



## What do children talk about?

By: Claire Bainer & Liisa Hale

*Dear BlueSkies families and friends, Lately I've been going back into the banner archives and pulling great articles that former co-director Liisa Hale and I wrote together over the years. This one was written in 2012 and is as relevant now as it was 7 years ago. It is nice to periodically reuse some of the collaborative articles and keep Liisa around in spirit.*

Sometimes parents ask what children talk about at school. Perhaps wondering and imagining what teachers overheard or are heard in children's conversations. It is true that we hear all kinds of things, and like parents in most cases we aren't always sure about the accuracy of the information! In others the cat is out of the bag so to speak (like the time a child said "I'm the mommy and when I get up in the morning I go right to the bathroom and throw up.") In that case we suspect a baby is coming. Generally however, the teacher's primary concern is not so much what the children talk about, but that children learn to use language as a tool for connection with others.

Luckily, we have enough experience with the way smart, imaginative children think that we learn not to overreact when children say things that are questionable. If a child in the dollhouse says "I'm the mommy so first I get up and then I throw up, then I take my shower..." we do sometimes get an inkling that a new baby might be coming to that family! "A big dog jumped over my fence and bit my baby" we are likely to wonder why the child said that more than we are likely to accept it at face value. The questions that teachers carry in their minds are "Why are they telling me this?" or "What is the question behind the words?" or "What does this child need?" The teacher might say "I wonder what made you think about a dog biting your baby?" and see where that goes. If it goes to what a bother babies can be, keeping one awake, that would elicit a sympathetic response: "Babies really are so little and need lots of help." If it goes to "Yes, and then a lion came over the fence," that's another kind of story. This kind of talk really isn't a lie as much as it is an experiment. "Wouldn't that be interesting, and what would Daddy do then?"

There are funny conversations like the three year old's explanation of a game called Squash that her father plays at the gym. It became apparent that her vision of this game includes lots of squeezing and rolling on the ground with friends! We have also known a child who came to school with what looked like a bad bruise and a big story about a big fall—only to find that the purple mark was ink from a marker.

There are serious discussions, too, as the children work to understand the world using words they don't fully grasp, with a brain that doesn't yet have the facts or the capacity to understand the abstract concepts they are wondering about. Deep discussions often occur around the drawing table, at lunch, or on the row of little potties—anywhere people are sitting for awhile together.

### Upcoming Events

#### Wednesday, Oct 2

Parents for BlueSkies Community Committee Meeting  
6:15 - 7:30 p.m. (5:45 social time)

#### Friday, October 4

BlueSkies closed for Staff Inservice Day

#### Tuesday, Oct 8

Parent Ed Event: Choosing Kindergarten Pt. I  
6:00 - 8:00 p.m

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## Director's Report Cont...

Hard questions about exactly where heaven is, or if you have the kind of a family that has Christmas, Kwanzaa, Hanukah, or Ramadan (families who celebrate several holidays are very interesting!) They talk about who “gets” to have a two mom families – something that seems like a very good idea to many children. Where people come from is something else to contemplate, children may recite the facts of life over and over because it really makes no sense to them. Children speculate about how things like bridges are made, or how airplanes fly. The facts are always sketchy; Some children will ask why they can't see the cord and plug trailing behind the airplane. Everyone was also startled to learn that “chicken is not meat, it comes from pig!” In this case, as in many others, the most determined believer trumped the discussion as the authority. Occasionally we clarify mixed up ideas but generally the most important thing happening in the conversation is the developing feeling of friendships and connection through the use of language. The expansion of meaning and increase of vocabulary.

If a child asks us or is clearly confused we do help to clarify children's understanding. It is cute and amusing to get these insights into the child's mind, but like you, the children don't really like to be laughed at when they make mistakes. Kindness and respect for those who are learning is always the rule. Having said that, we also know better than to fill a child with facts that his immature brain can't understand, or to give information that confuses or even scares him. Therefore we do tell the truth, but we tell a limited version. Explaining how the skin got off the skeleton really isn't ever going to be a productive discussion with a four year old! A response like “I wonder what you think about that?” really is more constructive; after you hear the child's ideas. it will help you keep your explanation within the child's understanding. Children can jump to very surprising conclusions with their immature thinking. Children beautifully prepared for mommy to go to the hospital when the new baby comes can freak out when their last experience in the hospital was seeing a dying grandparent. We may talk about the baby coming and everyone being happy, but if their experience is that people die in the hospital, and they have no experience seeing a healthy mama and baby in a hospital, the semi-verbal child's experience with death will hold a much stronger influence than any words about babies. Since we never know where the child's mind will jump, we stay honest, keep it simple, and remember to listen for the child's responses. We know that is the best policy when dealing with brains in which reason and logic are not yet developed.

One common sort of conversation is really not a conversation at all but a kind of “associative musing.” The language kind of hops around as the child's mind does, following one little riff after another; in a group no one is really relating to the other although they may stop and tell each other something now and then. Often the other child's riff just goes along without a pause whether or not they are including another child. One of a teacher's joys in the Nursery School is being able to help the children move from this disconnected non-communication to using language that creates reciprocity and relationship. At first children use language mostly to tell each other what they want the other person to do; being forceful, loud, and dominating can be quite effective with young preschool peers (see “chicken comes from pig,” above). Some children ignore conversation altogether, and others follow along as directed by a peer. The teacher reminds the children that a person may decide to say no thank you to the domineering playmate and do what she wants. Once the children are ready to implement this concept the dynamic begins to shift. At the same time, the children's development is making them want to do things with a friend, so dominating, not engaging, or just following along becomes less and less satisfying.

A teacher related this story of dissociated conversation, with a child speaking the right words but failing to make a true connection: Jan is engrossed in a book. Sue looks at Jan and goes to sit beside her. Jan reads. Sue chats. Sue gets up and heads to the yard; when she is about five feet from Jan she says “come on.” Jan studies her book without looking up. Sue goes on outside, and looks around for Jan. Sue comes back in, goes back to Jan and says “Wanna play?” Jan says “yes” without looking up, continuing to look at her book. Sue heads back outside. Teacher says “What happened, Sue? Does Jan know you want to play with her?” Sue seems unsure. “Let's go together and ask her. First we'll say ‘Jan’ so she'll know you are talking to her.” Sue and the teacher approach Jan. Sue says “Jan, do you want to play?” Jan says “yes” and continues to read her book. Sue turns to go. Teacher says “Wait a minute Sue. Jan, Sue wants to know if you'd like to come play with her.” Jan says “I want to play. I'm reading now”. “I see,” says the teacher. “You can tell Sue ‘I'm reading now, I'll come play when I'm done.’” Sue smiles. “Where will you be, Sue, so Jan can come find you?” asks the teacher. “I'll wait on the swing.” Sue says. If Jan doesn't go out soon the teacher will follow up; she doesn't care if the children actually swing or not but she does care that the children learn to use language to connect with each other. She

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will ask again and remind these young minds that when they say something they are making a commitment to other people. She wants to teach them to discipline themselves enough to stop their spontaneous behavior and hold to their plans. It is fine for Sue or Jan to decide to do something else as long as they remember to tell each other; if in a few minutes Jan is still committed to her book the teacher will ask her to go out and tell Sue she will play with her later. These young three year olds learned something—Sue learned that she really has to make contact to make words work, and Jan learned to tell people what she is up to rather than just think it in her head. Both want to play; of course they will need repetition. The teacher supported successes like this one, and practice, but they are on their way to reciprocity in language and the joys of relationships with friends. The teacher can also gain great insight into the child's development something that will help her form learning goals for the children. Amusing as it is to ask a child "Do you need a hand?" and see him stare in confusion at his two outstretched hands, it is even more a great glimpse into his brain's development.

## A Happy Un-Halloween from BlueSkies

This is a reminder that BlueSkies for Children is a "holiday free" zone. As you know, young children are reading clues from the faces as well as from words. This is why young children can be frightened by masks, and confused or over-excited by costumes, so we ask you to please save all Halloween costume dress-ups for home or neighborhood events rather than bring them to BlueSkies. In keeping with our nutritious meals and snacks, and food allergy policies, we also ask you to keep Halloween candy at home.

This is a wonderful time to talk to children about the changes in the seasons and how big and bright the moon is, how dark the sky, and about the leaves turning color and the harvest of fall foods, even the air and light feel different. All these things align children with the seasons and help child learn to love the beautiful earth and celebrate fall. Scare crows and pumpkins are concrete things the children can enjoy and understand. Soon they will be big and running around like the elementary school kids so don't forget to enjoy them where they are now. Save the "big kid" elementary school Halloween fun to come a little later when children are more able to understand real and pretend and can laugh at 'scary'.

As parents, it is so delightful to see how cute our children look all dressed up; we all remember the fun of trick-or-treating and Halloween parties. If your child has a sibling in elementary school, Halloween has certainly been a major topic in your household for some time now! It is important to remember that even when preschool children seem big and ready for fun, even when they beg to do what bigger siblings do, they still need our protection. Older children can look and act very scary even if you only see them from the safety of your own front door as you help hand out the candy. Think of BlueSkies as an oasis in this big confusing world, and help us keep the school feeling safe and calm. We will have autumn gourds and pumpkins around to connect the children with the season's change, but that is about as exciting as we want to be!

Thanks for your cooperation.  
– Claire



## Staff out in October

The following staff will be out this month:

- \* Christa out 10/11 - 10/14
- \* Claire H out 10/18 - 10/21



## Snapshot in the Homeroom

~ By Claire Bainer

Aaron and Noah sit side by side in the Homeroom, ready to draw. Aaron is almost 4 and Noah has just turned 3. They each choose a paper and a marker and begin to draw scribbles and circles with unsteady hands. The children sit side by side, not speaking to each other but in comfortable harmony. Aaron gets up, looks on the shelf, and finds a hole-punch that punches out a hole in the shape of a butterfly. Aaron slides the paper in the punch slot and pushes the button hard, using both hands, then carefully picks up the minuscule butterfly cutout and begins to color it brown, making tiny marks on the tiny bit of paper and on the table and on his fingers. It is hard to color such a tiny bit of paper. Noah reaches over and takes the hole-punch; he pushes on the button and turns the punch over and looks at the bottom where he can see the shape in the punch. He slides his paper near the punch and pushes the button. No butterfly cutout appears, nor is there a hole in the paper. He looks at his teacher and says “it doesn’t work.” The teacher says “Oh dear” and bends down to help another child right the scissors he is using to cut fringe around his paper. Noah works on the punch some more; he looks at the bottom and sees the punch move up and down as he pushes the button. Now he slides the paper into the slit on the punch and pushes the button – but he doesn’t push hard enough and the paper isn’t cut. This doesn’t work,” he says to no one in particular. Aaron reaches over, takes the punch, punches out a perfect butterfly and proceeds to color it – brown again. Noah takes the punch, turns it over, looks at the punch mechanism from the bottom, pushes the button and watches the shape move up and down. He puts his paper in; this time the paper is not in far enough so when he pushes a squiggle edge of a butterfly shape falls out on the table, and again he says “this doesn’t work.” The teacher suggests that another child sitting at the art table put his scissors back if he is done cutting. She comments to Aaron that his butterfly is very little to color; he smiles and nods. She is watching and listening to the children at the art table, and allowing Noah to work to solve his own problem. After a few more tries, Noah manages to punch out a butterfly, and proceeds to color it brown as Aaron did.

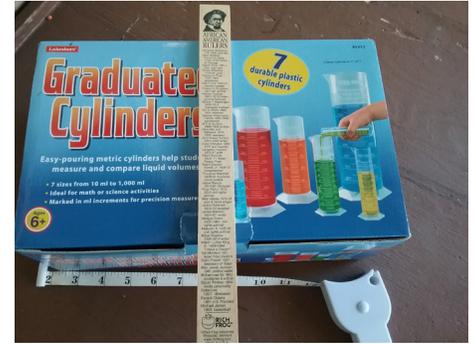
The teacher is close and hears Noah’s complaints that the punch isn’t working; some might wonder why she isn’t helping Noah when she is helping other children sitting right there? This teacher is being very careful not to distract Noah from the task he has chosen for himself. She knows that she could easily draw his attention away from the punch to engaging with her; she wants his focus to stay on his task so she can support him as he teaches himself that he can do it. She wants to help if he needs her, but she knows that if she helps when he is still willing and interested in trying she could unintentionally communicate through her help that he really can’t do it and that would build his dependency on her. Making careful choices like this one require focus, discernment and discipline on the part of the teacher. As the children get older, the toys and equipment in the classrooms are more and more the means through which the teacher works to achieve her goals for the children. The doll house is there to help the teacher teach social skills; the puzzles are there to build hand eye coordination and problem solving skills, etc. So while the children choose what they are interested in, the teacher remains aware that her job is to teach toward the goals she has for the children’s individual growth and development. For the child, succeeding at a difficult task carries satisfaction in the choosing and doing. For the teacher, seeing Noah try and then succeed without her direct help also carries a certain satisfaction as she facilitates his learning through her presence and availability; he knows she is there if he really needs her but also that she trusts him to be able to figure it out.

# Science with Naomi

Dear Parents,

After our fascinating exploration of live crayfish, we moved on to scientific tools for measurement. As you see in this picture, we worked with rulers, tape measures and graduated cylinders (also a measuring cup that was being utilized at the time of the photo).

In presenting this lesson to the Homeroom and Schoolroom kids, I am yet again amazed by the vast territory between ages three and four. With our three-year old students, it was the beginning of the concepts of measurement (and standard units like inches or ounces, centimeters or milliliters) and continuing to expand their understanding of opposites like solid and liquid, straight and curved. I repeat almost all of the successful lessons that the three-year olds experienced again when they are four, so that they can return to a concept with greater life experience, motor control and cognitive ability.



Our four-year old students, recognized the ruler and measuring tape and told of how it was used at home. We had great fun working together to use the measuring tape, I explained that in English one word might have two or more meanings, and we talked about the words “graduated” and “ruler.” Pointing to the lines on the cylinder I explained that each one indicated a “little bit more” and said that as they graduated from preschool, they would be a little bit more too – more educated and more of a “big kid”. I showed them the ruler and told them that the ruler was a straight stick that was always 12 inches used to measure straight solids. But that it was also a word that meant someone in charge – a President or Queen, King or Prime Minister. Because it is never too early to integrate social justice into teaching all subjects, I used a ruler that on one side had the standard measurements and on the other features great African-American rulers.\* Along the same lines of thinking, I talked about how one side of the ruler has inches which is the measurement used by the U.S., and the small countries Burma and Liberia, and the rest of the world uses the units on the other side of the ruler (Imperial and metric).



As you see in this photo, the students enjoyed learning about what a spout was and why it is helpful to pour. This is a great activity for home, in the bathtub and outdoors were my favorite places to have them practice pouring. Any containers will do, but ones with spouts and ones with a variety of sizes are most useful. These motor skills are the same that they’ll need as they learn to write, so it’s a great activity, one that’s both fun and useful for them.

As they attempted to pour into the increasingly narrow openings of the cylinders, I shared two of my philosophies with them. One I used as a mantra when my children were little: “it’s just a spill, don’t lose your chill,” expanding that idea with this statement “There is no way to get from the unknown to the known without making mistakes. It’s part of the process of learning.” As I observed and narrated the details of individual child’s attempts to pour well, “I notice she is lifting her elbow slowly to control how fast the water is coming out.” I shared another key element of my teaching philosophy - “different amounts of attention get different results”. Focusing on effort rather than innate ability is a strategy that education experts advise, as effort is under an individual’s control, whereas innate ability isn’t. It’s been learned also that it is equally harmful to tell a child that they were born smart and can just do stuff, as it is to tell a child they aren’t smart. When the child who has been told they are smart encounters material they don’t easily master, it results in a bit of an identity crisis and studies have shown that they consistently fail to persist as they attribute their past success to inherent ability rather than effort.

Next up will be our fall curriculum. We’ll start with apples, yum.

\*These are part of a great line of rulers that a company named Rich Frog sells (I have no affiliation with them), they cost \$2 and have other great ones like “great women rulers” “great Native American rulers” etc. that make have made for very well received teacher gifts in my children’s elementary school life.

# Introducing the BlueSkies for Children Board of Directors

By law, non-profit agencies must be run by a Board of Directors. At BlueSkies we have been fortunate to have Boards composed of collegial, skilled, and committed people for the past 35+ years. Although the Board members occasionally disagree about the best way to move the agency forward, the Board has always operated with great respect among the membership and between the Board and the Executive Director. The Board ByLaws require that it include current parents in its membership, although not more than 49% of the voting membership can be current parents. We are taking this opportunity to introduce the current Board members, an extremely talented and well-qualified group.

**Board President** Brooke Abola works as a Deputy City Attorney in the Office of the San Francisco City Attorney and has spent her legal career advising public agencies on finance-related matters. She is the proud parent of two BlueSkies graduates and has served as Co-Chair of the Parent Scholarship Committee for the past three years.

**Board Vice President** Murali Naidu was most recently Vice President, Chief Clinical Officer for Sentara Healthcare, where he was responsible for delivering reliable, high quality, customer-satisfying care across the continuum

**Board Secretary** Lisa Freitas is an Attorney/Mediator at Sawyer Mediation and provides family law consultation and mediation services for parties with divorce, parenting, custody, support and other family law disputes, as well as cohabitation, premarital and post marital agreements. One daughter is a BlueSkies graduate now in First Grade, and her younger daughter is in the Wobbly Walkers.

**Board Treasurer** Bryan Quevedo has a decade of public sector management service, with experience in budgeting, finance, grants, assessment, and strategic planning. He is currently a Policy & Planning Analyst with the San Francisco Office of Economic and Workforce Development. Bryan's daughter is in the Homeroom.

Claire Bainer, BlueSkies Executive Director, holds one vote on the Board.

Christa Edwards is the Assistant Program Director at BlueSkies. She is also the parent of a child in the Schoolroom.

Riana Hensel is a Spanish teacher at St. Paul's Episcopal School, and has the distinguished pleasure of being the first AOCS (the former name of BlueSkies) alumna to serve on the Board of Directors! In fact, she is still friends with some of her classmates from 30 years ago.

Maggie Greenblatt is currently the Coordinator of the Hospital School Program at UCSF Benioff Children's Hospital Oakland (BCHO) where she has worked since 1986. Her son is an alumnus from the 1999 class, and now a graduate of the University of Oregon.

Rory Darrah has worked in the field of Early Care and Education for over 40 years. Rory has written numerous reports, articles, booklets, and curricula on early childhood education (ECE) and has been a strong advocate at local, state, and national levels for quality ECE and family support services.

***Welcome to our newest Board members!***

Barrie McClune's two children attend and adore BlueSkies. She works as an Organization

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Development consultant in the Bay Area and holds a masters in Critical Media and Cultural Studies from SOAS in London and is working toward her Masters in Organization Development

Michael Shih is the VP, Business Banking Sales Manager at U.S. Bank. His son is currently in the Wobbly Walkers.

Ceinwyn Valo is the Director of Strategic Projects at Kaiser. She holds an MBA from UC Berkeley. Her daughter is a BlueSkies alum, and her son is currently in the Homeroom.

Yvette White holds her MA in History from Howard University. She is currently the Organizational Effectiveness Lead for Blend. Her son is a recent graduate of Blueskies.

Claire Bainer, BlueSkies Executive Director, holds one vote on the Board.

The Board of Directors meets almost every month during the school year. If you are interested in the work of the Board, please feel free to discuss your interests with a current Board member.



## BlueSkies-isms

*Parents often hear their children using phrases that they suspect they learned at BlueSkies. Each month's "BlueSkies-ism" will include a phrase the teachers use all the time at BlueSkies, and some context to help you use the phrase at home too.*

*"Tell me about..."*

...your drawing, your painting, your building, your digging. Children live in present time and often paint, draw, dig, or build just because it is interesting but without planning for any particular final product. They are enjoying the process of creating in the flow of ideas, so often don't have an answer to a question like 'what did you make?' We want children to know that we value just being in the flow of imagination and creative exploration, rather than requiring an end goal; we ask instead to be included in the process with 'tell me about.' It won't be long before they learn to value the end product and will be eager to tell you what they made.

