

# POETRY FEEDS THE SPIRIT

## *The importance of poetry and play for students and teachers*

*I have written over 1,000 poems about life in our elementary school classrooms. Over the years, my own words and those of others have taught me some profound lessons about the value of poetry and play.*

### **1 Teachers and Children Need Time to Nurture Their Spirits**

We feed the physical needs of children with breakfast and lunch at school, but people rarely speak of feeding a child's inner self, or spirit. Yet an undernourished spirit is as detrimental to learning as hunger. Filling every moment in children's lives with instruction, no matter how good the programs, is toxic and destructive. All human beings need time to reflect, create, celebrate, and rest. Every school needs a place where children can do this—a garden, a library, an office, even a cardboard-box-quiet-place.

The only place many children have in our elementary schools to rest their tired inner selves is the bathroom. My poems (and experience) have shown me that kids take refuge there, "hiding out" among the toilets and sinks.

I'm hiding in the bathroom,  
There's no one here to see,  
I'm tired of my classroom,  
And I wish they'd set me free.

The heart of teaching has little to do with success in the world's terms. In truth, high test scores might reveal a school where children and teachers are pressured to succeed at all costs. My poetry has taught me that when the costs are too high, we must refuse to make the payments. We are the caretakers of children. They count on us.

- ◆ Build in unstructured time to rest, draw, create art, read and write poetry, and celebrate life.
- ◆ Provide a place where children can escape classroom stimulation.
- ◆ Make sure students have breaks: morning recess, lunch break, and afternoon recess.
- ◆ Fight for a schedule that gives teachers breaks as well.

### **2 Children Need to Learn How to Fail**

Children need to learn how to fail as much as they need to learn to succeed—perhaps even more so, because failure is often a greater part of learning than success. Most students are as scared to death of failure as the adults who model that harmful philosophy.

Don't tell me  
I won't fail,  
For it might  
Not be true.  
Just tell me  
You'll still  
Love me,  
Even if I do.

- ◆ Share stories and poems about your own failures in life (I remember when I was learning to ski, and I was the lowest student in the lowest class in my ski school ...)

BY KALLI DAKOS



- ◆ Share stories and poems about the failures of great people in history—and how they eventually succeeded.
- ◆ Share inspirational poetry and sayings that encourage students to dare and risk failure, like this traditional, if unofficial, motto of the armed forces:

The difficult we  
do immediately.  
The impossible  
takes a little longer.

- ◆ Model the acceptance of failure by writing a short poem about one of your own failures in life—and don't worry about your poetry-writing skills! The poem's quality is not as important as the feelings it conveys.

### 3 Toys, the Tools of Childhood, Must Be in Our Classrooms

"Push back the desks!"  
—Albert Cullum

If we can't enter the world of children, we can never reach them. This has been the most surprising lesson to me. If children learn through play, if toys are the tools of childhood, then why don't we have toys in our classrooms? We are educating children—not adults, not little executives. Where are the toys?

I buy Coke bottles that dance, umbrellas that turn into frogs, battery-operated microphones with spooky voices, and squishy stress balls in every shape and size. Along

with books, these toys are among the best educational tools I use to teach a love of reading and writing poetry.

- ◆ Have children bring in their favorite toys and share them with the class. They might want to write stories, poems, advertisements, or articles about their toys.

- ◆ Ask students to bring in props when they act out stories, poems, and plays. Encourage them to look at everything in their lives in terms of creative possibilities. The pot in the kitchen provides sound effects; the old lamp sets a mood; the white sheet gives a ghostly presence.

- ◆ Budget money each year to purchase toys for your classroom. Always be on the lookout for special toys to accompany your lesson plans. Toys can be the secret ingredient that pulls children into the lesson.

### 4 Children Can Play Their Way to a Love of Reading

"My main fear for children is  
that they are losing the  
capacity to play."

—James Howe

Play is the miraculous ingredient that is missing in so many classrooms. One way I incorporate its magic is through "playing poetry." When we put tiny green round labels all over our faces, arms and hands, and pretend we have a bad case of the "chicken pops" (a different illness than chicken pox), a poem comes to life in a way children

understand, and even those who hate to read and write are drawn to the words through the joy of play.

- ◆ Divide children into groups, give each group a poem, and inspire them to "play poetry." They can bring in their own props and toys. Allow them to perform their final productions before the class.

- ◆ One teacher allows students to take turns working at her desk. The children love to "play teacher."

- ◆ I've been known to let children wear white lab coats while they did science, and a teacher I knew created purple poetry capes for reading and writing poetry. "Dress up" never goes out of style.

### 5 Children Are Aching to Talk About Death and Other Sad Goodbyes in Their Lives

I wrote "J.T. Never Will Be Ten," a poem about one of my own fifth graders who died when he was only nine years old. This poem has inspired some of the deepest writings from my students, and has helped me to realize that children are aching to talk about the mysteries of both life and death.

I call these "goodbye poems" and have come to realize that in many ways we live in a "goodbye society." Divorce is common, and in every classroom there are children adjusting to the goodbyes of parents. We are a transient society, and moving from one home to another can evoke deep feelings of pain and loss. Many children

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dren experience the death of a pet, while others grieve beloved grandparents. A larger number than I would have ever expected struggle with the death of a parent, brother, or sister. In increasing numbers, I even see poems about murder and suicide.

With younger children, I bring in a "pencil cemetery" and we write goodbye poems to our pencils. This seems to open the doors for the unexpected, deeply-felt writings that come from children's hearts. Goodbye poems have helped me to realize that children need healthy places, like poems and stories, to put their feelings of sadness, pain, and loss.

- ◆ Share goodbye stories and poems with children.
- ◆ Model the process by writing goodbye poems about your own life and sharing them with your students. Here's one of mine, entitled "Goodbye, Dear Pencil":

You were a gift from Grandma  
Before she died last year,  
Whenever I did my work,  
I felt that she was near.  
But now your life is over,  
And I cry another tear,  
Goodbye, dear pencil,  
Goodbye, Grandma dear.

- ◆ Create a pencil cemetery with younger children using styrofoam tombstones. Have children write goodbye poems to their favorite pencils.

- ◆ Give children the freedom to choose their own writing topics, and perhaps remind them that goodbye poems help the grieving process.

## 6 Something in the Poetry Knew More than I Did and Was Constantly Teaching Me

I have learned so much from my own poetry. In my own words, I found answers to the big questions in life. I learned why my dear friend, Carol, always did her homework, even though she knew she was going to die, and why Kate bragged about her home state of Texas until the students and I were ready to send her back. I understood the importance of children's questions about life, as I struggled to answer them in poems such as "Were You Ever Fat Like Me?"; "Why Can't a Girl Be the Leader of the Boys?"; "If You're Not Here, Then Where Are You?"

I finally learned a lesson that many students and teachers never realize. We do not write by ourselves; something wiser than we will ever be writes with us, so that our thoughts, our words, our opinions, and our feelings can guide and enlighten our lives. It is important for teachers to become writers so they can model the process and be in constant touch with this force.

- ◆ You don't need to know what you are going to say when you begin to write. You write to discover what is inside of you, just waiting to be said.
- ◆ Students can write to sort out thoughts, find solutions to problems,

understand feelings, and to achieve insights into their own lives.

- ◆ Again, teachers must model the process. When I don't know what to do about a problem in my life, I write a poem, and often find the answer right inside the poem.

A school year goes by so quickly. As teachers, we hold a child's hand for a brief moment, yet we plant seeds that will affect the future. There will always be stress and tests in any school, but that doesn't mean schools need clamp the adult world down on top of the world where children rightly exist. Let's spend time each day on what is truly important:

There are 1,440  
minutes in a day,  
Use some of them for poetry...  
and some of them to play.

### POETRY CREDITS

"I'm Hiding in the Bathroom" from *If You're Not Here, Please Raise Your Hand: Poems About School*, by Kalli Dakos (Aladdin, 1995); "Don't Tell Me" from *Don't Read This Book, Whatever You Do! More Poems About School*, by Kalli Dakos (Simon & Schuster, 1993); "Goodbye Dear Pencil," unpublished poem by Kalli Dakos; "1,440 Minutes," adapted from "Play" in *The Greatest Magic: Poems for Teachers*, by Kalli Dakos (Scholastic, 2000). ■

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