What Did You Learn In School Today?

Have you ever asked that question? So what was the answer? Most probably, the answer was, “Nothing,” regardless of the age of the child.

Now, you do realize that somewhere between birth and now, this child has learned to walk, talk, read, write, count, draw, sing, and probably much much more. And this learning happened somewhere somehow between home, school and the wider environment. So, it cannot be possible that the child learned “nothing” every day.

What you were waiting to hear was probably, “Well, I had Math during the first period. The goal was to be able to regroup the ten. We used manipulatives to work out a few examples and understood the concept. Then we transcribed those concepts into actual digits on paper, and then practiced on two worksheets. Then we reviewed the concept of place value for units and tens using Montessori unit blocks.”

“Then we had English Language Arts for second period. The teacher planned to combine practice of penmanship with the last step of how to write a haiku. So we pulled out the drafts we had been working on. The teacher then gave us beautiful flowery papers and ink pens and we copied our poems. We used blotting paper to dry out the ink. Some of us had to redo it several times to get it just right, with no spots and smears. Finally we got a matted frame each and taped the frame to the poem. We then got to pin them on the wall.”

But then, your child never does that. She will think, “Learn??? What DID I learn? Well, nothing. I did this and that, I enjoyed it tremendously. But I did not LEARN anything.” Children all have very individualistic ideas of what certain words mean. To one, “learn” might mean reciting by heart. To many, it might be a vague descriptor that means nothing in particular.

The truth is that even adults could not answer that question. Say you just came back from a lecture by a successful CEO of a Fortune 500 company. You really enjoyed the talk and the power point as well as the Q&A session afterwards. Now, you go home and a frowning parent suddenly asks you, “WHAT did you just learn?” Really. What would you answer?

Basically, what is wrong is the question. Even the long-winded statements (about Math and English) above did not answer such a question. It only described the activities done and the goals these activities should produce. Should the child have answered: “I learned how to regroup a ten?” Because the father could then reply, “OK, show me!” and the child could possibly fail to do so. Wow, he really learned “nothing”! Should the child then answer, “Oh, I learned what regrouping means.” Then the father could retort, “OK, so what does it mean?” I dare you to give the right answer, you, Dear Reader, an educated adult. What should he have said?

Learning is a strange process. It could be the introduction of an idea. It could be the practice of a skill. It could be the repetition or regurgitation of some information. It could be the development of new cognitive skills. Learning how to add two three-digit numbers for example, is easy: add a column to two two-digit numbers. Ahah, but then why did you get so many wrong? Well, maybe you need practice? Or is it because you have not mastered regrouping? Or is it that whenever you come across a seven you add wrong? So did you “learn” something or not?

Some parents ask instead, “What did you do today?” Very often, you still get the default “nothing”. Especially from high schoolers.

Parents, if you want to share your child’s day, it is more satisfactory to ask, “Did you have fun today?” and go from there. You want to know what the goals are, what the curriculum is, how much s/he has achieved, then ask the teacher, not the child.