

# John Dewey:

## Father of Pragmatism

**“Education is not preparation for life: Education is life itself.”**

John Dewey (1859-1952)

Although he was one of the most famous educators of the 20th century, what may have been most remarkable about John Dewey was his ability to see the extraordinary value of the unremarkable, everyday experience for young children.

In most classrooms across the United States during Dewey's time, children could be found sitting quietly and obediently in their seats, passively receiving information from their teachers and committing random facts to memory. Every classroom and every teacher would be doing the same thing at the same time.

How unsettling this was for Dewey! He knew that, out of necessity, even the youngest children participated in household chores and activities, and he quickly recognized the wonderful learning opportunities these everyday experiences provided. He came to believe that the child's own instincts, activities, and interests should be the starting

point of education.

Dewey's strong beliefs fired his passion for educational reform. After receiving a Ph.D. in philosophy from Johns Hopkins University and teaching at the University of Michigan, Dewey founded his now-famous Laboratory School at the University of Chicago in 1896. The Lab School came to have a powerful influence on American education. In designing the curriculum, Dewey took advantage of the teachings of early European educators such as Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi, who emphasized that children learn by doing, and Fredrich Froebel, who recognized the value of play in children's development. Important skills such as problem solving, language, and math concepts were developed as children were allowed to move freely in and out of the classroom and explore their surroundings. Education was truly child-centered—teachers were trained to observe children's interests and help them follow through on those interests.

Throughout the entire process, teachers and children were "learners together."

When we look at early childhood classrooms today, we see children building language skills as they share snacks with classmates, learning important science concepts as they

water and care for plants, and developing math skills as they cook up a special treat for lunch. All these commonplace preschool activities stem from the ideas of a forwardthinking and most uncommon man — John Dewey.

### DEWEY'S DOCTRINE

Dewey's beliefs about education for young children were based on the following ideas:

- 1) Education and life are interrelated, not separate.
- 2) Children learn best by doing, by acting on the world.
- 3) Continuity of experience is essential to growth.

### A PRAGMATIC APPROACH TO LEARNING YOU CAN EXERCISE DEWEY'S APPROACH TO LEARNING IN YOUR OWN PROGRAM BY:

- 1) Starting each day by gathering children for a group meeting, where the development of language skills is an inevitable outcome.
- 2) Planning cooking activities in which children learn important math skills in the process.
- 3) Taking a nature walk for a hands-on exploration of important science concepts.