

The Lion Cubs

(This excerpt is Chapter Three of the book *Future In Our Hand: Institution Building For Supplementary Education*)

by Leon Dixon, Jr.

As a twig is bent, so grows the tree.

It is important for us to recognize that the acculturation process for our children starts at birth. The human brain develops most rapidly during the first two to three years of life. After all, it is starting from zero in terms of its perception of the world's environment and the realities it will have to deal with. (In the *Textbook of Pediatric* by Waldo E. Nelson, M.D., D.Sc., we find on page 15: "At birth the human brain is about twenty-five percent of its adult size. In the first year of life it undergoes around fifty percent of its postnatal growth and another twenty percent in the second year.") In these first three years the child develops the capacity to process the information he receives through the five senses. The child can understand verbal language before he can talk and body language before he can walk. He learns to discern the moods and disposition of others. Most of what we speak of as learning, in many ways is only the icing on the cake, the tip of the iceberg or merely the finishing touches. It is like putting the body and paint on a car after everything else has been assembled. As it is with a business, it is the start up that is most crucial or how you set up shop that makes or breaks you. As with a computer, it is the software compiler you install and the operating environment for that compiler you set up that determine how the computer will function, how it can be used and what it can accomplish. In these first three years the brain is setting up preparations for lifelong journey or should we say "the journey of lifetime."

From birth we should create an environment for our babies that is conducive for learning. This environment should be culturally enriching, enabling our babies from birth to develop a strong sense of identity. Our young lions will need to know who they are and whose they are. From birth our babies should engage in mentally stimulating activities.

To emphasize the importance of early training, consider this account by the Nobel prize winning physicist Richard P. Feynman given in his book *What Do You Care What Other People Think* (p. 12):

Before I was born, my father told my mother, “If it’s a boy, he’s going to be a scientist.” [Feynman’s father was a Ph.D in physics, also.] When I was just a little kid, very small in a highchair, my father brought home a lot of little bathroom tiles—seconds—of different colors. We played with them, my father setting them up vertically on my highchair like dominoes, and would push one end so they would all go down.

Then after a while, I’d help set them up. Pretty soon, we’re setting them up in a more complicated way” two white tiles and a blue tile, two white tiles and a blue tile, and so on. When my mother saw that she said, “Leave the poor child alone. If he wants to put a blue tile, let him put a blue tile.” But my father said, “No I want to show him what patterns are like and how interesting they are. It’s a kind of elementary mathematics.” So he started very early to tell me about the world and how interesting it is.

Notice that Feynman’s father had definite ideas on how he was going to work with his son, even before he was born. Notice how, as a small child, Feynman was having fun while he was learning. (By-the-way, I might add that dominoes are recommended for young children to play with. They can be used to develop pattern recognition skills, counting and elementary strategy.) Feynman has also pointed out that as he grew up his father would take him for walks in the woods and point out to him how the wings of various birds are designed to accommodate their different flying needs. Birds that needed special speed had wings shaped one way, and birds that soared had wings shaped another way. He said his father did not concentrate on the names of the birds as the fathers of his playmates were doing. Feynman said that a playmate once told him, “Your father wasn’t teaching you any thing,” because he could not identify a particular bird. Feynman explained that every bird is called by a different name by the people of different cultures. That was not the important thing. What were the characteristics of the bird? “My father,” said Feynman, “was teaching me aerodynamics.” (That is what the people who designed airplanes did also.)

Parenthetically:

Einstein's father and uncle ran a small electrochemical factory. Although young Einstein had no interest in formal instruction, his uncle introduced him to algebra and the Pythagorean theorem. Einstein enjoyed solving algebra and geometry on *his own*. When he was around *fourteen* years old a series of popular books on natural science made a great impression on him, which led to an interest in theoretical physics. Regarding his works on relativity, Einstein said that he had been meditating on the fundamental problem concerning the velocity of light since he was *sixteen*,

The importance of early training and development cannot be over emphasized. I was reminded of that during a conversation I had with my former high school homeroom teacher, Ms. Evelyn Mayfield. She shared with me a remark made to her by a Jewish acquaintance: "If your people don't take your gifted and talented young people and develop them, you're going to be lost." For me, this statement is axiomatic, a basic truism. I would add, however, that there are very few, almost no, children that have no gifts and talents. The challenge is to find out what they are and help to develop them. At the very least we should try and determine what each child is good at and work with that child to fulfill his/her potential. As one of my professors at Texas Southern University told his class: "Everybody can beat every body else doing something."

I once heard a child psychologist state that "there is one thing that all five year old children have in common with geniuses—curiosity." Children seem to come into this world naturally curious. They want to know about everything. It is all too often that adults put a damper on this very thing that is essential for creativity and genius. For example, Kim Edwards, a staff member of the W.E.B. DuBois Learning Center, speaks of an incident she observed once at a laundromat where a young boy about three years old was fascinated by the sight of clothes tumbling in a dryer. The child approached his mother about it. "Go sit down," she said. But the fascination would not go away and again the child approached his mother about it. "Didn't I tell you to sit down?" The curiosity of a young child is as tenacious as it is vivid. However, after a

third rebuff, the child finally sat quietly, never having his curiosity satisfied, his desire for knowledge met nor his efforts to learn rewarded. This child was asking the type of questions a budding genius would ask. However, faced with his kind of rebuff, clearly a significant and vital portion of his potential could be snuffed out. Instead, if the mother had been wise she would have taken her child to an empty dryer and shown him the ridges on the inside of the cylindrical drum, and then explained to him that a motor rotates the drum and the ridges lift the clothes up until they have to fall, and that hot air is blown into the drum causing the clothes to dry. In this way she could have helped her three year old develop his analytical capabilities. This is the kind of dialogue and development that most, if not all budding geniuses receive. The various forms of creativity need to be encouraged. The type of curiosity that leads to discovery, that leads to understanding, that leads to exploring concepts needs to be allowed to flourish. This curiosity is part of the natural developmental inertia that all children are born with.

People who are around children in their early years, including persons other than parents and guardians, need to look for signs of talents. Children soon start to manifest gifts and talents early in life, and they need to be acknowledged, encouraged, worked with and developed. Indeed, there are some talents that need to be developed as soon as possible.

I was watching a public television program about sled-dogs wherein the trainer kept going on and on about the importance of the lead dog. He pointed out that his particular leadership traits are very special and how not every dog has them. His leadership skills are so crucial to the sled-dog team that they had to start training this future lead dog while it was still a puppy. Quizzically, the reporter asked, “How can you tell which puppy has the characteristics to become a lead dog?” The trainer explained: “When a litter of puppies are born, you watch them. There is always one who is the first one out of the box, the first one to start poking his nose around to venture out, and the other puppies follow along after him. That’s the lead dog!”

This raises the obvious question, “Is this also true with people?” So I began to observe young children and reflect back upon the childhood of people I know—friends and family, for example. And sure enough I saw the same phenomenon. Could it be that the young children who exhibit

these characteristics are potential leaders? Keep in mind that a leader is not necessarily the wisest, the smartest, the most knowledgeable or the most intelligent. A leader is quite simply one whom others will follow. And every area and aspect of different fields and communities has its own leader.

To verify this hypothesis would take time—years. The next best thing was to talk to others who had worked with youngsters over a long enough period of time and could discuss the development of their various and particular talents with the kind of authority that is derived from experience. From long time and retired teacher, elders of families, long time little-league coaches, church elders, etc., came the resounding affirmation. They all observed the same phenomenon. Leadership traits as well as other characteristics begin to show up early.

Moreover, there was one particular characteristic that one of our staff members, Cornell Perry, Sr., of the W.E.B. DuBois Learning Center, observed that I think is worth further exploration.

For a little background on Perry, to underscore why his opinions on this matter are worth consideration: Perry, as of this writing, has been a little-league baseball coach for over twelve years. He coaches eight, nine and ten year olds and has never had a losing season. His teams are perennially in the city play-offs and he has won the city championship twice that I know of. I point this out because boys at this age know next to nothing about baseball. Also, since his team is in a predominantly white league, they face the usual amount of racism. Sometimes it is quite blatant. He lost one game 8 – 12 and the opposing team did not even get a hit! The racism he faced with his eleven and twelve year old basketball team was equally as blatant. As a result of not having lost a league game in three years and winning by lopsided scores, he was “encouraged” to move up to another level or move on to another league! Perry and his assistant coaches taught their charges, the lion cubs, to win in spite of the prejudice. In this world we live in, racism is a given fact of life. It just has to be dealt with. You acknowledge it, you abhor it, you grapple with it, you figure out how to overcome it and move on. You cannot wish it or its effects away.

Perry’s observation: “the *talents* that our kids have show up at a very young age, although what is normally nurtured and exploited are their

athletic abilities. You can see similar potential across the board. But what usually happens to these kids, because of their superb athletic abilities, they get pampered by adults and the other kids in our communities.

“These kids are given a false sense of security and signals that they can rely solely on their athletic ability to achieve success. They consequently become lazy when it comes to academics and far too many are allowed to do just enough to get by and seldom do they teach their full academic potential.

“This occurs because the media has set the tone in our communities that the quickest way out of the inner city is through sports. And to perpetuate the myth, we as a community, allow these kids to showcase their talents in sporting events even when we know that some of them are not performing academically as well as they should. Or we give them preferential treatment so as not to hinder their chances for athletic success.

“But even among these kids, there are one or two that stand out above the others. There is something even more special about them. It is just something that they have. They are the trendsetters and are usually the most popular kids in school. And since they are their schools best athletes, with suspected professional possibilities, they are treated like royalty by a small contingency of their peers. Their activities and ways are mimicked by a lot of our other youngsters, for better or for worse. They are natural born leaders with the ability to influence whole student bodies.”

Perry’s hypothesis: “If we can identify and guide these particular youths in a positive direction, starting at a very early age, their effects on our communities could be staggering. If we can develop their natural athletic abilities, with their natural leadership abilities these young people would become very positive influences affecting whole neighborhoods, families, communities for a whole generation.”

Perry calls this “the disciple theory” based on the premise that our youth are influenced more by their peers than by adults and how the teachings of the disciples of Jesus affected generations. If Perry’s observations and hypothesis are true or even partially true, and many of

the indicators seem to suggest that they might be, then that suggests that this is a strategy that we need to at least try. But again, the key is early recognition of talent and the early beginning of its development.

There is even more graphic evidence why such early development is essential. There have been children discovered who have been brought up by wolves. (See *World Children and the Problem of Human Nature* by Lucien Malson and other works on feral children.) The social scientists and psychologists tell us that if these children are rescued before the age of about ten, eleven or twelve (before the onset of puberty), then they might be civilized. After that it is too late. The acculturation processes and mechanisms of the brain have been set. You may say, “But I can learn a different language at, say fifty.” Yes, you can, but that is because you already know and understand a language. You, therefore, are not learning a human language for the first time. You are using your knowledge of a human language that you already know, one that is second nature to you. To learn a second language, your brain does not have to be reprogrammed to understand the way humans use language. The linguists say that if you are not familiar with human language by then, you cannot be taught any human language. The point is this: basic and fundamental life trends start developing early; basic and fundamental thinking styles and patterns start developing early; basic and fundamental behavioral traits start developing early. The first few years of life are extremely critical and their importance cannot be overemphasized. (There is even some folk wisdom that a dog will determine in its first few months of life, say two-to-four, just which one of the members of the household will be its master. And also, that a dog’s training must begin early. Recall the saying about old dogs and new tricks!)

There are those who would argue that it is never too late to reach a person. And even a fifteen year old “wolf-child” can be civilized, to take an extreme example. We are not going to debate the issue. However, suffice it to say that any such attempt would require a Herculean effort. The spirit and will of a “T’Shaka Zulu” would have to be summoned. Let us consider a more typical situation. It is common wisdom among people who try to impart knowledge to others that it is much easier to teach something to someone who has not been taught anything, than it is to try to teach something to someone who has been taught the wrong thing. Once an idea or concept is ingrained it has to be dealt with first

before a new or different one can supplant it. This is not to be confused with building upon old ideas that lead to development. In this instance the old idea is not necessarily ‘wrong’; it only needs enhancing. The case we are referring to is an old idea, concept or way that has to be eradicated and discarded and replaced with a new one.

Children start learning early just what they can and cannot get away with—just what is and what is not expected of them. Consequently, any environment children find themselves in, the adults in charge are going to have to lay down the laws right from the very beginning. Things cannot be allowed to drift. The tone has to be set. We must begin to prepare the way for our lion cubs in order that they may proceed along the path that will lead them to become the young lions we need them to be.

It is often argued that one of the primary reasons why we African Americans do so well in athletics and entertainment is that we devote so much of our energies into those fields in our formative years. Not only are those activities enjoyable, but they also contain the lure of a fun way to achieve economic independence. They appear to be the path of least resistance. And almost everything in nature seeks to take that path. I say “almost” because there are lessons to be learned from studying the salmon, which is an exception to that rule. The salmon swim upstream. They do that because their survival depends on it. They do not use logic or reason to realize that is what they have to do. It is in their genetic code. Humans generally tend to follow whatever path their acculturation leads them. Again, considering the parameters of this society, we African Americans will have to do some swimming upstream. It is logic and reason that tell us that. Logic and reason also tell us that there will be significant resistance along the path we must take.

One of our tragedies is that so many of our youth hocus so much on feast or famine endeavors—like athletics and entertainment. Too many of our young are walking the “razor’s edge,” often so blinded by the glow of fools gold that they do not even see all of the former travelers who have fallen into the quicksand and pits-of –miry-clay along the way.

In the public television program “The Brain” it was pointed out that whenever a reasoning process or physical activity is performed, neurons and electrons blaze a path through the brain. A comparison was made to a well-traveled path in a forest that became a well-worn trail that any traveler could follow. Another analogy would be the trail or tracks in a dirt road that evolved after enough cars had passed along it—eventually a car would not even need to be steered along it. Likewise, after enough “runs,” mental and physical processes and procedures become second nature.

As an example, the series showed Olympian Greg Louganis doing one of his fantastic high platform dives (naturally they showed it in slow motion). The narrator commented that Louganis had been diving for so long and had done this particular dive so many times that he did not have to think about what he was doing. It just flowed. His muscles instinctively knew what to do. This activity had become as natural to him as walking or running was to ordinary folks.

This illustrates the advantage of early exposure, training and drill. This instilled second nature to perform a given task, whether physical or mental, when begun early is to a child’s advantage. This is especially true if concepts and analytical processes can be instilled early, for early development of reasoning, logic and analytical ability can have tremendous consequences in later life.

Far too many of our young harbor the illusion that they only need to have street smarts, mother wit and common sense “to make it.” On occasions when I am asked to speak to a group on this subject, I often employ techniques that I learned from one of my high school teacher-mentors, Dr. Chester R. Anderson. I ask those who think, believe or feel that they have common sense to raise their hands? Every hand in the audience usually goes up. Then I ask how many of them could perform open heart surgery to raise their hands? Nothing! Then I ask how many of them could fly a 747 jet? Again, nothing! Then I would proceed to tell them that common sense would carry them only so far; after that you have to know something. Those with common sense should have enough common sense to realize that they are going to have to learn something—that common sense is something you start with that you have to build upon. Again, we will need to acquire this knowledge early. By the time the lion cubs reach their pre-teens, the tendencies for

many of the attributes they will use in the shaping of their lives will have set in.

There is a saying that “between the ages of about fourteen and twenty-four you can’t tell these kids anything. It’s not until they turn twenty-five that they begin to realize that mamma and daddy had a little sense after all.” I sort of compare this stage of their lives to “the back side of the moon.”

When a space craft is sent out to circle the moon, radio contact between the earth (parents) and the astronauts (children) is lost when the spacecraft begins to go around “the backside of the moon.” At that point the people on earth can only hope that all the programming, spacecraft maintenance, engineering and astronaut training has been properly done and everything will go well. While the space craft is on the “backside of the moon” the astronauts are out of the earth’s contact and are completely on their own. The people on earth just keep their fingers crossed, hold their breath, pray and hope everything is going to come out fine. When the spacecraft begins to emerge from the “back side of the moon” and radio contact is resumed, the people on earth give a great sigh of relief. And the astronauts do, too.

When young adults reach twenty-five years of age and begin to experience what the real world is like, they begin to communicate better with their elders.

But in order to make a successful journey around “the back side of the moon,” things have to be right going into it. It is virtually too late for any unfinished preparations. There is not time for confusion. You have to know what you have to do and what to expect and what is expected of you. You will have no time to wrestle with your identity or to figure out your basic responsibilities.

This brings us back to why early preparation is so crucial. There will be situations on the “back side of the moon” that they will have to be prepared to deal with. If they are not prepared, disastrous consequences could result. If they are prepared, then profound growth can occur and keen insight can be developed through the experience.

In his book, *Countering the Conspiracy to Destroy Black Boys*, pp 5–15, Jawanza Kunjufu discusses how he observed children up to the fourth

grade to be eager to learn, bright-eyed, attentive and all of that. But after the fourth grade these characteristics seem to diminish. He called this the “fourth grade syndrome.” He goes on to analyze reasons for this that we will not go into here. For our purposes, we will accept his findings as true and use it as a working hypothesis.

However, it behooves us to recall the discussion in the Interposition Section about the child’s capacity for imitation being maximum between the ages of four and eight. This sheds some additional light on the “fourth grad syndrome.” The fourth grade child is about nine years old and children of this age, according to the research findings, are beginning to advance beyond the stage where their imitation faculties are predominant, which implies that other faculties are coming to the fore. And failure to take this into account in the pedagogical process may contribute significantly to the “syndrome.”

Again fourth grade children are about nine years old. Young people approach “the back of the moon” at about fourteen. This means we have about a five year period to concentrate our efforts to make sure our lion cubs do not lose their developmental momentum.

Let us draw further on the spacecraft analogy. Just before lift-off, the astronauts (babies about to be born) position themselves for the launch (birth). Any other preparations required from or for them should already have been make. The people at command center (parents) are standing by monitoring the event (birth) and readying themselves to man the controls (guide and direct the new life). The mechanics, engineers, computer programmers, etc., (doctors, nurses, etc.) double check to see if “all systems are go.”

During the launch, the astronauts (babies) feel a tremendous amount of pressure. The people at command center (parents) have a tremendous amount of anxiety. After all, lift off (birth)—escaping the gravitational pull of the earth (severing the umbilical cord)—is one of the most dangerous parts of the flight (life). The spaceship (body) uses up most of its energy during the first stages of the flight. A space ship is launched into the heavens under certain conditions. Similarly, a child is born into the world under certain conditions. In the case of the spaceship and its astronauts, its course and mission are predetermined. A child, on the other hand, will have more freedom in choosing its

course. Still, each will have to navigate its course with the equipment it has. Each will receive directions, advice, influence, etc. from outside of itself. But the further he or she goes along the way the more he or she will have decisions to make and responsibilities to carry out.

As the space ship travels along, mid-course corrections will have to be made due to both predictable and unpredictable circumstances. This brings us up to the “fourth grade syndrome” and the approximate five year period before we start into the “back side of the moon.” We do not want to lose all that we have worked for up to this point. Here we will have to do some constant monitoring and evaluating to determine just what kind of adjustments are necessary. The parents, community (people at command center and their entire support group) and the lion cubs (astronauts) will have to work closely together to deal with whatever circumstances that will be encountered.

In order for communication to be effective during this phase, strong bonds will have to have been established between positive adults and the young. Influences are like electromagnetic forces. They can be positive or negative. It is our task, our responsibility, indeed it is our obligation, to make sure that our lion cubs have far more, and stronger, positive influences acting on them than negative ones.

The major point we are trying to make here is this: Just as a typical person has developed about ninety percent of his or her physical or outer characteristics and potential by around fourteen years of age, about ninety percent of the mental or inner characteristics and potential are developed by then. To look at it another way, the mold has been cast and the clay is just about hardened. The only thing left to do now is to put on the finishing touches, place it into the blast furnace (“back side of the moon”) and wait and see how the finished product turns out. However, in this analogy you can monitor the curing process and even influence it some—by altering the temperature for example.

There is a famous fable of the celebrated Ethiopian sage of the East, Lokman (often confused with Aesop), whose fame in Islam equals that of Solomon in Christianity. It is recounted by J. A. Rogers in his book *Worlds Great Men of Color*, Volume I (pp. 68–69):

A hare meeting a lioness one day said reproaching, “I have always a great number of children while you have one or two now and then.”

The lioness replied. “It is true, but my one child is a lion.”

What the lioness in this fable is expressing was her knowledge of just how special her child was. She knew full well that her lion cub would grow up to become a young lion with all the potential, along with the other members of its pride, “to lord over the land.”

We must see our young children in this same light. We must work to see to it that they have every opportunity within our capacity to give them to fulfill all of their innate potential. This will be no mean task. It will require dedication and commitment and time. Let us bear in mind that a child can be conceived within fifteen minutes. But it will take nine months to give birth to it and about twenty years to raise it. Altogether that is about twenty-one years of hard work and labor. And it can be and should be a labor of love.