

## Off To A Good Start

At a dialogue with Dr. Stuart Shanker on school readiness last week, it struck me (yet again) that the educating of children is indeed a partnership between family and teachers.

Stuart Shanker is a Distinguished Research Professor of Philosophy and Psychology at York University and is currently Director of the Council for Human Development and Past President of the Council of Early Child Development.

Dr. Shanker spoke about the “stages of activation” of the mind, or what level of arousal the mind needs for optimum learning. According to his research, the six stages of mental activity are:

1. Asleep
2. Drowsy
3. Hypo-alert
4. Calmly focused and alert
5. Hyper-alert
6. Flooded

Stage four above – *calmly focused and alert* is, of course, the one that will enable children to have success in the school environment.

In the first three stages the brain is tired – not enough sleep, poor nutrition, etc., while in the last two stages the mind is over stimulated, anxious and unfocused.

So, how do we ensure that children have maximum opportunity to learn in the preschool/school environment each and every day, and that their minds are calmly focused and alert?

According to Dr. Shanker, there are several things that both their family and their teachers can do promote calm and focused minds so that children are truly ready for learning.

### The teachers' role...

In early childhood, teachers prepare an environment for the developmental stages of the two, three and four-year-old mind. We know that children need a balance of indoor and outdoor activities, free play and structure, activities that are focused and those that are restful, and that they need nutritious food. All these contribute to creating a calm and focused mind. Lastly, it is our job to entice, engage and have fun with the children in our care, so that children *love* what they are doing, which promotes positive emotional states and sets the stage for a successful preschool experience.

### The family's role...

*Establishing good bedtime routines and ensuring that your child gets enough sleep.*

Preschool children typically sleep 11 to 13 hours in every 24 hour period. After 5 years of age most children have given up napping, but the amount of sleep they require remains the same. Children who get adequate sleep are:

- more alert
- better able to learn
- less prone to obesity
- less accident-prone
- more cheerful
- wake spontaneously feeling refreshed

Children who get inadequate sleep may:

- be more susceptible to infection
- have rapid mood swings
- have impulsive behaviour
- appear “wired”
- be hard to wake up
- be too sleepy to eat breakfast

*Serving nutritious meals and snacks*, with healthy choices that are appetizing and will fuel the body - a daily balance of carbohydrates, protein, fruits and vegetables.

*Being prepared* - making a child's day easier by not having to rush out to get to school so the day doesn't start with anxiety.

*Severely limiting the time spent in front of a television, or electronic games* AND never using them BEFORE school.

*Keeping the lines of communication with the teacher open and well-oiled!* Communicate with your child's teachers about any changes at home - births and deaths, getting a new pet or sibling, a parent away, grandparents coming to visit. Any change in their routine affects children and we see the effect at school. By keeping us “in the loop” we can help a child to *process* the experience positively.

By working together to support children in these ways, we can achieve the balance that will create a calm and focused mind that is ready to learn.