

WHAT IF
EVERYBODY
UNDERSTOOD
CHILD
DEVELOPMENT 



Straight Talk About
Bettering Education
and Children's Lives

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What If Everybody Understood Child Development?

*Straight Talk About Bettering
Education and Children's Lives*

Rae Pica

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Praise for *What If Everybody Understood Child Development?* by Rae Pica

“What a pleasure to read commonsense wisdom about what young children need!”

*Diane Ravitch, Research Professor of Education
New York University*

“This amazing book does far more than chase down the myths about how to ensure that children are successful. It offers real, research-backed practical strategies every teacher and parent can use. This belongs on every desk for quick and handy use!”

*Eric Jensen, Director
Jensen Learning, Maunaloa, HI*

“This book is a must read for anyone who is part of the current education system. It is time to think about what we are doing to the youth who are the new digital generation era and to ensure we are teaching them in ways that are the most developmentally appropriate.”

*Lyneille Meza, Coordinator of Data and Assessment
Denton ISD*

“This is a great read. Its social media flavor is inviting and inspiring. The issues presented echo teacher discussions made around the water fountain. [Rae Pica’s] expertise and evidence based on research will move your hair-pulling complaints to policy-changing action.”

*Leonard J. Villanueva, Teacher
Palisades Elementary School*

“This book offers provocative ideas for the new educator, the experienced teacher, and administrators alike. Let’s use what we know about child development to start remaking our schools to meet the needs of all students. This book provides a starting point.”

*Katrina L. Ladopoulos, Teacher
Crestwood Elementary School*

“Rae Pica has a deep understanding of childhood development and she has delved into every facet of it so that educators, parents, and policymakers will come to that understanding too. *What If Everybody Understood Child Development?* includes 29 critically important chapters that focus on every single important issue we don’t always take enough time to talk about. This book needs to not just be on everyone’s shelves, but open in everyone’s hands.”

*Peter DeWitt, Author/Consultant
Former K-5 Principal, Finding Common
Ground Blog—Education Week*

“Our understanding of young children has become quite distorted, as have our policies and practices. It’s time to reorient our views and Rae Pica’s *What If Everybody Understood Child Development?* gives clear examples of the problems and of the solutions. To her, children are remarkable human beings—active, caring, and creative. They are more than an investment in the future. They are of immense value here and now.”

*Joan Almon, Co-Founder
Alliance for Childhood*

“Rae Pica’s *What If Everybody Understood Child Development?*, in its so readable and so interesting format, is an important contribution to a field that is constantly fighting to have facts about child development guide and inform decision making about young children rather than let the ‘theory of the day’ do harm to our youngest learners. I love, love, love this book!”

*Marcy Guddemi, Executive Director
Gesell Institute*

“Rae Pica understands children. With her wisdom and insight, she helps us know how to do right by kids in a world full of conflicting pressures. Thank you, Rae, for this valuable book. We need it now more than ever!”

*Nancy Carlsson-Paige, Professor Emerita
Lesley University*

**What If Everybody
Understood Child
Development?**

*This book is dedicated to my oldest friend, Sheila Chapman,
who has known me since we were thirteen and
still loves me these many years later.*

Preface

In April 2013, I wrote a piece for *Huffington Post* called “What If Everybody Understood Child Development?” because I was fed up with the many ridiculous actions taken against children in the name of education or safety. What if all administrators, policymakers, educators, and parents really understood children—how they develop and what can be expected of them at certain stages? Surely children’s lives would be so much better! Surely their education would be greatly improved.

Writing the piece was a necessity for me. I was asking a question that had been gnawing at me for some time. What I expected was relief at putting the question out there. What I hoped was that educators, administrators, policymakers, and parents would take notice. What I hadn’t predicted was the response both the question and the piece would receive.

As of today, the post has been shared widely on social media, acquiring, among other things, more than 2,500 Facebook shares and 23,000 Facebook likes. Recently, it was moved from *Huff Post Education* to *Huff Post Impact*, where it received renewed interest that began a whole new round of sharing.

Along those same lines, not long ago I tweeted images comparing an “inactive” brain when someone is sitting quietly versus that of a quite vibrant brain following 20 minutes of walking. My tweet stated, “For those who think sitting = learning, take a look.” Within a few hours there had been over 150 retweets and favorites. To this day, the tweet is still receiving reactions.

The messages contained in my *Huff* piece and in my tweet clearly resonated, especially with teachers who want to see “their” opinions expressed, their thoughts and feelings validated, and who need support to advocate for what’s right for children!

Because the messages resonated so strongly, I was inspired to write this book. I wanted to offer teachers all of the above. Additionally, I wanted to help inform those teachers, administrators, policymakers, and parents who remain uncertain about what *is* developmentally appropriate for children in early childhood classrooms and through the elementary grades.

The need for a basic understanding of children and developmentally appropriate practice has never been greater, as

- the educational climate in this country continues to remove decisions from the hands of educators and to place decisions in the hands of those with little to no knowledge of either children or education.
- many young teachers entering the field have grown up, as have today's young students, with little opportunity to experience the benefits of play, risk-taking, active learning, and life without fear, technology, or academic accountability.
- society and the media continue to perpetuate myths ("earlier is better," "children must be protected from risk and mistakes," "we must 'give' children self-esteem") that harm childhood and result in far too many bad educational policies.

Traditionally, the necessary understanding of children and developmentally appropriate practice would come from textbooks and college courses. However, many preservice teachers still are not required to study child development prior to beginning their careers. Nor are administrators, parents, or policymakers required to be familiar with the basic tenets of child development. In today's society, with "overwhelmed" the new normal, even if those who work and live with kids were to realize the need for a better understanding of children, few have time to read a textbook—or perhaps even a traditional book—on the subject.

What If Everybody Understood Child Development? is not a "traditional" book. Consisting of 29 essays, all of which run approximately 900 to 1300 words in length, it meets the needs of today's busy readers who can easily and quickly read the pieces whenever time allows, in whatever order preferred.

The opinions expressed in these essays are based on my 35 years as an education consultant, but they're also supported by research,

anecdotal evidence, stories shared by teachers and parents, and the views of experts in the fields of education, child development, play research, the neurosciences, and more—most of whom I have interviewed in my role as a radio host on BAM Radio Network. I feel as though my years as an educator, together with the unique opportunities I've had to speak with hundreds of thought leaders, led me inevitably to this project.

In addition to the thoughts expressed, each essay concludes with what the executive producer at BAM Radio calls “actionable insights”—recommendations for what you, as a teacher, parent, or education advocate, can do to help bring about change. Each also offers a short list of resources, including links to online articles and the appropriate radio segments, for those wishing to learn more about the topic at hand.

It's unlikely you'll agree with all of the opinions expressed here. But whether or not you agree, it's my hope that the straight talk in *What If Everybody Understood Child Development?* will inspire and motivate you to generate change—so children can begin to have the lives and education they deserve.

Acknowledgments

I can't begin to thank all of the people responsible, not only for making this book possible, but also for being part of my life's journey to this point. Among them are

- my partner in life, Fredrick Davis, whose belief in me knows no bounds;
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- Errol Smith, who got me started on the journey that became BAM Radio Network and whose ideas and inspiration have led me down new paths, and Jeannette Bernstein Smith, whose efforts and support make my work for BAM easier and better;
- the many incredible experts I've interviewed for *Body, Mind and Child*, *Teacher's Aid*, and now *Studentcentricity*;
- the fabulous education professionals who have joined me on my interviews as commentators; and
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About the Author



Rae Pica has been an education consultant (www.raepica.com) specializing in the education of the whole child, children's physical activity, and developmentally appropriate practice since 1980. A former adjunct instructor with the University of New Hampshire, she is the author of 19 books, including the text *Experiences in Movement and Music*, in its fifth edition; the award-winning *Great Games for Young Children* and *Jump into Literacy*; and the parenting book, *A Running Start: How Play, Physical Activity and Free Time Create a Successful Child*. Rae is known for her lively and informative keynotes and trainings and has shared her expertise with such groups as the *Sesame Street* Research Department, the Head Start Bureau, Centers for Disease Control, the President's Council on Physical Fitness and Sports, Nickelodeon's *Blue's Clues*, Gymboree, Nike, and state health departments throughout the country. Rae also blogs for *Huffington Post*, is a member of the executive committee of the Academy of Education Arts and Sciences, and is cofounder of BAM Radio Network (www.bamradionetwork.com), the world's largest online education radio network, where she currently hosts *Studentcentricity*, interviewing experts in education, child development, play research, the neurosciences, and more.



Corwin is committed to improving education for all learners by publishing books and other professional development resources for those serving the field of PreK–12 education. By providing practical, hands-on materials, Corwin continues to carry out the promise of its motto: **“Helping Educators Do Their Work Better.”**

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<p>Whether we’re talking about academics or athletics, the idea that earlier is better has infiltrated American society and education. As a result, there’s been a pushdown in curriculum, and children are expected to read as babies and to play like Beckham years before their eye-foot coordination allows them to successfully connect foot to ball.</p>	
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<p>Being a passive receptacle and being required to perform in ways for which they’re not developmentally ready creates children who come to resist—and even detest—“education.” Learning that is joyful, on the other hand, creates a love of learning that an individual will retain for a lifetime.</p>	

4. Bubble Wrapping Not Required **20**

To say that we've become "risk-averse" where children are concerned is to be laughably understated. And it's not just parents; teachers and school administrators, perhaps in reaction to parents' concerns and certainly in reaction to the fear of litigation, are removing swing sets and even tag from their playgrounds. But is a life without risk really best for children?

5. When Did a Hug Become a Bad Thing? **25**

America has always been a low-touch society, but when teacher education programs begin advising its students to put up a high-five when a kid requests a hug, and teachers' unions instruct educators to refrain from touching kids at all, it's time to take a step back and reassess our priorities.

6. Teaching Girls They're More Than a Pretty Face **29**

Nearly half of all three- to six-year-old girls worry about being fat, the sexualization of children has led to eating disorders in those as young as six, and children rank body image among their highest concerns! Teachers can help combat these attitudes by helping young girls grasp that they are more than how they look—and they can start with how they talk to girls.

7. Doing Away With the "Baby Stuff" **33**

When a school chief in Maryland declared that it was time to do away with the "baby stuff" in preschool, he was referring to naptime. My first thoughts were, *When did preschoolers cease to be babies in the lifespan of the average human being?* and, *When did scientific findings change with regard to the human need for sleep?* The pressure for young students to spend more time on "academics" has become so great that basic human needs are being ignored and unmet.

8. "But Competition Is Human Nature" **37**

Is competition human nature, or is it learned behavior? Is the world a "dog-eat-dog" place? Is it a place that requires us to prepare our children to do battle, rather than belong, to clash, rather than collaborate, and to see everyone else as foe, not friend? Early childhood and elementary education professionals are in a unique position to encourage and foster cooperation among children—and there are a great many reasons why they should want to do so.

9. Terrorist Tots?

42

In the wake of the Sandy Hook shooting and other such incidents, school safety, understandably, is a concern. But does school safety necessitate the suspension of 2 six-year-old boys playing cops and robbers during recess and using their fingers to make imaginary guns or the suspension of a five-year-old kindergartner who told another girl she was going to shoot her with her pink Hello Kitty toy gun that discharges bubbles? Overkill, anyone?

Part II. Understanding the Mind/Body Connection

10. The Myth of the Brain/Body Dichotomy

48

When the Texas State School Board was voting whether or not to make daily physical education (PE) part of the curriculum, one member pronounced, “If we have daily PE the kids will be healthy but dumb!” Such is the legacy of philosopher Rene Descartes, whose declaration, “I think, therefore I am,” was the beginning of mind/body dualism—the belief that the mind and body are separate entities.

11. Why Does Sitting Still Equal Learning?

52

Educators have long maintained that learning best occurs while children are seated (and quiet, of course). But brain research has shown that sitting increases fatigue and reduces concentration—and that movement activates the brain much more so than doing seatwork. Whether giving kids “brain breaks” or allowing them to sit on exercise balls or stand at tables in class, some teachers are beginning to rethink the theory that sitting still equals learning.

12. In Defense of Active Learning

56

It may no longer be acceptable to run, jump, and dance in the early childhood classroom simply for the joy and the physical, social, and emotional benefits of it (sad but true), but what if movement has cognitive benefits? What if it can be used to help children meet standards? What if physically experiencing concepts helps children learn better?

13. “Play” Is Not a Four-Letter Word

60

Educators all across the country tell me that children don’t know how to play anymore. Why? Because they’re given so few