

BIG JOBS

Planning for Competence

Nancy P. Jones



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The children straggle up the path from the parking lot. Each carries a shovel or a spade. The first rain of February drips off their raincoats and snowsuits. Cheeks flushed, they say little as they gather on the wide outdoor steps. I can tell from the looks on their faces that they have been working together. Putting the tools beside the house, the 18 classmates wait calmly for the teacher to go over the plan for the rest of the day.

The project they tackled this morning was a huge puddle in the school parking area just where families step out of their cars. Teachers produced the tools, and the children began creating a diversion ditch for the puddle to drain into. The work continued for a good 15 minutes. It involved energetic chipping, pushing, and shoveling—a healthy physical outlet.

New concepts emerged as children struggled with water levels. Vocabulary grew as teachers scaffolded children's learning with comments like "Do you think the water is flowing in this direction?" and "It feels harder here on this thicker, dark ice." The children encouraged each other as they worked: "Deeper here," "Dig over there." No one wanted to stop until the problem was solved.

The children cheered when the water began to flow out of the puddle. Self-control and focus come more easily when young children work on a problem and achieve visible results. Teachers do not need to praise or offer rewards for success—the results are their own reward.

Having accomplished another Big Job, the children are ready to start their day together indoors.

At a time when their age-mates at child care centers and family child care homes throughout this suburban neighborhood watch puppet shows and push passive computer mice, the children at the Children's Farm School may be found busy at Big Jobs. The chil-

dren are three to five years old. They attend the program half-days either two or three days a week. Eighteen children and two teachers share the indoor and outdoor space. The indoor classroom is a homey family-room size addition to an old farmhouse. The outdoor classroom includes acres of ponds, fields, and woodlands.

The school is located on a small former dairy farm not far from the metropolitan area of St. Paul, Minnesota. Although the setting is not

typical, it meets all standards of licensing and is accredited by NAEYC. It was founded in 1974 as an alternative to indoor learning environments with the commercially produced toys and teddy bear posters that were beginning to flourish. My colleague Regina Buono and I were convinced that outdoor learning, with motivating physical activity such as hiking to the ponds and learning to ride the pony, would appeal to young children. The farm offered many meaningful activities

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and tasks that could facilitate hands-on learning through play. We soon noticed an added benefit of our setting that we had not planned.

What is a Big Job?

We saw that young children grow emotionally from participating in meaningful and challenging physical, social, and problem-solving activities; these emotionally healthy children become better learners both cognitively and socially. Children who work together to drag a hay bale to the pony can better share toys in the sandbox. Hesitant children who are asked to help shovel snow become more confident when they later tackle new puzzles. Aggressive children who need to feel important become more friendly after helping pull cornstalks to feed to the pigs. We began to plan for and incorporate more and more of these tasks in our daily activities, informally calling them Big Jobs.

A Big Job is a useful, helpful task that requires several people to work together. The need for the task and the improvement that results are obvious to children. A Big Job requires physical exertion, thinking and problem solving, and functional use of language (as in group planning and giving or following directions). Teachers plan Big Jobs as part of the day's activities; however, a Big Job may arise at any time, and teachers are always ready to respond.

Research related to the Big Job concept

Research validates the use of Big Jobs to challenge children. Beginning in the 1930s, theorists of the Adler school of psychology viewed children's motivation as being rooted in children's feelings of emotional competence and linked to self-concept. Alfred Adler believed that *constructive usefulness*

A teacher of two-year-olds in Kentucky tells of the day a package arrived via UPS.

The children gather around the box and help to pull off the wrappings. Inside is a step stool, in pieces, with directions for assembly. The teacher shows the children the words, and they make a plan. Some two-year-olds help hold the parts in place and others hold the end of the screwdriver while the teacher assembles the step stool. "I really needed some extra hands," she tells them.

That night at the school's open house, all the parents ask to see the step stool. The children had come home that day and told them, "We built a step stool!"

would give the individual "a sense of happiness and the feeling of worth and power" (Adler 1930, 20). Rudolph Dreikurs, remembered best as the father of logical consequences, is perhaps less known for his strong belief in children's need to be needed. Dreikurs and Soltz view happiness, even in young children, as arising "from within oneself as a result of increased self-sufficiency" (Dreikurs & Soltz 1964, 41).

Researchers and developmental psychologists have long been interested in children's motivation to learn. White's (1959) description of the *urge toward competence*, in which children show a need to have an effect on their environment, seems especially salient to us in view of how we see children responding to Big Jobs. Harter writes about *effectance motivation*—the desire to solve challenging problems for the gratification of discovering the solution—and its key components, "curiosity, preference for challenge, internal criteria of success, and working for one's own satisfaction" (Harter 1975, 370). This describes children working at Big Jobs.

Daniel Goleman has defined a model of emotional intelligence that he sees as an important aptitude for living a successful, happy, and contributing life. Applying the emotions to learning, he discusses the feelings of *self-efficacy*, "the belief that one has mastery over the events of one's life and can meet challenges as they come up" (Goleman 1995, 103). He notes that developing a competency of any kind increases



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Developing a competency of any kind increases the feelings of self-efficacy, making a person more ready to seek out new challenges.

the feelings of self-efficacy, making a person more ready to seek out new challenges. The children coming into the classroom after a satisfying Big Job feel ready to tackle learning and playing together in the indoor setting.

Hauser-Cram reviews the literature on mastery motivation, which she defines as “children’s motivation to solve problems, figure out how objects work, and complete tasks they set out to do” (1998, 67). She proposes some conclusions to promote problem solving and encourage children’s autonomy in a classroom setting. She challenges us to look at “the extent that peers challenge each other as they persist

tence in a social context—children becoming socially competent through activities shared with others. Teachers using the project approach involve children in personally meaningful inquiry. Helm and Katz see opportunities to become engaged in a topic of personal interest and to have an emotional involvement in their learning experiences as important in strengthening their natural curiosity and desire to learn (Helm & Katz 2001, 5). Bredekamp and Copple (1997) urge teachers to provide many opportunities for children to learn to work collaboratively with others and to socially construct knowledge as

understanding of the world around them” (Illinois State Board of Education 2002).

Young children developing their social skills may need help learning to interact with others (Katz & McClellan 1997). Big Jobs offer the camaraderie of working together, which carries over into other areas of learning. In addition, the Illinois Standards goals for social and emotional development include the ability to “demonstrate a respect and a responsibility for self and others” as well as “perform effectively as a member of a group” (www.illinoisearlylearning.org/standards/socemodev.htm). While teacher-led group activities such as

Children working together on Big Jobs know they are making a difference.



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together on a joint enterprise. To what extent do children develop a sense of shared agency in making a difference in their preschool classroom?” (Hauser-Cram 1999, 170). Children working together on Big Jobs know they are making a difference.

Educational leaders tell us to engage children in meaningful, situational learning. Katz and McClellan (1997) discuss compe-

well as develop social skills, such as cooperating, helping, negotiating, and talking with other people to solve problems (p. 129). A guiding principle of the Illinois Early Learning Standards states that “the early childhood environment should provide opportunities for children to explore material, engage in activities, and interact with peers and adults to construct their own

singing and group discussions during circle time help children learn to participate in a group, Big Jobs offer children a motivating task to be completed while working with others and the additional emotional benefit of feeling useful and needed. When a child feels capable, he or she can more ably join in other group or team activities.

Emotional development is key

Informal teacher research at the Children's Farm School includes 25 years of observing children and promoting their feelings of competence. On a daily basis children demonstrate the positive effects of growing competence in all areas of their development. Effective early childhood teachers foster the development of the whole child—in the physical, social, and emotional domains as well as the intellectual. At our school we plan the curriculum to foster growth in each of these four intertwined areas.

At the Children's Farm School, children's emotional development is key in the development of skills in the other domains. Not only does it make the cognitive and physical learning more meaningful in a given activity, but it creates a climate of individual and group confidence and competence that empowers children's learning in other activities (Hyson 2004).

To foster emotional development, teachers must include meaningful ways to help young children feel important, confident, useful, and successful. At the Children's Farm School this is built into the curriculum because daily life in the twenty-first century may not provide enough opportunities for this to happen naturally. In the home lives of many of the children, there are fewer and fewer opportunities to be useful. For example, one child was talking about his mother. "What does she do?" asked the teacher. "She cleans." Asked if he helps her, the child replied, "No, I just watch



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TV." Many well-meaning parents today provide a child-centered world with love, television, and toys galore but few opportunities for young children to be helpful, useful, and competent. Thus it is all the more important for schools to provide for this need.

Planning for Big Jobs

A school on a farm has many built-in opportunities for Big Jobs; teachers just need to remember this rule of thumb: Never do any job that could be done by children. Sometimes this means giving up that perfect classroom arrangement as a teacher recognizes the potential for children's emotional gains in helping to set up the play area. It means allowing enough time and having enough sponges available for children to clean the tabletops after an art project instead of quickly doing it oneself. And instead of shoveling that inch of snow off the path before class, it means

Big Jobs offer the camaraderie of working together, which carries over into other areas of learning.

meeting the children at the door with shovels.

It's important to realize that children at the Farm School rarely *have to* do these jobs. Instead of being coerced, they usually welcome the chance to be useful (we call it the Tom Sawyer principle). If the job itself doesn't look inviting, a teacher or child stating the need or requesting help is rarely turned down by any child. Built into the day as choices or proposed as a shared activity at the beginning of the day, such activities become springboards for play and discovery in the remaining time that the children are together.



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Some Big Job ideas

The following are some of the routine Big Jobs at the Children's Farm School. I have omitted those specifically relating to a farm, as few programs have this setting. However, planting gardens and having pets for children to care for, either indoors or outdoors, can create opportunities for Big Jobs. I observed a school in Tokyo where children joyfully donned boots and grabbed brooms to clean out the cement duck pond for the two pet ducks. The teachers told me that the children were all eager to be the chosen ones each week to perform this important job.

Outdoor Big Jobs

- digging with shovels in the garden
- hoeing or chopping weeds in the garden
- watering new lettuce and seedlings in the garden
- sweeping the blacktop play area
- filling up the birdbath using plastic water buckets
- winding up or moving the hose
- filling the water table
- uncovering the sandbox
- moving animal cages to shady spots
- moving the work tables or the water table
- pulling up grass to feed the rabbits
- wheelbarrowing garden weeds to the compost pile
- raking mowed lawn clippings for mulch
- bringing the rabbits inside or out, moving their cages

I drive into the barnyard with ten 50-pound bags of feed to unload from the back of the truck. Remembering never to do a job that a child can do, I go into the classroom and ask the teachers if the children need a Big Job this afternoon.

Jenny takes the first group out to unload half the bags, put them in the red wagons, and haul them into the barn. When I look outside 20 minutes later, the children are still at work. "Good grief," I think, "they don't have to do it all!"

When Jenny and the children come inside, Jenny tells me, "That was wonderful. They loved unloading the feed. And I needed to get a few little guys cooperating this afternoon."



Fall Big Jobs

- pulling up broccoli "trees" to take to the compost pile
- raking leaves into a big pile to jump into
- raking leaves to put in wagons and dump in the woods
- rolling and harvesting gourds and pumpkins, sorting and stacking them in piles
- using wheelbarrows to take leaves or hay to the garden or woods
- moving outdoor tables into the storage place
- together moving a large log to use for a bench

Winter Big Jobs

- shoveling snow to clear paths and patio; building a big mound to play on
- rolling snowballs to build a play-house for all to share

Spring Big Jobs

- raking up old hay or leaves
- rediscovering the sandbox; cleaning it up
- bringing old rabbit manure down to the garden in wagons
- turning over the garden, digging for worms
- setting out the toys on the outdoor play area
- helping to spread wood chips under the climber
- cleaning up the rope swing area, taking sticks to a pile
- digging in the garden
- planting potatoes, peas, beans



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Indoor Big Jobs

- sponging off the tables and easels
- rearranging the block shelves
- filling the sand or water table
- cleaning up under the sand table

Five-year-old Nathan busily plays in the sand table. He soon proposes his own Big Job. "There's lots of sand here on the floor," he announces to the teacher. "I think I should clean it up." Nathan gets one of the child-size brooms hanging by the sink and starts to work.

When Bianca strolls by, the teacher sees a chance to involve a second person: "It looks like this is a Big Job.

Bianca, maybe you could help Nathan?" Bianca somewhat grudgingly agrees. Sand is actually fun to sweep, and soon Carter joins the children. Three brooms push the sand into two piles.

Nancy the director walks past. She asks, "What will you do with these piles of sand?" Uncertain looks; sweeping is what it's been about. "Well, let's see, do you think this is clean sand or dirty sand?" "Dirty," claims Bianca, and the two boys nod in agreement, sweeping the piles into the dustpan held by Nancy. "Well, then, we'd better not put it back in the sandbox. Let's take it outside." "Good idea, Nancy" says Bianca, as if she is the teacher and Nancy the child.

Bianca holds out her hands to take charge of the dustpan.

Jared and Rachel approach the crates of toy farm tractors and other toys at the side of the building. They call to a teacher for help. The teacher says, "I'm busy over here helping Jane carry the paints. You can do it together." "We can't, we're too little!" The teacher replies, "Maybe you can find a friend to help you."

Rachel and Jared call to Joey, who comes over and tries to lift the crate. Unsuccessful, he motions for them to join in. Together they lift, tug, and slide the crate down the slope, over the rock edge of the playground, and onto the flat play area. Soon the three are involved in playing together. Their play continues peacefully for more than 20 minutes.

Planting gardens and having pets for children to care for, either indoors or outdoors, can create opportunities for Big Jobs.

More Indoor Big Jobs

- feeding the fish
- washing the rocks brought in for the nature table
- watering the plants
- assembling new furniture
- bringing over the blanket for snack time, spreading it out
- putting the cover on the water table
- fixing bolts on chairs when they come loose
- setting up a new creative play area

The teachers are looking forward to replacing the grocery store in the play area with a new theme; “robbers” have come into the store one time too many. Making plans for the new area, they ask the children to help them pack up the groceries in bags. Several children carry the shelves and tables back to the storage room.

The next day supplies are set out for a veterinarian clinic. The children help move the tables in and put all the play pets in their cages. Having helped set up the area, a great many stay for a long time afterward playing vet.

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Cooking Big Jobs

Snack preparation provides many tasks that meet the Big Job criteria. Entire books have been written about the science, math, and language to be learned while cooking (Colker 2004). The most compelling benefit we see is that cooking is an opportunity for children to be useful, helpful, and involved in a

meaningful part of their day.

- baking biscuits or scones: a small group pounds out the dough and cuts the shapes
- making zucchini cake: sitting together to grate the zucchini, then deciding when there are two cups full
- beating eggs for scrambled eggs
- spreading crackers for snack
- making soup: all help cut up veggies around a table
- baking cookies

Tools are essential

A commitment to Big Jobs involves obtaining child-size tools and equipment. At a minimum, hang several brooms on low pegs in the classroom, with one or two dustpans that children can reach. Provide assorted sponges for cleaning and several plastic ice cream containers for moving sand or water. Outdoor tools should be real ones, albeit child size. They can be found in the garden sections of building or discount centers. These stores often sell children’s plastic leaf rakes and sturdy plastic snow shovels in season, as well as metal garden rakes and shovels.

Children should always be supervised when using tools, knives, or hammers. Safety concerns can be addressed by starting a task with small groups and instructing children on the care and safe handling of the tools. When presented with a real job for a tool, such as digging a hole, children have little interest in random or dangerous play. Children need a clearly stated place to put tools when finished. A crate on a wagon works for us in the garden. Together the children work to pull the crate back to the tool shed, where each tool has an assigned box for easy sorting.

When teachers start looking around their classrooms, they will come up with more ideas for Big Jobs. Plan Big Jobs daily, but also be on the alert for some that just

happen, like that puddle in the parking lot that needed to be tended to. The Children’s Farm School experience has shown the benefits of Big Jobs to young children as we work to meet their needs in an age-appropriate learning environment.

Conclusion

When the children sing together at the end of the day, “We all work together with a wiggle and a giggle,” I know that children have not changed since the days when Woody Guthrie wrote that tune in the 1930s for his own children. Our technological society has changed children’s environments, and few young children get to play (and certainly not work) with a hoe or spade, but

**We all work together with a wiggle and a giggle,
We all work together with a giggle and a grin.
[Song accompanied by much wiggling]**

**— From “All Work Together”
by Woody Guthrie**

their need to help, to be part of a group, and to be useful continues to be a basic human need.

Going inside and taking off their wet raincoats after working on the big puddle, the children continue with a typical school day—pretending together, doing puzzles, building with blocks, and painting pictures, much as their counterparts in other classrooms around the state are doing. What is different here? A student teacher observes on a visit to the school, “They’re not fighting!” A mother notices as she watches her child through the observation window, “He chooses so calmly and stays at things so long.” And I, the school director, listening from my office above the classroom, remark, “Their voices sound so happy as they play and work together.”

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