

Children First: Research Intention for the 2023-2024 School Year

As Children First teachers create the learning environment, shape routines and classroom culture, prepare provocations, allocate time and, most of all, interact with children moment to moment, we are constantly making choices –choices that ultimately shape a precious year in the lives of all the learners in our community. We want those choices to be grounded in what truly matters. So, in creating this statement of intention, we have considered:

- Our beliefs about children and what they deserve from school, and from childhood. Please see our Guiding Principles [here](#).
- Our learning goals for children around Self, Community, Work & Play, Nature and Skills, [here](#).
- Our aspirations around Social Justice, [here](#), [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#).
- Our most deeply held values as teachers and human beings – among them love, belonging, learning, meaning, beauty, delight, and balance – alongside our most pressing questions.
- Our sense of the larger world children are living in here and now, and the future world we hope they will shape through their choices and actions.

Awe and Wonder

“There are two ways to live; you can live as if nothing is a miracle; you can live as if everything is a miracle. The most beautiful thing we can experience is the mysterious. It is the source of all true art and all science. He to whom this emotion is a stranger, who can no longer pause to wonder and stand rapt in awe, is as good as dead; his eyes are closed.” – Albert Einstein

In the Studio for Playful Inquiry – the on-line learning community that is an important part of Children First teachers’ ongoing professional development –we spent our summer considering the transformative power of awe –the capacity, as Jane Goodall put it, for “being amazed at things outside yourself.”

We read social scientist Dacher Keltner’s exploration of awe – an emotion which he describes as the “feeling of being in the presence of something vast that transcends your everyday experience of the world.” Keltner argues that awe quiets the nagging, self-critical, overbearing, status-conscious voice of our ego; empowers us to collaborate, opens our mind to wonders, and enables us to see the deep patterns in life. Keltner believes that awe dissolves boundaries and puts us in “right proportion” to everything and everyone else – without leaving us anxious or disappointed about being “just one among others” – because in awe we are not “lost” in that larger whole, but find belonging in it. Awe is an antidote to scarcity. Awe brings us “inside” community, ancestry, culture, nature, and the universe.

And not surprisingly, Keltner insists that “Childhoods rich with awe are good for children.” And, that despite what we think of as children’s natural bent toward curiosity and wonder, one of the most alarming trends in the lives of children today is the disappearance of awe. In our driven culture, we are not giving anyone – including children - enough opportunities to discover and experience the wonders of life. Essentially, he believes, our children – and their grown-ups - are awe-deprived.

All of this left US curious about a Children First year focused on Awe and Wonder.

In the years since the pandemic and the “racial reckoning,” we have focused our research intentions on challenging and heart-rending matters of Social Justice - developing and experimenting with ways to engage children around questions of Identity, Belonging, Fairness, and Freedom. We expect that process and those questions will continue to be an important part of what we do here every day and every year. And we are inspired by the idea that a robust capacity for Awe and Wonder may underlie and animate our individual and collective capacities for empathy, connection and activism.

Meanwhile, we land at Children First this year as both a larger group, and as a group who more new to one another. There's a lot to be curious about, and a lot of connections to be made.

So, we come into the year with an intention to practice Awe and Wonder, and to create conditions that support the growth of Awe and Wonder for everyone in the community.

We will plan, observe, engage and reflect with a focus on questions like these...

- What are these 12 children – individually and collectively – most curious about?
- How do they “meet” their experiences here? With each other, with nature, and with materials?
- How can we create conditions that support their capacity to “meet” experiences with wonder? And what conditions allow them to find “everyday moments of awe” in those experiences?
- How can we tune our observation and noticing of the children so that we are more able to spot moments in which they may be experiencing awe and wonder? How will we enter those moments with the children? And how will we share stories of those moments with them and with each other?
- How does it change us, and change the learning and living conditions we create, when we are practicing awe and wonder in our lives with the children?

Keltner proposes “eight wonders of the world” that are most likely to generate awe –

1. Moral beauty - other people's courage, kindness, strength or overcoming.
 2. Collective effervescence – the life force of being part of a collective self through activities like ritual, dance, and sport.
 3. Nature.
 4. Music.
 5. Visual Art.
 6. Spiritual and mystical experiences.
 7. Experiences with birth and death – the cycle of life.
 8. Epiphany – aha moments.
- Where do we see awe and wonder arise as we engage children in these domains? And are there other domains – story, perhaps – where we also observe children finding awe?
 - How do curiosity, wonder and awe help us create caring community with one another?
 - What becomes possible when we practice curiosity, wonder and awe in times of tension and uncertainty?