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## The Pleasures of Learning: Linking Parent and Child with MegaSkills

by Ailish Hopper Meisner

It is no surprise that many parents are worried about their child's relationship to learning; currently, there are hundreds of books on the market and an equal number of programs of support to help parents "maximize their child's potential" or help a child who isn't doing well. The recent call for more testing, part of the No Child Left Behind Act, is only the most current manifestation of a "Back to Basics" urge that has been around for nearly 30 years. Yet, for an even longer time, it has been claimed that something is "broken" in American education, that not enough is being taught or being taught well, that not enough children receive what their parents hope for them. We point to school leaders, to educational philosophies, to particular texts or lesson plans, to physical plants or to school uniforms, hoping that changing these will ensure that our children will experience success and will have all possible opportunities in life.

Since the 1950s, Dorothy Rich, a former teacher, felt that there was not enough focus on every child's first place of learning--the home. She held evening sessions for parents in the 1960s called "Success for Children Begins at Home," in which she led discussions and activities for parents. And when research began to appear that indicated similar conclusions, Rich began to explore and devise what she's since called "MegaSkills." When "Back to Basics" really gained ground in the 1980s, Rich realized that its focus was on academic basics only, ignoring the fact that education is not merely a school's responsibility, but consists of a partnership between parents and school. She felt that the other crucial basics, which she calls "superbasics" and which allow or disallow children to acquire the academic skills, were being ignored. As she says, "It is so important not to wait for changes to begin 'out there.' Educational change can start in every home today."

Rich began to research school report cards and job performance evaluations, noticing that there were certain factors that determined success in what she calls "the Never-ending Report Card." She compiled what she calls a sort of "recipe" book that connected these traits with activities that parents and children, in some cases in conjunction with teachers, could do together. These "recipes" describe another realm of education, one from which academics might spring, in which responsibility does not just mean drudgery but joy; in which effort means satisfaction; and initiative means excitement. Rich's book, *MegaSkills*, came out in 1988, with two more editions following. Her nonprofit organization, the Home and School Institute, provides training programs based on the books that are currently used in over 4000 schools nationally and

internationally. The training programs instruct teachers in the use of MegaSkills in the classroom and instruct school support staff, parent liaisons and guidance counselors, for instance, in partnering with parents.

Rich calls the MegaSkills "inner engines for learning." They include Confidence, Motivation, Effort, Responsibility, Initiative, Perseverance, Caring, Teamwork, Common Sense and Problem Solving. In the third edition of her book, she added Focus to the list. As Rich acknowledges in her book's preface, what she has articulated is a way of parenting that comes naturally to most of us, but we have lost our connection to the specifics of how to enact it. As she says, "We seem to have heightened sophistication about parenting and schooling and decreased common sense. I used to think that everyone knew about home learning activities -- about how to teach math at the grocery store or in the kitchen; about how to teach reading with napkins, dishes, spoons, and forks. But I have learned better now, and I've learned this lesson from parents."

Perhaps her own experience learning--and parenting--this way was influenced by Rich's upbringing in a small town in Michigan where, as a youngster, she raised chickens. However, she cites as her most important influence her work as a teacher, as well as the many workshops she's led since writing the MegaSkills books and curriculum. Rich specifically sought to pull together activities that would be both practical and enjoyable; she said to herself when just beginning, "Figure out what every family can do...Don't make it too hard or too long...Remember, it doesn't take a lot of time to do a lot of good."

As Rich puts it, MegaSkills is designed to have parent and child experience the pleasure of learning. The book and the curriculum encourage parents to use this time as play, to begin to equate learning with play. Most activities take a mere 10 to 20 minutes; Rich is enormously sensitive to the amount of pressure that parents and children already feel to do or achieve. She speaks to parents' guilt about not doing enough, or not doing it right, promoting the same sense of play for them in teaching as she does in children's learning. She also highlights a hidden benefit to practicing such skills together: the feeling of value and love that a child feels when an adult invests in her this way. In a way, the MegaSkills are a Trojan horse; they appear as a means to help children succeed in school, but the activities contain within them a means for families to be knit more closely, for parents to feel more comfortable and confident as teachers, and for both parent and child to gain more hope and confidence in life and their abilities to handle life.

Two MegaSkills that parents most often cite a need for, and children most often feel nagged about, are Motivation and Responsibility. Rich emphasizes that motivation is something children are born with, and her "recipes" relocate motivation in curiosity instead of, for instance, avoidance of punishment. They include "Just Outside," in which a parent might take a walk with a child, look at something through a magnifying glass or simply focus on a single sense--hearing, or smell. The parent shares her experiences with the child and elicits the child's experiences; in so doing the child can learn that there are innumerable discoveries always available if she only pays attention. The Motivation recipes are antidotes to the "I'm bored" or "I don't feel like..." that parents often hear, yet they are not about lecturing or sermonizing; they are about waking up to all that is exciting around us. They include visiting a courthouse, getting around using public transportation (with the child planning and executing the route) and sitting and watching at a construction site, airport

or train station.

The Motivation activities also emphasize time and communication. Rich notes that, "Before they do things, children tend to ask two questions over and over: How long will it take? [and] What was that I was supposed to do again?" Rich suggests doing timing activities, in which the child claps for five seconds, or times a traffic light or times holding her breath. She also suggests taking turns giving directions to places or to do an activity (setting the table, for instance), in both written and oral form. Similarly, she suggests in "The No-Nag Writing System" that parent and child use, for varying amounts of time, only written notes to communicate. Parents should ask their children what nagging problem they have together, then agree to use notes instead of nagging. As one parent said, "We left notes for each other about what we didn't like. My daughter, age 12, wrote, 'You never let me explain. You always say 'no.' And I responded, 'No, I don't.' But then, I thought about it, and I wrote, 'Yes, I do do that. I really do.'"

Rich defines the MegaSkill of Responsibility as "doing what's right." The activities cover such concrete things as personal cleanliness, punctuality and keeping promises and such abstract things as honesty or ethics. As "heavy" and grim as that list might seem, in the recipes it appears as fun. For instance, one activity, which teaches getting up on time, has the whole family draw lots, with one person drawing a piece of paper that says "wake up" and everyone else drawing "wake *me* up." Children have to learn how to use the alarm clock, and they are trusted with the responsibility of waking everyone else up. But, perhaps most importantly, the job rotates, so they get to see others in the position of responsibility. They get to see other people learning, which helps responsibility be less black-and-white.

The MegaSkills proposal for honesty and ethics is a reminder to parents that responsibility is a two-way street. The tough questions that test children's ability to tell right from wrong must be asked. Both parents and children are encouraged to discuss such questions as, "What are the choices? What are my values? How do I want to be treated? What kind of person am I? What kind of person do I want to be?"

The overall goal of MegaSkills is to transfer the power and responsibility of learning to the student, and the secret of their effectiveness is that they're not just for the children but for parents, too. The book and the curriculum promote dialogue and give concrete examples and exercises that directly relate to situations in life; but most of all, they put the locus of learning where most children up to the age of 18 spend much of their time: the home. In a country that has polished the phrase "lifelong learning" to the point of meaninglessness, the MegaSkills approach gives it new life.

Recently, the MegaSkills curriculum has been made available in smaller "minibooks," which concern particular content areas, such as Preschool/School Readiness, Middle School and "Keeping on Track" and "Creating Positive School-Home Connections," Rich also writes a syndicated column. Her upcoming book is called *It's Hard to Be Smart When You're Scared*.<

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