Patricia Haensly, Ph.D.

Balancing a Culture of Distraction With Guided Attention for Gifted Exploration and Reflection

"Grant me intention, purpose, and design—That's near enough for me to the Divine"
—Robert Frost, from "Accidentally on Purpose"

As I was looking for relevant material for the Adolescent Psychology course I teach, my attention was drawn to a book by Thomas Cottle, *Mind Fields: Adolescent Consciousness in a Culture of Distraction* (2001). Frost's quotation is in the frontispiece, and his words seemed so relevant to the topic I intended to develop in this issue's parent column and is stated with so much elegance, that I couldn't resist using it to initiate an exploration of the roles of *distraction*, *attention*, *exploration,* and *reflection* in our attempts, as both parents and teachers, to foster the development of gifted potential in our children.

Distraction

So, when does this distraction factor begin in the lives of children and in what ways does it become an influence for children and adolescents, particularly those who may already exhibit a path toward great potential? Is it something we as parents need to be concerned about as we plan activities and guidance for our highly capable children? It's become a useful concept to consider in planning one's class presentations even at the university level because there is this idea that lesson presentations must be entertaining (or certainly attention-getting) to hold students' interest. How do we distinguish between distraction and learning, or between focusing the learners' interest so that they are as intrigued by the topic as you are without losing the thread of the lesson intended? Is distraction a societal attitude that has begun in infancy, been promoted in childhood, and come full blown in the arena of adolescent and adult learning? Does distraction lead to flawed attention? Is having fun while learning a good or a bad thing, and is the avenue to fun at learning only gained through distracting strategies?

Recent events beyond Cottle's book furthered my interest in the yin and yang of distraction. The first event occurred in a place where children interact with colorful, electronically operated play equipment: a Chuck E. Cheese establishment. As two of my young grandchildren participated along with many other children their age, the dilemma that Cottle seems to have been referring to—disruptive distraction—came to mind, an environment even more chaotic given our

society's preoccupation with terrorism, war, and instant news from around the world.

In the somewhat frenetic atmosphere of the Chuck E. Cheese setting, the fearless 2-year-old took off immediately to explore the vast panorama of approximately 30 electronically driven machines he might choose for manipulating his physical interactions. The 3-year-old sister, more introspective in temperament, retreated to a safe observation point where she could make her choices from afar. The next hour or so was spent alternating between some pizza-related refreshments and the chosen activities, some of which seemed to this observer to be more fun than others, some more distracting and scary than fun, but perhaps offering a challenge in psychomotor control to the child who dared to try them. Since this was a morning session, most of the children in this barn-like building were of preschool age, although this would change to elementary-age children as the day wore on and the *more experienced* youth arrived.

Guided Attention

To this adult, this somewhat chaotic event at Chuck E. Cheese would have been much more disturbing had I not been privileged also to watch these two children at many other instances in different kinds of play.

For example, the 3-year-old spent more than an hour in the family's backyard observing, with her father's occasional directive comments, an emerging butterfly perched on the picnic table, checking its progress every few minutes as she engaged in imaginative play involving butterflies and other characters in the surrounding area. In a recent conversation with her mother, I'd found that, in the course of such instances, Kyra had become so interested in all manner of insects that she was well on her way to becoming an entomologist of sorts. A few months later, she was absorbed in the butterfly kit her parents had obtained, in which she was able to follow the sequence of growth from eggs, to pupae, to full-fledged new butterflies. She did a sketch of these each day to reflect their development. She worried one day about her snail that she had left behind as she assembled an entire grocery bag full of her collections of various insects to take to "Show and Tell" at her preschool class. No outing seemed to occur without discovering *and reflecting with her mother* on some new aspect of the insect world.

Even her younger brother sometimes helped with the collecting, although his main focus seemed to be forever "being busy," as his mother stated: "He always seems to find interesting things to do with toys and environments," so that his focus, though differing from his sister's, also brought about constructive attention. Outings to a safari-type animal park on a Saturday morning, a visit to the children's museum, or collecting shells on a beach and other rich provisions from natural settings were regular events for them as a family. Intense attention to all the details of these outings frequently resurfaced and reconfigured as they reappeared in imaginative play at home. For example, observed one day was an orderly row of dozens of their plastic animal figures—a herd of giraffes, elephants, tigers, horses—proceeding around the coffee table edge, with the children manipulating them for water breaks and interactions between the various species, accompanied by conversations about what the animals were doing. This kind of sampling and connecting at ages 2 and 3—how will it carry over into the teenage years, and how does it matter?

A second event in which distraction/play might have emerged occurred with another set of grandchildren. Eight-year-old Sally and a friend decided to collect pillbugs they had discovered in the backyard. Soon, with multiple plastic boxes organized for small and large pillbugs as homes for the miniature collection, they were gathering leaves to feed them, naming and identifying them with colored pens, and engaging in imaginative games with them (on the kitchen floor since it was a bit cool outside). Their attention already having been captured serendipitously, Mom, working nearby, suggested the Internet might provide them with more information about these creatures. Her laptop soon printed out several pages of information, including not only a list of facts, but also ideas to check out and even descriptions of experiments to learn more about pillbugs (http://www.udel.edu/msmith/pillbugs.html). However, having briefly learned that pillbugs were a type of arthropod, rather than insect or bug, the girls abandoned the printout and used their own considerable creativity to direct their play over the next hour. Mom was careful not to intrude further with her own ideas on the direction for the play to take.

Early the next morning, Sally's dad and her 11-year-old sister, Rhea, were observed having set up a maze of wooden blocks and laughing. They seemed to be having great fun seeing how the pillbugs would negotiate the maze and which were the most skillful at figuring out the exit. Since the girls and Dad were scheduled to attend a Home Depot activity that morning where they would each build a plywood butterfly house for the yard, the maze fun was set aside. However, after they came home and showed the houses they had built, they quickly returned to the pillbug collection. The girls set about creating new scenarios for the pillbugs, who by now had taken on individual characteristics and abilities such as rolling over and

curling up. Units for outdoor camp activities for these pillbug individuals were organized (as in Girl Scout camp). They also began testing out the ideas from the Internet handout over the course of the afternoon. The pillbug population was destined to hold interest for a few days, at least until the next project evolved.

Gifted Exploration

Choices of activities, at least for children, appear to fall on a continuum ranging from significant and intense exploration of the environment so that unique personal and mental growth occurs, to mixed-message activities of moderate instructive value, to the polar opposite, with engagement in activities designed only for the moment's occupation. The first choice would seem to fit the category of absorbed and prolonged attention and involvement as seen in Csikszentmihalyi's concept of *flow* (Csikszentmihalyi, Rathunde, & Whalen, 1993) and as exhibited in Kyra's butterfly and Sally's pillbug experiences. At the other end of the continuum I'm proposing, *attention* may fall into the category of pointless and self-serving distraction, perhaps occurring for many children engaged in activities propelled by the excitement of technologically driven mechanisms, as in the Chuck E. Cheese experience, rather than by their own drive to extend their knowledge.

Thus, I had to think about how thoughtful, sensible parents are able to balance their plans of action for their children somewhere between pure fun and deeply introspective activities. Nevertheless, I began to think: In what ways might the Chuck E. Cheese activity have been an incident of focused attention, purpose, and design? Certainly, in the minds of the designers of such electronic play equipment, the activities must have been related to capturing the attention of participants. But, in what ways did it serve some purpose in the child's developmental tasks for his or her cognitive, social/emotional, and psychological growth? In what ways might such experiences foster development of some aspect of giftedness or unique talent? And how would this all translate as the child grows into adolescence, where it seems that distraction becomes an area of concern to psychologists such as Cottle?

As constructivist parent-educators and teachers of young children, we need to think about the additive effect of varied levels of experiences at various times. When children engage in different types and instances of play, they begin to accumulate pieces of understanding from one instance and carry these pieces forward into expanded understanding in their later activities. This understanding happens *if they are fortunate enough to have attentive guides to help them fashion a strategic approach of applying past memories to current experiencing*. For a simple example, 4-year-old Valerie paused at the top of the playground slide and called out to her mother about how entering the top of the slide "feels I'm in a big wave just like at the water park where we were the other day—it feels just like that when I go down this slide!" Her mother replied, "Oh, yes, that's when we had so much fun at the water park, and I remember how surprised you looked when you first went down that slide and how you laughed as it tossed you up on the wave."

However, I also began to think of the studies done by Emmy Werner on the important trait of resilience and how results and our understanding differ depending on how we frame the question. When Werner started her research more than 40 years ago, she was looking for an answer to how failure passed from one generation to the next. When she found that at least one-third of the failure-generation youth she had studied were growing into emotionally healthy, competent adults, despite their start embedded in societal failure factors, she realized she needed to frame her research question differently. She realized it would be more productive to study what the characteristics were that the stressed kids, now more than 30 years old, seemed to have that helped them create their own luck out of deficient beginnings. Among the resiliency-related factors she uncovered were watchful parents, welcoming schools, good peers, and extracurricular activities (Werner, 1995). Perhaps we, too, should look at how, when, and from what kind of activities do productively developing children extract critical factors for the support of their unique gifts, rather than mulling over what specific environments do *not* provide. We might even bridge ahead to think of which factors that contribute to young children's productive attention and interaction with the environment might remain as these children move into adolescence. It quickly became apparent that there were many such informative events in the lives of these children I had observed, and I'm sure in the lives of your children.

Reflection and Empowerment

Back, then, to Cottle's examination of distraction as superimposed on Csikszentmihalyi's flow concept. Cottle stated that the concept of distraction "is intended to denote any cultural stimulus, fashion, fad, style, norm, that leads the adolescent away from the sort of reasoning and reflection required to produce an authentic, not to mention healthy, moral sense of self and identity" (p. 5). Nevertheless, distraction as a technique of managing one's feelings or the behavior of others has almost

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become a mantra for our current approach to many of our children's activities, instructional action plans and classroom management, and recreational time for children and even ourselves as adults. In fact, it is a subliminal cornerstone of some psychological approaches to modifying undesirable children's behavior into more productive channels. Consider, for example, the child who has discovered some dangerous aspects of a particular toy or activity and how we as adults then subtly guide attention to the attractiveness of its more productive aspects and away from its destructive attractions. This strategy seems preferable to the primal admonition of "No!," which instead simply piques intrigue to explore the forbidden activity surreptitiously. Or, as Cottle pointed out, in helping children manage instances of crisis and grief, one can point to the happy factors of someone's life that have been experienced or might introduce literature to show how other children have responded in such situations.

As Cottle began to consider the tasks of cognitive and psychological development in adolescence, including the adolescent's ability to apply Piaget's description of formal operational reasoning (hypothetical and abstract thinking) and construct an identity that will take him or her successfully into adulthood, Cottle pondered how the culture in which we exist influences those significant processes for better or for worse. For adolescents to complete this important task in this period of their development, construction of an authentic identity requires a great deal of self-exploration and self-reflection. Distraction in its most fundamental form "disrupts reflection, . . . causing adolescents to perceive of themselves more in the forms, beneficial or not, the culture desires, . . . leading to more fragile and incomplete identities" (p. 5).

So, we begin to see that there may be debilitating aspects or levels of distraction, especially when the adolescent is exploring and trying to find his or her core identity. But, we also can see how the outcome of distracting activities may be reshaped or redirected by simply pointing out how technology and machines can support one's body to do incredible feats (as in the Chuck E. Cheese experience) or how the activities of other species mimic, differ, or apply to our human life (as in the butterfly and pillbug experiences). Do not misunderstand that I am suggesting we must transform the fun of every play experience into an academic venture. Instead, we as the guiding adults need to keep in mind the potential of such experiences so that we can be prepared to plan future ones, as when Kyra's mom searched for a butterfly kit to extend those moments of wonder Kyra had experienced when she observed the butterfly in her backyard. More importantly, perhaps, we must be prepared with the guiding strategies that can empower the child to do his or her own reflecting. Empowerment becomes the salient outcome.

The "teachers in preparation" (advanced undergraduates and postbaccalaureate university students pursuing teaching certification) who have taken my Adolescent Psychology class spend a great deal of time considering how best to support this identity resolution process through which adolescents transform successfully into adulthood. One team presented to the class the details of how and why a class in deconstruction of the media should be offered to middle and secondary school youth. All sorts of curricular connections to literature, history, and even mathematical and statistical concepts would form the foundation for such deconstruction. And, through this process, the students would learn how the media are designed to manipulate their thinking and even wishing and how they might instead become empowered to manage their own thinking and wishing in ways that would help them construct authentic identities. Such empowerment would strategically release them from the destructive distraction present in their culture.

The research of Csikszentmihalyi on talented youth, as well as the theories of other psychologists on ways to support youth in negotiating their transformation to adulthood successfully, are important to keep in mind. Empowering youth to understand their own specific role in exploration, reflection, and identity formation becomes an important growth task that we may have

continued on page 64

Guided Attention for Gifted Exploration

continued from page 33

previously withheld from them in approaches such as "When you get older, you will understand why we want you to try out this or that activity."

Although *Mind Fields* and the Chuck E. Cheese and pillbug experiences had sent up red flags to my thinking regarding our day-to-day tasks as parents of potentially gifted youth, they served usefully to highlight how critical it is that we manage to become mentors and backstage guides as our youth unravel the mysteries of each new task. The critical part of the strategy is empowering the child. When the adult sincerely seeks understanding along with the child, the adult conveys that it is interesting to him or her, too: "I like the way this machine helps you do a somersault just like you do in gymnastics" or "I didn't realize pillbugs have gills, but also a breathing mechanism so they don't have to live in a water environment." When the adult leaves the power of direction and rate for such inquiry in the senses and mind of the child, rather than taking charge of the pace and direction of the exploration, the child is empowered.

This, then, is how I suggest we can balance a culture of distraction: by suggesting appropriate levels of attention at appropriate times; by guiding exploration of the increasingly enriched sources we can find; and by prompting and participating in gifted reflection about the exciting outcomes of our exploration. "Grant me intention, purpose, and design—That's near enough for me to the Divine . . ." and for us, as parents, to bring about the optimal development of the extraordinary potential waiting to be awakened in our children's daily environment. GCT

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Purposeful Professional Development

continued from page 41

7. Planners of professional development should offer opportunities for reflection and feedback through follow-up experiences on the same topic.
8. Administrators should provide opportunities for teachers to collaborate with peers and mentors to incorporate new concepts.
9. Program planners should incorporate the expertise of district staff.
10. Planners of professional development should consider alternative forms of professional development, such as book studies, teacher inquiry, and peer coaching.

Setting the standard for excellence in professional development should never be compromised. Participants in gifted program staff development are best served in a collaborative atmosphere where they are involved in self-assessment of needs, goal planning, selection of materials and facilities appropriate for adults, and reflection with supportive feedback and follow-up. Teachers of the gifted and talented must be given opportunities to participate actively during staff development, integrate new ideas with existing practices, and personalize for their own classroom the information shared during professional development experiences. When professional development experiences are meaningful and transferable, the knowledge and skills attained will lead to enhanced teaching practices resulting in quality instruction for gifted and talented students. GCT

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