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# Beginnings Professional Development Workshop



PHOTOGRAPH BY BONNIE NEUGEBAUER

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# A Graduation Story

by Donna King

At our best, early childhood teachers create experiences that reflect our deepest values, speak to the aspirations of families, and communicate a clear-sighted respect for every child. Of course, in the moment-to-moment reality of our hectic and unpredictable lives with children, we don't always realize our highest ideals; we have smooth days when the gap between intention and action narrows, and difficult days when the gap seems to swallow us whole. One lovely thing about important transitions is that they require planning ahead, and thus invite heightened attention to living our intentions.

When we create ritual to mark transition, we ask ourselves: What story does this celebration tell about the children? About their families? About teachers and our work? Any celebration is a chance to communicate confidence and pleasure in a child; warm appreciation for a family; or joy and pride in your own work. But perhaps no celebration offers a richer opportunity to tell these stories than the end-of-year ritual many programs call 'Graduation.'

There are probably as many wholehearted ways to celebrate Graduation as there are teachers saying goodbye to children they know and love. This is the story of one Graduation at Children First, a small school serving 12 preschoolers in a mixed-age group.

## April: Teacher's Planning Meeting

It's time for my teaching partner, Sarah, and I to sit together with the calendar, and face our mixed feelings about the goodbyes ahead. As leaders of the school community, we are responsible for logistics, but even more, we are charged with holding space for feelings. All of us — the families and children who are leaving; and the families, children, and teachers being left behind — will experience grief, excitement, anxiety, and anticipation in this transition. If Sarah and I enter this time in tune with our own feelings, we are more likely to move through Graduation in a way that helps everyone else stay present to theirs.

I bring our 'big list' — the five-page document that captures what we've learned in years past about how to make

Graduation happen. We divide tasks and map out the timing of events. Graduation will be the foreground for this last month of school, but we know we must leave space in the background for the wholesome daily fare of preschool life — pretending, time in nature, sensory play, and open-ended work with materials.

We consider ways to make this demanding month more nourishing for teachers. We know that for a ritual to resonate with children and families, many elements need to stay the same from year to year. At the same time, we will bring more energy to our work if some elements are fresh and some time-consuming tasks drop away. So we weigh the value of each item on the list and decide which to keep, which to simplify, and which to let go.

Finally, we remind ourselves what kind of story we want this celebration to tell about each Graduator — a story that acknowledges both challenge and achievement with tenderness, honesty, humor, and optimism.

And so, we settle on a plan. Traditionally, our Graduates prepare gifts for their families as keepsakes of their time at Children First. We want this final project to reflect what the children love, and to showcase their skills with many expressive languages. We decide that each Graduator will choose a 'scene' from their lives at school to represent in a diorama, including a self-portrait 'action figure' they will draw, and digital photographs of their playmates.

Also in keeping with our tradition, each Graduator will have a Special Day sometime in May. On that day, teachers will host an early morning Progress Conference for the child and family. Later, all the children will help make the Graduator's crown, and add ideas to the 'diploma' — a big piece of chart paper we will fill with a list of things the Graduator has learned to do.



In 1990, Donna King, informed by her graduate school study of child care quality, worked with a group of teachers and parents to found Children First, a small, nonprofit early education program in Durham, North Carolina — and she has been teaching, directing, and, most of all, learning there ever since. She has three children — Cara, now 22; Anna Grace, now 20; and Josh, now

17 — all graduates of Children First.

Sarah and I leave our meeting organized and energized. There is hard work ahead, but we know it is work we have chosen for important reasons.

### Mid-April: Planning with Families

It's time to bring families into the process. I update our annual Graduation newsletter and send it out. Sign-ups are posted. Graduating families choose dates for Special Days, and other parents volunteer to cover the classroom while teachers are in Progress Conferences. A crew of parents will come one Saturday to raise a giant tarp over the playground in case of rain. Another crew will help teachers set up the playground on the day of the event. Everybody who comes will bring food to go with the pizzas we'll order for dinner, and one family will bring a huge cake decorated with the Graduates' names. We need this help, and we believe that the celebration is more meaningful for families when they pitch in.

### May 1: Planning with the Children

Today when the Graduates arrive at school, they find their names on the morning message: "Gwen, Casey, Kai, and Noam will meet with Donna in the library." These four children — three of whom saw their older siblings graduate, and all of whom were 'graduation partners' last year — have been excited about their own Graduation all year. We've been careful, though, not to talk about it much; we would rather children focus on the here and now. But with the turn of the calendar to May, Graduation is upon us, and there are decisions to make.

This meeting is an opportunity for these children to make familiar traditions their own. They choose which songs we will sing for each of them at the ceremony, and negotiate with each other about which dance to do together (as often happens, Joanie Bartels' wild and silly "Martian Hop" wins the day). Then we brainstorm possibilities for the Graduation piñata we will make from cardboard and paper-mâché. After a series of votes, the winner is "Abiyoyo" — the Pete Seeger monster who has loomed large in stories and games this year.

Later, each Graduate meets with Sarah to choose the scene he or she will represent. What space, experience, and friends will each child claim as most important? We

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smile with recognition when Casey chooses a game of Rocketship at the creek; Kai, digging "Bob Lake" in the playground's Sand River; Gwen, playing Mama in the Loft Room; and Noam, being the baby in the Playhouse.

At our end-of-morning meeting with the whole group, the younger children draw names out of a hat to learn what job they will do as 'Graduation Partners.' Now we know who will carry each diploma up to the stage, and who will deliver each graduate's gift from the teachers. What matters most is that everyone has a part to play.

### May 2: Songs

There is exciting mail for all the kids this morning: we've put the four graduation songs on a CD so that kids and families can practice singing them together. Gwen chose Red Grammar's "Hooray for the World," the cheery song we sang two years ago for her older brother. For Kai, we will sing Sara Pirtle's "The Sun Inside Us": "You're so strong, you're so smart — you were born with a loving heart." Red Grammar's rollicking "ABC's of You" is a perfect song for a kid like Casey who enjoys words. And Noam, a boy who loves a tender story, has volunteered to take "Puff the Magic Dragon" — the song we use as the grand finale every year, precisely because it invites the tears that often need to be shed for an important goodbye.

### May Days: Graduation Work

Most days, there is graduation work to do. The Graduates slowly assemble their detailed dioramas. They design a t-shirt, and families order them in favorite colors. All the kids pitch in to build, paint, and decorate the Abiyoyo piñata, scouring the classroom for just the right materials to represent scraggly hair and long toenails. We sing the Graduation songs, and draw the images they bring to mind. Teachers make a gentle note of 'last times' — the Graduates' last trip to the Eno River; their last turn to pick a reading word; their last Story Day. We talk about mixed feelings: sad goodbyes and kindergarten excitement.

### Special Days

In the midst of other May Days, each Graduate's Special Day comes and goes. Early that morning, around a table set with a candle and a simple breakfast, parents and teachers

shared stories of learning and growth they had prepared for the Graduator. Now, the Gradsutors enjoy wearing the beautiful necklaces we helped them make as tokens of those stories: each bead on the necklace representing something important they have learned. The finished crowns look spectacular sitting in the window, each a colorful reflection of the child who will wear it. The diplomas hang in the classroom, and teachers, children, and families add to the lists until the pages are overflowing with celebratory words: Gwen can “Play Germs, Baby Monkeys, Fairies, Creek Alligator, and Creek Rocketship.” Kai can “Tell amazing stories and make up songs to go with them.” Casey can “Tell people what’s really better because he knows lots of stuff.” Noam can “Be Martin Luther King and the Bus Driver in the Montgomery Bus Boycott.”

## Rehearsal Day

It’s the day before Graduation. Yesterday, Casey’s parents were here to help the kids paint the banner that will hang behind the stage. Today, though, we ask parents to arrive early and exit quickly. We are eager to dive into the many tasks of Rehearsal Day.

A few kids head to Creation Station to make pretend diplomas, gifts, and flowers to use as props. We set up the stage on the playground, then play-act the ceremony from beginning to end. One by one, the Gradsutors take turns standing on stage in their crowns and leading the singing of their songs. Partners get to hear their names called and make their way to the stage with the important object they will deliver to their Gradsutors. Sarah and I get to practice crying a little when we sing Puff. Then we all cut loose with the Martian Hop. It feels great.

After rehearsal is done, I meet with each Graduator one last time. We read through the entire diploma, adding a few final words if there’s space left on the page. Finally, we choose five especially important things they have learned for teachers to read aloud at Graduation.

Sarah invites each Graduator to paint a tile for the Old Friend mosaic that hangs in our classroom, and takes a photograph of the Gradsutors together to hang in the bathroom. These are concrete ways we say, “You will be remembered.”

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## Graduation Day

Arrivals this morning are very tender for families, aware that they are reading the morning message and waving at the Goodbye Window for the last time. Teachers feel it too, and there are lots of hugs in the office.

For the kids, we allow space for simply being together at school: the bike deck is roaring, the loft room is abuzz with pretending, and there is a team of diggers making “Bob Lake” one last time in the Sand River. Meanwhile, there are four big, brightly-colored paper bags waiting to be filled, and teachers invite kids to join a treasure hunt for things the Gradsutors will take home tonight: decks of reading words; almost-full story journals; wood, wire, and clay sculptures; family ‘action figures’ from the block area, family photos from the magnet board. The Gradsutors paint a watercolor where teachers will write messages of appreciation for their families. We help the kids wrap their finished dioramas, taking a few minutes to study the carefully crafted scenes and savor the stories that accompany them. We imagine together how delighted the families will be when they open these gifts tonight.



PHOTOGRAPH BY ALBERT SUN

After school, the kids leave quickly, and we get to work transforming the playground with our troop of helpers. Lights are strung all around; the banner is hung behind the stage; programs are copied; the piñata is rigged; pizzas

are ordered; tables are set; music is plugged in; citronella candles are lit to keep away the mosquitoes. It's raining, but for now the tarp is holding. When we're finished, we take a moment to sit and soak in the magic of the transformation.

As kids will say later, "It's school, but not school!" We're ready.

## Graduation!

And now the kids and families are arriving, many in their Graduation t-shirts. We're excited to see many alumni families, too. The kids snack and play in the rain as the grown-ups spread their blankets around the stage, and situate their potluck offerings on the tables. Teachers make sure that diplomas and gifts are in the right hands, and help the Graduates into their crowns. We get a little nervous about a family who is late, then breathe a sigh of relief when they arrive. It's time to begin.

Sarah and I take the stage, and call the alumni Children Firsters up to join us. This small choir — now aged six to 21 — lead us in singing the graduation version of our traditional gathering song: "Here We Are Together."

And now it's time to call the Graduates. Sarah and I alternate as Gwen, then Kai, then Casey, and finally Noam come up front. For each, there is the presentation of a flower as they take the stage. They stand beside their teacher as she reads out the five things chosen from the diploma, then stand alone as we sing their songs. The teacher calls one graduation partner to bring the CD, and another to bring the diploma, and each partner receives a flower in exchange for their delivery. Then we call for "one last round of applause," placing a hand on the Graduates to hold them there for a moment; we want them to look around, as we do, and see the love coming back to them from the smiling and tearful faces that surround the stage.

Then we call all four Graduates back to the stage, and invite everybody to get up and dance to the Martian Hop. After four minutes of hilarity, the crowd takes a moment to settle back down, and then, just as I'm about to introduce the Abiyoyo piñata, a graduating parent stands and asks for a moment on stage. Other graduating parents follow, and they speak together of their appreciation for the teachers, and present a gift. Sarah and I are so grateful — not just for their

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generosity, but for the way that families have claimed space for what they want to express in this ceremony.

The parents sit back down, and we invite everyone to make a huge circle around the piñata. We have prepared a careful

list of the children we expect to be here — from the youngest sibling to the oldest alumni — and, beginning with the youngest, we move through the list, inviting each to take his swing at Abiyoyo. Sarah and the kids have built this piñata to last — we want all the kids to get a turn with the bat. Abiyoyo crumbles nicely just as we get to our college-aged alumni. Out falls a pile of simple treasure bags, each labeled with a name. Everybody knows they will get their share, and there's a busy exchange of bags as kids read the labels and deliver them to each other.

And now it's just a pizza party in the rain — eating, playing, and cutting the cake. Sarah and I wait for a moment when each graduating family is settled together, then bring out the surprises for the kids to present to their parents. We watch with satisfaction as the parents exclaim over the projects we've kept a happy secret for so long.

Finally the party ends as all parties must — with clean-up. Graduating families take down the banner, and cut it apart to save the piece with their child's name. Sarah and I stay to the end, working alongside a crew of parents to put the playground back together, and taking breaks for goodbye hugs as kids leave with their families, arms full of bags and gifts and crowns and diplomas.

## The Day After . . .

The cycle begins again. Sarah and I meet for a late breakfast, and debrief. First, we exchange versions of the event, dwelling on moments we especially loved: The way Casey held eye contact with his big sister the whole time he sang; the way even the shyest Graduation Partners made their deliveries; the way families were good sports about the rain; and the way kids turned the rain into fun. And then the Big List comes out again, and gets a hard look. What worked, and what didn't work so well? What new ideas will we try next year? In this way we end our year the same way we hope the children have ended theirs — satisfied with what has gone before, and hopeful about what lies ahead.