soon and to building these efforts alongside you.

We invite you to deepen your engagement with TXAEYC by strengthening your advocacy efforts, renewing or expanding your membership, and lending your voice to policies that support children, families, and early childhood professionals across Texas. Together, our collective voice is powerful—and it is essential.

We also hope you will carry this energy forward by joining us at next year's TXAEYC Annual Conference, where we will once again come together to learn, connect, and elevate our profession. The work ahead is important, and it is work we do best—together.

Thank you for your continued commitment to early childhood education and for being an essential part of the TXAEYC community.

With gratitude and appreciation,

Audrey Rowland

TXAEYC Governing Board President

## Can We Just Talk About Stuart J. Murphy? Transforming Early Mathematics Education Through Story-Based Learning

By Karen Walker, *Early Years* Editor

---

In the landscape of early childhood mathematics education, few names resonate as powerfully as Stuart J. Murphy. For nearly three decades, Murphy has been quietly revolutionizing how young children encounter mathematical concepts through his masterful integration of storytelling and numerical learning. His work deserves serious consideration from every early childhood educator seeking to make mathematics both meaningful and joyful for their students.

Stuart J. Murphy's journey into children's mathematical literature began with a simple yet profound observation: children naturally learn through stories, play, and visual experiences. Rather than accepting the traditional paradigm of abstract mathematical instruction, Murphy envisioned a world where mathematical concepts could be woven seamlessly into engaging narratives that capture young imaginations while building foundational numeracy skills. In 1995, the first three books in Murphy's 63 book MathStart series were published by HarperCollins Children's Books. This marked the beginning of what would become one of the most comprehensive and beloved mathematical literature collections for young learners. The MathStart series represents more than just books; it embodies a philosophy that mathematics is everywhere, accessible to everyone, and best learned through meaningful contexts.

Murphy's approach acknowledges that young children are natural mathematicians. They sort, classify, compare, and pattern long before they enter formal educational settings. His books honor this innate mathematical thinking while extending it through carefully crafted stories that make abstract concepts concrete and relatable. For preschool educators, Murphy's books offer unprecedented opportunities to integrate mathematics seamlessly into daily classroom experiences. Rather than treating mathematics as a separate subject requiring dedicated "math time," his books demonstrate how mathematical thinking can permeate every aspect of the early childhood curriculum.

**Circle Time Transformations:** Murphy's books excel as circle time read-alouds, creating shared mathematical experiences that build classroom community around numerical exploration. Books like "Monster Musical Chairs" naturally lead to discussions about subtraction, while "The Penny Pot" introduces money concepts through a story about a young entrepreneur saving for a toy.

**Center-Based Learning:** Each MathStart book provides natural extensions into learning centers. After reading "Captain Invincible and the Space Shapes," teachers can enhance the block center with three-dimensional shape exploration or create art projects focusing on geometric forms. "Sluggers' Car Wash" leads naturally to dramatic play scenarios involving water play, counting, and simple business mathematics.

**Assessment Opportunities:** Murphy's books provide authentic contexts for observing children's mathematical thinking. As children engage with stories and related activities, teachers can document their counting strategies, pattern recognition, spatial reasoning, and problem-solving approaches without intrusive testing procedures.

**Family Engagement:** The narrative format makes these books perfect for homework assignments that families can enjoy together. Parents who might feel uncomfortable helping with traditional math worksheets can confidently share mathematical stories with their children, extending learning into home environments.

Murphy's digital presence through MathStart.net extends the impact of his printed books into the digital realm, offering educators additional resources for implementing story-based mathematics instruction. The website provides supplementary materials, activity suggestions, and professional development resources that enhance the classroom application of MathStart concepts.

Teachers can access downloadable activities that extend book experiences, find suggestions for cross-curricular connections, and discover professional development opportunities that deepen their understanding of mathematical instruction through literature. The digital resources are particularly valuable for creating take-home materials that support family engagement in mathematical learning.

The 2022 Texas Prekindergarten Guidelines provide a comprehensive framework for early childhood education, and Murphy's MathStart series aligns beautifully with the mathematics domain outlined in these standards. The Texas Prekindergarten Guidelines were revised to align with the Kindergarten Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS), creating a seamless pathway from preschool through elementary mathematical learning.

The Texas guidelines emphasize mathematical thinking processes: problem-solving, reasoning, communication, connections, and representation. Murphy's books naturally support these processes by presenting mathematical problems within meaningful contexts, encouraging children to reason about numerical relationships, communicate their thinking through story discussions, connect mathematics to their lived experiences, and represent mathematical ideas through various formats.

Number and Operations: Counting with one-to-one correspondence, comparing quantities, understanding number relationships

Patterns and Algebra: Recognizing, creating, and extending patterns; understanding sorting and classification

Geometry and Spatial Reasoning: Identifying and describing shapes, understanding positional concepts, exploring spatial relationships

Measurement: Comparing and ordering objects by various attributes, understanding measurement concepts through practical applications

Murphy's approach is grounded in solid educational research supporting the integration of mathematics and literacy. Studies consistently demonstrate that children who

experience mathematics through meaningful contexts, storytelling, and real-world applications develop stronger mathematical understanding and more positive attitudes toward numerical learning.

His contribution to early childhood mathematics education extends far beyond his impressive collection of published books. He has fundamentally shifted how we conceptualize mathematical learning for young children, demonstrating that mathematics can be joyful, accessible, and deeply integrated into the storytelling traditions that have always captured children's imaginations. For early childhood educators committed to providing high-quality mathematical experiences, Murphy's work offers both inspiration and practical tools. His books remind us that mathematical learning should be an adventure, not a chore, and that every child has the potential to become a confident, capable mathematical thinker when provided with appropriate support, engaging contexts, and meaningful learning experiences.

As we continue to evolve our understanding of effective early childhood education, Murphy's integration of story and mathematics serves as a powerful model for curriculum development that honors both the joy of childhood and the importance of foundational learning. His work deserves not just recognition, but active implementation in classrooms committed to nurturing young children's natural mathematical curiosity and building the numerical foundation essential for future academic success.

## Building Number Concepts in Early Childhood

By Kayla Middleton, EdD and Melissa Dawn Gatlin, PhD

Dr. Kayla Middleton is an early childhood education professor, researcher, and curriculum expert with a doctorate in Educational Leadership. She is passionate advocate for literacy, mathematics, and developmentally appropriate practice. Dr. Middleton balances academia with motherhood, raising four children while mentoring future educators and contributing to national early education discourse.

Dr. Melissa Dawn Gatlin is an early childhood education professor, researcher, and advocate for play-based learning and early math development. With a doctorate in Curriculum and Instruction, she mentors future educators while exploring innovative practices that nurture curiosity, confidence, and joy in learning. Dr. Gatlin is also a proud grandmother of her first grandchild and is inspired by her to contribute to the national conversation about teaching young children STEM.

---

When little ones step into their classrooms each morning, they bring so much natural curiosity about the world with them. However, teachers often report feeling more confident supporting young children's development in literacy than in mathematics. Brain research tells us that the math experiences educators offer in these early years literally shape the way children's brains develop (Elgavi et. al., 2024). If we treat math as an afterthought, we risk limiting children's opportunities to build strong neural pathways for problem solving, reasoning, and creativity. This article offers practical ideas to integrate math into daily routines, so children experience math as meaningful and engaging. The concepts in this article are guided by constructivist theory, specifically Piaget's work on logic-mathematical knowledge. They also draw on Kamii and DeVries' applications of his framework in early childhood. This lens views children as active constructors of meaning and not passive recipients of simply following procedures.

## **Why We Shy Away from Math**

If the idea of teaching a math lesson makes you anxious, you are not alone. When teachers feel shaky about math themselves, children miss out on powerful learning moments (Aumann et. al., 2025). Approximately 7% of American adults report having positive feelings towards mathematics, and nearly two thirds report that they are scared of math (Marks, 2022). Those feelings often linger from our own school experiences and can shape the way we teach math. We might unintentionally push our math lessons towards the end of the day, when young children are likely to be less engaged. From a constructivist standpoint math anxiety comes from the gap between real problem solving and rote instruction, and teachers ease this anxiety when they connect math to real experiences. We can purposefully create meaningful learning experiences not just for our students, but for ourselves as well. The first step is noticing our own math anxieties so that we can set them aside and build a classroom environment where we and our students feel brave enough to explore numbers together. As a result, every math moment becomes an opportunity for discovery, connection and shared learning.

## **The Core Early Math Skills Young Children Need**

Before children can tackle formal addition and subtraction, they need hands-on experiences that build deep number sense and spatial awareness (Bailey, 2017). These opportunities allow them to make sense of quantities and number relationships, such as estimating how many snacks will fit on a plate or grouping classroom objects into sets to compare which has more, fewer, or the same amount. While school math often looks like counting cubes on a worksheet in an abstract way, real math emerges when children engage in activities such as counting snack cups to make sure every classmate has one. In these everyday contexts, math becomes meaningful because it is directly connected to their lived experiences. Research on Cognitively Guided Instruction shows that when teachers start with children's own lived experiences in regard to problem-solving strategies, teachers are better able to guide growth in number concepts while keeping learning meaningful and developmentally appropriate (Carpenter et.al., 2015).

Constructivist theory emphasizes that children build number concepts through hands-on exploration (Gifford, 2004) which emerge from active engagement rather than direct transmission. One to one correspondence is an important early math concept that shows young students how numbers connect to the objects around them (Kamii, 2014). As children learn how to count, they learn to match one number word to one object, such as pointing to each block while saying the numbers out loud. Kamii (2014) emphasizes that play and games help support indirect teaching by encouraging children to reason and develop their own understanding of number concepts such as one-to-one correspondence.

Pattern recognition can emerge during art projects or music time, as children spot repeating nursery rhyme rhythms, replicate bead sequences on a string, or create their own sequences using colored blocks. Sorting activities are a powerful way for children to engage in deeper thinking about the attributes of objects. These experiences encourage young learners to observe, compare, and classify based on distinct characteristics. For example, children might sort leaves by shape during a nature walk, arrange toys from smallest to largest, or group pretend food by color in the dramatic play area. Through these hands-on activities, they begin to understand the features that define each category, which lays the groundwork for more advanced mathematical reasoning (Gripton, 2022).

Measurement becomes meaningful when everyday tools act as instruments of discovery. Young children can use scoops and cups to explore volume at the sensory table, weighing classroom materials on a balance scale, or measure the length of a shelf with a string and then comparing it to the length of a classroom desk. Geometry and spatial reasoning grow through block play and puzzles, where children explore how shapes fit together to build towers or complete tangram designs (Bailey, 2017), and tracing shadows outside to see how shapes change with the sun. Each of these activities are fun, highly engaging and children may not even realize they are learning. When foundational math skills are woven into everyday routines, they become part of children's natural learning experiences. Activities like lining up items by height, setting out snack plates to practice one to one correspondence, or counting jumps on the hopscotch grid help transform math from a separate subject into a meaningful way of understanding the world.

### **Connecting to Standards without Losing Playfulness**

State and national early learning frameworks outline clear benchmarks for kindergarteners. They should be able to count to twenty, recognize and write numerals, order small sets of objects, create and extend simple patterns, experiment with measurement tools, and identify fundamental shapes. Thinking about math is also important as standards also expect children to analyze, justify, and explain math in their own words. This approach is reflected in broader curriculum reforms such as Texas's Bluebonnet Math curriculum which is grounded in research emphasizing conceptual understanding along with procedural fluency (Burns et al., 2015) and is considered a high-quality instructional material (HQIM).. These standards along with a HQIM curriculum offer a roadmap for educators, ensuring that every child develops the

building blocks of mathematical thinking. Aligning lessons with real world problems ensures deep learning, and the magic of early math unfolds through children's natural play. For example, during a nature walk children might gather pebbles and count them into groups of five, or in a block building challenge they can construct towers, compare heights, and ask who built the tallest structure and how many blocks it has. Water play can transform measurement into a sensory exploration as little ones fill and pour, learning about volume and capacity firsthand. In these playful contexts, standards become hands-on, guiding children to meet goals while sparking curiosity and enjoyment at the same time (MacKay et al., 2022).

## **Four Big Ideas That Guide Our Math Teaching**

The following four guiding principles come from constructivist theory, which emphasizes how problem solving and moments of challenge help children develop their reasoning. These guiding ideas are not only suggested but are also aligned with Texas's approved HQIM structured lesson that integrate math into the daily routines of young children.

1. Children are valued as problem solvers. Every math moment becomes a puzzle to solve rather than a procedure to memorize.
2. Curious questions such as "How might you show that with blocks?" or "What if we tried it this way?" help encourage learners to articulate their thinking and explore multiple different strategies.
3. Math in everyday routines reminds us that hallways, snack tables, and art centers provide us with endless opportunities for one-to-one correspondence, measuring, and patterning, if we know where to look.
4. Talking and reasoning together solidifies understanding. When children explain "I built my tower this way because..." they're developing the language and reasoning skills that will support future learning (Tzuriel & Mandel, 2020).

## **Building on What Children Already Know**

Young children will typically come to school with meaningful, real-world number experiences already incorporated into their everyday routines. They might count the steps to their bedroom, sort spoons by size in the kitchen drawer, or compare how many toys fit in different-sized bins (Elliott et al., 2023). These small moments reflect a genuine inquiry and lay the foundation for more formal math learning, such as one-to-one correspondence, pattern recognition, and measurement. Kamii (2014) reminds us that when teachers honor this kind of thinking, rather than teaching using worksheets or drills, children build stronger, more meaningful number sense.

When teachers scaffold these early skills, math time transforms into an opportunity for exploration rather than rote drills. Instead of relying on worksheets, children might count seashells at a sensory table, group them in different ways, and discuss the totals. On a giant number line taped to the floor, young children could hop from three to eight, feeling the distance between numbers and hearing their own voices count aloud. Or they might match tower heights by trading cubes, discovering subtraction or addition

through play (Chen, 2025). By connecting what children do naturally to what we do in the classroom, we give them space to grow their own logic and confidence with numbers.

### **Moving Beyond Rote to Real Understanding**

Counting by rote, simply reciting numbers in order, has its place in early learning. It can be a fun, rhythmic way for children to engage with numbers. But saying numbers in sequence does not necessarily mean a child understands what those numbers represent. Rote counting reflects what Kamii (2014) describes as direct instruction, which fails to foster genuine number sense. Instead, real understanding comes when children connect quantities to their lived experiences. We want children to recognize that the last number they say when counting a group of objects tells them how many are actually there in that group. We want them to realize that if they have five crackers and eat two, there are three left. These moments go beyond memorization; they reflect real understanding. When children begin to link number words to actual quantities and can think flexibly about how numbers work, they are developing true number sense.

### **Activities for Deep Number Sense**

Hands-on math activities provide meaningful opportunities for children to explore and communicate their understanding of number concepts. Using materials such as colorful buttons, ten-frame mats, numeral cards, and recording sheets assist young learners as they engage in hands-on math activities. These tools help them practice counting, structure numbers in meaningful ways, and explain their reasoning. A student might fill a ten-frame and describe their thinking by saying, “ $5 + 5 + 5 + 2$ ,” demonstrating their ability to group and compose numbers (Elgavi et al., 2024). On a large number line is taped to the floor, children to solve problems such as “start at six then add seven,” by physically hopping along the line. This activity supports one-to-one correspondence and experimentation with counting strategies with single jumps or skip counting.

Interlocking cubes are another effective tool. Children use them to construct towers representing different numbers. Children compare towers, measure the difference in height, and trade cubes to equalize them which makes abstract subtraction concepts more tangible (Chen, 2025). Pattern recognition is reinforced through structured hunts for AB, ABB, and growing patterns, with connections drawn to real-world examples such as floor tiles and fabric prints (Elliott et al., 2023). Math-based games, such as the card game of tens or adapted versions of Go Fish, provide additional practice in a playful context. During these games, prompts like “When you rolled a four, how many more until ten?” support mental math and numerical reasoning. These activities embody Piaget’s assertion that number concepts are constructed through action on objects, not memorization of symbols.

### **Building Confidence with Problem Solving Strategies**

Problem solving experiences rooted in real world contexts are essential for developing mathematical reasoning and confidence. Tasks such as designing a snack station for

twelve classmates using containers of varying capacities (for example, three or five cups) offer students opportunities to apply operations, make estimates, and test multiple strategies throughout the week. Celebrating these efforts through collective discussions guided by reflective prompts like “What did you notice when you combined  $3 + 5 + 5$ ?” helps shift the focus from correct answers to mathematical thinking and flexibility, allowing for moments of productive struggle, helping students see that grappling with challenges is a normal and valuable part of becoming a confident problem solver (NCTM, 2014). Over time, students begin to generate their own problems, reinforcing a sense of ownership and agency in their learning (Aumann et al., 2025).

To support mathematical language development, a dedicated vocabulary wall can serve as an ongoing resource. Keywords such as sum, difference, estimate, equal, and pattern are displayed with student generated visuals or short video clips, making abstract terms more accessible. Activities like math charades encourage students to actively use and reinforce academic language in a playful context (Tzuriel & Mandel, 2020).

Regular opportunities to share strategies, such as during daily math meetings, foster a collaborative learning environment. Students are invited to walk peers through their problem-solving processes, justify their decisions, and respond to peer questions. Documenting these sessions through photographs or transcripts and compiling them into a class strategy book provides a valuable reference for students to revisit and draw inspiration from (MacKay et al., 2024). Mathematical thinking can extend beyond math time through journaling and cross curricular connections. In math journals, students may record repeating patterns observed in hallway tiles, musical rhythms, or weather cycles at home. Sharing these discoveries helps contextualize math as a tool for interpreting the world, rather than a subject confined to the classroom (Elliott et al., 2023).

Finally, rotating through hands-on learning centers, such as dramatic play stores using play money, construction areas for measuring materials, or cooking stations for weighing ingredients, enables students to engage in mathematics through purposeful, real-world applications. These experiences, especially when they include peer mentoring, promote both skill development and self-efficacy. More experienced classmates can model strategies and explain their thinking to support others, creating a collaborative learning environment. This approach mirrors the principles of Cognitively Guided Instruction, where teachers pay close attention to the strategies children naturally use and then build on them to deepen problem-solving skills (Carpenter et.al., 2015). When children engage in meaningful, student-centered tasks, they begin to see themselves not just as learners of math but as capable mathematicians in their own right (Chen, 2025).

## **Embracing a Mathematical Mindset**

As we think about early math, it is easy to focus on what children cannot yet do, such as count to a certain number, recognize numerals, or solve equations. But when we look closely, we see that children are already making sense of numbers in their daily lives. They compare, sort, and problem solve long before they ever touch a worksheet. This

reminds us that our role is not to simply deliver facts but to guide and extend the mathematical thinking that is already there. A constructivist approach recognizes children as active thinkers who are constantly exploring and testing ideas about numbers. When teachers build on this natural curiosity, math becomes more than memorizing steps and grows into real understanding that children can carry with them.

## Reference

Aumann, L., Puca, R. M., & Gasteiger, H. (2025). Effects of early childhood teacher knowledge and feedback on children's early mathematical development in German kindergartens. *Early Childhood Education Journal*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10643-025-01859-1>

Bailey, D. H. (2017). Causal inference and the spatial–math link in early childhood. *Monographs of the Society for Research in Child Development*, 82(1), 127-136. <https://doi.org/10.1111/mono.12288>

Carpenter, T. P., Fennema, E., Franke, M. L., Levi, L., & Empson, S. B. (2015). *Children's mathematics: Cognitively guided instruction* (2nd ed.). Heinemann.

Chen, W. (2024). Problem-solving skills, memory power, and early childhood mathematics: Understanding the significance of the early childhood mathematics in an individual's life. *Journal of the Knowledge Economy*, 16(1), 1-25. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13132-023-01557-6>

Elgavi, O., & Hamo, P. (2024). Math on the brain: Seven principles from neuroscience for early childhood educators. *Early Childhood Education Journal*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10643-024-01656-2>

Elliott, L., Votruba-Drzal, E., Miller, P., Libertus, M. E., & Bachman, H. J. (2023). Unpacking the home numeracy environment: Examining dimensions of number activities in early childhood. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 62, 129-138. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ecresq.2022.08.002>

Gifford, S. (2004). A new mathematics pedagogy for the Early Years: In search of principles for practice. *International Journal of Early Years Education*, 12(2), 99–115. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0966976042000225507>

Gripton, C. (2022). Pattern in early years mathematics curriculum: a 25-year review of the status, positioning and conception of pattern in England. *Research in Mathematics Education*, 25(1), 3–23. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14794802.2021.2010237>

Kamii, C. (2014). Direct versus indirect teaching of number concepts for ages 4 to 6: The importance of thinking. *Young Children*, 69(5), 72–77.

MacKay, K. L., McMillan, B. G., Young, T. A., Tucker, A. M., Kimball, A. C., & Tolman, E. K. (2022). Mathematics content in early childhood classroom libraries: Alignment with common core mathematics standards. *Early Childhood Education Journal*, 52(7), 1325–1337. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10643-022-01418-y>

Marks, T. (2022). Anxiety in Mathematics: Change the Narrative, Change the Environment. *BU Journal of Graduate Studies in Education*, 14(2), 9-14.

Piaget, J. (1977). *Piaget on Piaget* [Video]. Yale University Media Design Studio. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I1JWr4G8YLM>

Tzuriel, D., & Mandel, R. (2020). Parent-child math discourse and children's math thinking in early childhood. *Journal of Cognitive Education and Psychology*, 19(1), 3-19. <https://doi.org/10.1891/jcep-d-18-00015>

## Adultism and Redefining Adult-Child Relations through Constructivist Pedagogy

By Shushan Vardanyan

---

Shushan Vardanyan, Ph.D., is an Assistant Professor of Early Childhood Education at the University of Mississippi. Her research focuses on active learning, cultural influences in education, higher-order thinking skills, and constructivist teaching approaches in early childhood education. For inquiries, she can be reached via email at [svardany@olemiss.edu](mailto:svardany@olemiss.edu) or by phone at +1 (662) 915-7622.

### **Abstract**

Adultism, the systemic privilege of adults over children, is deeply embedded in societal structures, particularly in education and parenting. This paper explores how adultism manifests in early childhood education, shaping power dynamics that undermine children's autonomy, critical thinking, and self-determination. Drawing on existing literature, the study examines how schools reinforce adultist hierarchies through rigid curricula, authoritarian teaching methods, and behavioral control mechanisms such as rewards and punishments. The research highlights the ways in which children's voices are silenced, their emotions dismissed, and their choices overridden under the guise of care and discipline. The paper also considers constructivist education approach that challenges traditional authority structures and advocates for child participation in decision-making. By recognizing and addressing adultism, educators and caregivers can foster environments that honor children's agencies and respect their rights as active participants in their own learning and development. This work calls for a shift in educational philosophy, moving away from compliance-based approaches toward a constructivist framework that prioritizes autonomy, respect, and intergenerational solidarity.

*Keywords:* Adultism, Early Childhood Education, Child Autonomy, Power Dynamics, Constructivist Pedagogy

Children grow up in a world constructed by adults where rules, expectations, and decisions are designed without their participation. This imbalance of power is deeply embedded in our social fabric and rarely questioned. What often appears to be standard practice such as discipline, routine, protection, can also reveal the contours of adultism: a system of thought and behavior that privileges adults over children in ways that silence the latter's agency, constrain their autonomy, and overlook their capacity for reason and moral judgment (Bañales, 2024; Fletcher & McDermott, 2024; Liebel & Meade, 2024).

Antoine de Saint-Exupéry's *The Little Prince* poignantly illuminates this dynamic. In the book's opening scene, the narrator recalls how, as a child, his drawing of a boa constrictor digesting an elephant was dismissed by adults who could only see a hat. "Grown-ups never understand anything by themselves," he writes, "and it is tiresome for children to be always and forever explaining things to them" (Saint-Exupéry, 1943/1971, p. 2). The story demonstrates adultism not only as a failure of empathy but as a systemic failure of imagination, an inability to see the world through a child's eyes, and a compulsion to redefine it in adult terms. This literary insight mirrors the lived experience of many children today, whose ideas are routinely misunderstood or dismissed because they do not conform to adult logic or priorities.

Nowhere is this more evident than in schools. Educational institutions are founded on the premise that children must comply with adult-devised systems that frequently prioritize order and obedience over critical thinking and self-regulation (Bell, 2018; Varella, 2024). In such environments, children are evaluated more for how well they conform than for how well they understand. Within this landscape, adultism hides in plain sight, in the way students are expected to *behave*, the way their concerns are minimized, and the way pedagogical goals are framed around what adults believe children should learn, rather than how children construct knowledge for themselves.

This is precisely the critique offered by Kamii and her colleagues in their response to *The Six National Goals* (1994). They challenged the prevailing view that children's learning should be measured by adult-defined standards of achievement, suggesting instead that genuine learning occurs only when children are allowed to make sense of their world in developmentally meaningful ways. Their analysis calls attention to a central contradiction: while national goals stress measurable outcomes, they ignore the child's need for autonomy and intellectual freedom. When children are taught what to think rather than how to think, adultism is not just practiced, it is institutionalized.

Kamii et al.'s critique reinforces concerns raised by Kohn (1999; 2005), another constructivist thinker, who argued that the use of rewards and punishments undermines the development of intrinsic motivation. Rather than fostering moral autonomy, these practices condition children to seek external validation. In both classroom management and instructional policy, control becomes the objective, leaving little space for children to question, wonder, or dissent.

Legal and policy frameworks, such as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), offer partial resistance to these trends (Vranješević, 2020). While the CRC emphasizes protection and provision, its third pillar, participation, is most radical in its implications. It invites a reconceptualization of children not as passive recipients

of care but as full citizens capable of expressing preferences and exercising agency. Yet, as Vranješević (2020) notes, adultist ideologies often distort this principle, framing participation as a risk rather than a right.

Despite these challenges, there is growing scholarly interest in understanding adultism not only as a set of interpersonal dynamics but as a structural force that shapes how we design educational experiences. When adultism is acknowledged, it is often framed as isolated instances of disrespect rather than recognized as a systemic form of exclusion upheld by curriculum mandates, disciplinary policies, and inflexible developmental standards (Bertrand et al. 2023; Smith, 2024).

This paper addresses the following research question: In what ways do teacher-student interactions reveal adultist assumptions, and how can these dynamics be transformed to foster mutual respect and shared authority in the classroom?

### **Theoretical Framework**

This paper is grounded in a constructivist theoretical framework that draws from the work of Kamii (1984), and Kohn (1999, 2005) to critically examine adultist assumptions embedded within classroom interactions. Kamii's vision of intellectually autonomous children challenges traditional hierarchies in education by advocating for classrooms where authority is shared and children are respected as capable thinkers. From this perspective, teaching is not the transmission of adult knowledge to passive recipients, but a co-constructive process wherein meaning is built through dialogue, inquiry, and mutual respect. Kamii's emphasis on children's autonomy - intellectual, moral, and social - serves as a foundation for reimaging classroom structures that prioritize independence over compliance and critical thinking over rote behavior.

Kohn's (1999) critical analysis of rewards and punishments as tools of control further informs this framework. He argues that such behavioral strategies function less as supports for learning and more as mechanisms of adult convenience and coercion, fostering conformity at the expense of intrinsic motivation and moral development. His concept of "sugar-coated control" underscores how even seemingly positive reinforcement (e.g., praise) can subtly reinforce adult dominance and suppress children's agency (Kohn, 1999, p. 24).

By integrating Kamii's constructivist vision, and Kohn's critique of behaviorist discipline, this paper interrogates how teacher-student interactions may unwittingly reflect and perpetuate adultism and explores how these dynamics might be transformed to promote more democratic, respectful, and empowering learning environments.

### **A Personal Encounter with Adultism**

As The Little Prince reminds us, all grown-ups were once children... but only few of them remember it (Saint-Exupéry, 1943/1971). Remembering, it seems, is more than nostalgia; it is a moral imperative. To remember what it felt like to be a child, to have your world reshaped by decisions made without you, is the first step toward resisting adultism.

## ***I remember***

I remember being seven years old, filled with the quiet joy of a secret treasure. My youngest uncle had returned from Germany with a beautiful doll; delicate, elegant, unlike any I had ever owned. It was not the kind of toy one played with carelessly. It felt sacred. I hid it in the back of my closet, behind layers of old clothes, taking it out only when I was alone. Each glimpse felt like magic. It was my own private rose. But unlike *The Little Prince*, I did not get to protect what I loved.

One evening, visitors arrived, a grieving mother and her young son who had recently lost his father. The house was heavy with sorrow. As they prepared to leave, my mother, perhaps moved by compassion, looked at me and said softly but decisively, “If you’re not playing with that doll, why don’t you give it to him?”

Her tone was gentle, but the decision was final. I froze. How did she know? Why did she assume I didn’t treasure it? I wanted to explain that love doesn’t always look like play. My hiding it was an act of care, not neglect. But in that moment, I wasn’t allowed to speak. I was a child, and like so many others, my voice was not considered necessary. With trembling hands, I handed over the doll. The boy took it by the hair and swung it playfully as they walked out. No one saw my silent grief.

It was a moment of rupture between me and my mother, but more deeply between my inner world and the adult world that could so casually trespass upon it. I learned then what *The Little Prince* teaches so gently but urgently: adults forget. They forget what it means to treasure something silently, to see with the heart instead of the eye. In forgetting, they make decisions that diminish rather than honor a child’s emotional life. From that day forward, I began to guard my inner world more closely. I learned that the sacredness of childhood, its wonder, its quiet attachments, was fragile in a world governed by adults who rarely remember what it was like to be a child.

## **Adultism: A Silent Force in Our Lives**

Looking back, I recognize that this experience was more than just a childhood heartbreak, it was a lesson in adultism. My mother’s decision, though well-intended, was made without my consent. She saw a chance to show kindness at my expense, assuming that, as a child, my feelings were less valid than her act of generosity.

This is how adultism operates. It dictates children’s lives in ways they cannot resist, often under the guise of love, care, or discipline. It happens in homes, in classrooms, and in societies where children are expected to conform, obey, and accept that adults know best. But at what cost?

As educators, parents, and members of society, we must ask ourselves:

- How often do we make decisions for children instead of with them?
- How many times do we assume we know their needs without truly listening?
- How does our authority silence their voices in ways we fail to recognize?

Recognizing adultism is the first step toward challenging it. And as I reflect on my own childhood, I wonder: if I had been given the choice that day, if my mother had simply asked, rather than decided, how different might my memory have been?

### **Moving from Rewards and Punishments to Constructivist Education: A Road to Defeat Adultism**

Alfie Kohn (1993, 2001, 2005), in *Punished by Rewards, Unconditional Parenting*, and his article “Five Reasons to Stop Saying ‘Good Job!'”, critiques the widespread reliance on praise, rewards, and punishments as mechanisms of control in both parenting and educational settings. He argues that such practices, however well-intentioned, embody adultism by assuming children’s behavior must be externally controlled rather than internally guided. This perspective reinforces a hierarchy in which adults manipulate children’s actions to meet their own expectations, often at the expense of the child’s autonomy and intrinsic motivation.

Kohn (2001) critiques praise and rewards as tools of control rather than support. He warns that expressions like “Good job!” often reflect adult convenience, encouraging conformity over independent thinking.

Borrowing the term *sugar-coated control* from DeVries & Zan (1994), he describes this as “a way of doing something to children to get them to comply with our wishes” (p. 1). Kohn (2001) argues that praise, like punishment, can manipulate behavior:

The reason praise can work in the short run is that young children are hungry for our approval, but adults must avoid exploiting that dependence... Instead of fostering autonomy, praise fosters approval-seeking: rather than bolstering a child’s self-esteem, praise may increase kids’ dependence on us, making them more tentative and less likely to persist with difficult tasks (p. 2).

Kohn concludes, “What kids do need is unconditional support, love with no strings attached. That’s not just different from praise – it’s the opposite of praise” (p. 5). He advocates for moving from *doing to* strategies toward *working with* models that respect children’s capacities for reasoning and collaboration.

Kamii (1984) emphasized that teachers and parents must cultivate environments where children think critically, question authority, and construct understanding through meaningful engagement. Such education nurtures responsibility, reflection, and ethical decision-making, preparing children for democratic participation. Constructivist education similarly respects children’s curiosity and developmental progression, fostering agency by positioning them as active participants rather than passive recipients (Liebel & Meade, 2024). Kamii’s emphasis on social problem-solving aligns with this approach, where children negotiate and create norms rather than obey externally imposed rules. Evidence shows that children thrive when given freedom and responsibility, demonstrating how autonomy advances both personal growth and collective responsibility.

## Implications

### 1. Classroom Rules for Teachers

One simple yet radical practice is to establish *rules for teachers*. Just as teachers create rules for the students, why not ask children what they would like *us* to do in the classroom? This could take the form of a collaboratively created poster listing “classroom rules for the teacher.” Such an agreement would model mutual respect and trust from the first day of school. If this feels uncomfortable, we should ask ourselves why. The answer often lies in adultism: the ingrained belief that authority flows only one way.

*Potential Challenge:* Some teachers may resist this practice, feeling it undermines their authority. It may also take time for children to articulate meaningful rules, requiring careful facilitation to ensure the process remains constructive.

*Overcoming Strategy:* Teachers can begin with a small set of guiding prompts (“What makes you feel safe?” or “What helps you learn best?”) to scaffold the process. Administrators can support by framing this not as a loss of authority, but as modeling shared responsibility.

### 2. Children as Co-Teachers and Planners

We seldom imagine a young child teaching the teacher or sharing knowledge with their peers. Yet children bring perspectives, skills, and insights that adults overlook. Inviting them to help shape lessons, or even to teach their classmates something they know, affirms their capacity to contribute. More than knowledge transfer, this practice cultivates leaders, children who grow up confident, compassionate, and responsible for the world around them.

*Potential Challenge:* Not all children may feel comfortable stepping into teaching roles, and some may dominate while quieter students remain overlooked. Teachers must balance participation to ensure inclusion and equity in these opportunities.

*Overcoming Strategy:* Rotate opportunities so each child has a turn in different formats such as storytelling, demonstrating, or leading a game. Pair shy children with a partner or small group to lower pressure and use reflective discussions so all voices are heard.

### 3. Teacher Recruitment through the Lens of Adultism

If we are committed to dismantling adultism, then it must also shape how we recruit and evaluate teachers. Instead of focusing only on credentials and years of experience, why not explore how deeply teachers remain connected to the child within themselves? In interviews, we might ask:

- *What kind of games did you play as a child?*
- *Who was your best friend, and why?*
- *What toy did you cherish most, and how did you care for it?*
- *What childhood memories would you like to recreate with your students?*
- *How would you like your students to remember you when they grow up?*

These questions do more than check qualifications, they reveal whether a teacher can empathize with children and engage with them as fellow human beings.

*Potential Challenge:* Hiring committees may struggle to balance these child-centered questions with traditional measures of competence. There is also a risk of bias if interviewers misinterpret candidates' personal childhood experiences or undervalue diverse cultural expressions of play and memory.

*Overcoming Strategy:* Combine these reflective questions with evidence-based teaching scenarios and observations. Provide cultural competency training for interviewers so they interpret answers with respect for diversity, not as a fixed standard of "childlikeness."

### **Closing Reflection**

If we have the courage to see children not as incomplete adults but as full beings in their own right, we might begin to construct schools, homes, and societies where respect and reciprocity replace control and compliance. This requires nothing less than a shift in consciousness—from *doing to* children toward *being with* them.

As Saint-Exupéry (1943/1971) reminds us in *The Little Prince*:

"All grown-ups were once children... but only few of them remember it" (p. 5).

Let us be among those few who remember. And let us allow that memory to guide how we listen, how we teach, and how we honor the children entrusted to us.

## References

Bañales, X. (2024). Decolonization: A framework to understand and transgress adultism. *Taboo*, 22(1), 7-27.

Bell, J. (2018). In Frey B. B. (Ed.), *Adultism*. SAGE Publications, Inc. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781506326139.n26>

Bertrand, M., Brooks, M. D., & Domínguez, A. D. (2023). Challenging adultism: Centering youth as educational decision makers. *Urban Education*, 58(10), 2570-2597. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0042085920959135>

DeVries, R., & Zan, B. (1994). *Moral classrooms, moral children: Creating a constructivist atmosphere in early education*. Teachers College Press.

Fletcher, A. F. C. (2024). A future without adultism. *Taboo*, 22(1), 61-70.

Fletcher, A. F. C., & McDermott, J. C. (2024). Introduction to the special issue on adultism. *Taboo*, 22(1), 3-6.

Kamii, C. (1984). Autonomy: The aim of education envisioned by Piaget. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 65(6), 410-415.

Kamii, C., Clark, F. B., and Dominick, A. (1994). The six national goals: A road to disappointment. *PHI DELTA KAPPAN*, 75(9), 672-677.

Kohn, A. (1999). *Punished by rewards: The trouble with gold stars, incentive plans, A's, praise, and other bribes*. Houghton Mifflin Co.

Kohn, A. (2005). *Unconditional parenting: Moving from rewards and punishments to love and reason*. Atria Books.

Kohn, A. (2001). Five reasons to stop saying "good job!". *Young Children*, 56(5), 24-28.

Liebel, M., & Meade, P. (2024a). Can school become a non-adultist institution? *Childhood & Philosophy*, 20, 1-34. <https://doi.org/10.12957/childphilo.2024.81338>

Liebel, M., & Meade, P. (2024b). Intersectional tensions in theorizing adultism. *Taboo*, 22(1), 96-123.

Saint-Exupéry, A. de. (1943/1971). *The little prince*. Reynal & Hitchcock.

Smith, K. (2024). Using adultism in conceptualizing oppression of children and youth: More than a buzzword? *Taboo*, 22(1), 227-255.

Varella, A. (2024). Exploring and combating adultism in early childhood education and beyond. *Taboo*, 22(1), 256-268.

Vranješević, J. (2020). Convention on the rights of the child and adultism: How to deconstruct a myth? *Šolsko Polje*, 31(3/4), 44-253. [https://doi.org/10.32320/1581-6044.31\(3-4\)45-61](https://doi.org/10.32320/1581-6044.31(3-4)45-61)