

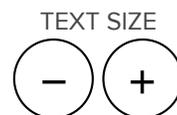
## The Power of Thinking Like a Preschooler

Adults often have trouble understanding young children’s needs and inner lives—but paying closer attention to the way they experience the world can be valuable.



Jason Lee / Reuters

**LAUREN CASSANI DAVIS**  
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What is it like to be a 4-year-old human? Trying to remember this experience with any accuracy is difficult. Memories are hazy flashes of sensory experience and emotion that fail to coalesce into something coherent: the red piped icing on a birthday cake, the sticky static of plastic wrap on mom’s dry cleaning, overwhelming waves of sadness from a Disney-movie soundtrack.

It's no wonder that at an individual level, trying to talk and relate to a small child can feel like grappling with a foreign species. It's also, perhaps, no wonder that a society of adults has trouble figuring out how best to design a preschool environment.

Erika Christakis has spent many years on the ground (literally) with children in a school setting, studying them as both educator and scientist. Previously a preschool teacher and director, she is now a child-development specialist at Yale University.

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While Christakis earned media attention last year for an email she sent to college students at Yale that unintentionally ignited debates about free speech and “safe spaces” on campuses, she has been vocal about America’s youngest students for far longer. In a [piece for \*The Atlantic\*](#) last month that was distilled from her book, *The Importance of Being Little: What Preschoolers Really Need From Grownups*, Christakis identified and analyzed what she sees as troubling trends in the American preschools today—where an increasing number of children now spend part of their time each day.

As a consequence of what she described as an “academic takeover” of early learning in America, kids, she argued, are becoming less inquisitive and engaged than kids of earlier generations, often failing to develop sophisticated language skills. But these early-education issues rarely are a result of parents and preschool teachers lacking goodwill, she said. Rather, they stem from, and perhaps in some ways symbolize, the trouble adults have in understanding children’s needs and inner lives—a deficit in the

“recognition of young children as unique people with their own ideas, their own feelings, their own thoughts and tastes and experiences.”

I spoke to Christakis about how paying closer attention to the experiences of young children might help not just little humans, but older ones, too. Below is a lightly edited and condensed transcript of our conversation.

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**Lauren Cassani Davis:** What are some of the biggest misconceptions adults have about how a preschooler thinks and feels?

**Erika Christakis:** I think we have a mismatch problem, where we both underestimate and overestimate children. I think we underestimate kids' intelligence. We often think they have short attention spans, but this is really not true if you've ever observed a child in nature who can watch something really slow that's very captivating, and can be very attentive and still for a long period of time. A child can hold a vulnerable animal or a plant with real delicacy and care. We assume that kids have short attention spans in part because we don't give them enough time to engage in something—we whisk things away very quickly. We also overestimate them pragmatically. It's quite exhausting to be a preschooler. There are lots of very rapid transitions and logistically it can be quite taxing and overtiring to be a young child.

**Davis:** Is there something about adult psychology as a whole that makes it so hard to go “deep into the mindset of a child?” You noted that young children lack “adult conceptual schemes”—like social norms that we rely on to guide our behavior and dictate what is or isn't appropriate. Is that part of it?

**Christakis:** Well, I do think children have an extraordinary ability to zero in on the truth or authenticity of something. So sometimes children can be very disarming. I remember when I was newly post-partum and a little child came up to me and put his hands on my belly and said, “Why is your tummy so fat if you don't have a baby in there?” Which was probably what my neighbors and

colleagues were thinking, too. I think children have a kind of brutal authenticity to them.

The other thing is, because we tend not to understand how profound children's thoughts are, it can be really disarming when they talk about issues related to death, to spirituality, to intense anger—even aggressive feelings, or feelings of deep love and passion and friendship.

I always think that we sometimes make a mistake, as grownups, by assuming that children are cognitively the same as adults, and yet somehow have different emotions. Personally I think it's almost the reverse. I think a young child really does think quite differently—their thinking is more concrete and less abstract. But my belief is that children actually have really similar emotional lives to adults in terms of the depth of their feelings and the types of feelings they have, the sorts of existential questions that concern them.

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**“Those kind of inquiry-based practices are really no different whether you're 4 or you're 50.”**

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**Davis:** This mismatch you described in adults' perception of young children—is this a uniquely American thing? Are any other countries or cultures where people seem to have a better ability to understand and empathize with the way small children perceive the world?

**Christakis:** I don't think it's uniquely American. That said, I think we can point to cultures where young children are living in a more child-sized world. And some of them are quite clichéd examples. I vowed that I wouldn't utter the word Finland in this conversation—but the preschoolers there do seem to be inhabiting a more child-sized world.

There are certain features of American culture that lend themselves to the

mismatch—[for one], we are a very hurried culture. But I think it would be too simplistic to suggest that this is entirely, or uniquely an American phenomenon. My friends and family in other countries report similar concerns. I think our society has changed—in the U.S. almost 75 percent of 4-year-olds are in non-family care of some kind—and our lifestyles have changed. That doesn't mean we can't be attentive to children, but it just means we have to pay attention to how to do that, how to create the [right] habitat for children.

**Davis:** You've argued that spontaneous, meaningful conversation—whether between a preschooler and a teacher, a child and their parent, or between two children—is crucial for young children's development, but high-quality conversations are hard to come by in preschools. Do you think that research suggesting that technologies like smartphones are [eroding conversation between adults](#) is relevant here?

**Christakis:** I just read a study recently showing that children playing with blocks or simple toys, what I would call open-ended toys—[that children can use] to represent things symbolically—invites higher-level language use than electronic gadgetry that might have just one function. The study showed that when parents play with kids using blocks, there's more conversation. It makes sense, because it's open-ended, more imaginative.

The cognitive process of symbolic thinking is so critical in the early years to sound cognitive development—and that's what fantasy play, imaginative play, dramatic play, are all about. And we are absolutely changing the habitat. This is something that is rapidly becoming, if not obsolete, certainly harder to support. And I think parents do have a role in that.

**Davis:** Are there any good rules of thumb for trying to have a meaningful conversation with a young child?

**Christakis:** I think there are a few good rules of thumb. The first one is to ask open-ended questions. We tend to predetermine the boundaries of a conversation with young children by commenting on something very specific. So we might approach a child who's drawing and say, "That's a nice house." Well, that's a way of closing a conversation. But if you ask questions, or you make open-ended declarative statements: "Tell me about your picture," or, "Do you think we could do it this way?"—that's a really small tweak but it's actually really significant for opening up conversation.

I also think sometimes we close off emotion, which can be such a great fuel for conversation. The classic way is to tell a child who's whining, "I'm sorry, we have to be home, we can't stay any longer at the playground." And a way you can tweak that is to say "Wouldn't it be great if we could stay at the playground? Wouldn't that be fun?" That might open up, first of all, a more pleasant conversation, but it also opens up more fantasy and more reflection on the part of the kid.

Opening up conversations and making them less adult-driven is a habit. It doesn't just come overnight, especially if a child is in a very scripted early-childhood setting at school, where there's a lot of teacher-directed talk, or if parents aren't familiar talking to their kids in that way. You can't suddenly turn on the switch and expect your child to be a great conversationalist. But it's an approach you can adopt and practice over time.

Even before asking open-ended questions, one of the most important ways to feed conversation is to actually observe children. I always try to adopt this phrase [from] a psychoanalyst who said that he approaches his patients with this idea of "no memory, no desire." I think observation in as neutral a way as we can is really key. And that means you need the time. You can't be just watching your kid judgmentally when you're rushed and tired. You have to find a time when you can just focus in a very lovingly unjudgmental way. And

I think that's another way to open up conversation, because you see things that might not be as visible.

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**“Young children learn in relationships ... And to me that's a lesson that we really shouldn't lose as adults.”**

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**Davis:** These ideas about open-ended versus closed conversation also seem analogous to the two approaches to teaching that you discuss: a direct-instruction approach, where learning is highly scripted and teacher-driven, versus a more self-directed type of learning, where the teacher plays a supporting role. Do you think the importance self-directed learning holds true of students across all ages?

**Christakis:** To be clear: It's easy to assume that there's a dichotomy between scripted education with clear goals, on the one hand, and then some kind of free-for-all. The kind of teaching I'm talking about is very intentional. But it's inquiry-driven. And I do think that is very important at all levels [of education], because there's just no limit to the number of facts we can acquire, and we need to equip young people of all ages with what I would call a sort of cognitive sequence—a cognitive approach to questions—rather than just giving them the content.

To me, that cognitive sequence in the early years is observation, questioning, exploration, reflection. It's a process you go through whether you're fooling around playing in the mud, building a fort, or experimenting with cooking. And within that sequence, skills emerge, of course—and they need to emerge. Whether it's reading skills or mathematical concepts.

Obviously in high school that's very different, because there is a content base that's very essential. If you don't know arithmetic, you can't do algebra. But I think we need to equip young people of all ages with basic tools: how to have a

conversation, how to listen to other people, how to you express yourself, how to observe and then explore and then reflect on what you've explored. Those kind of inquiry-based practices are really no different whether you're 4 or you're 50.

**Davis:** Overall, what do you think adults can learn from taking the time to think more like a preschooler? What elements of the optimal preschool experience also apply to a well-lived adult life?

**Christakis:** You're getting me to reflect on something that, bizarrely, I haven't really reflected on. I guess the primacy of relationships. Young children learn in relationships. And we know when they're securely attached [by having a strong bond with a nurturing adult], and when they have opportunities to talk and to listen, they feel better, and they learn more. And to me that's a lesson that we really shouldn't lose as adults. I think the centrality of human relationships and human connections is something that is powerful at all ages.

In addition to the centrality of relationships, I think the way that children approach the material world is so different than adults. They really use—especially pre-literate children—materials, whether it's drawing materials or building materials, as an expression of themselves. These materials become a form of communication. As adults we view materials as products, and we have a very instrumental view of making things to create a product. And when you really talk with little kids you see that they're so much more connected to their physical environment, and it's very unfiltered. I think adults need to get more in touch with that. And maybe that's where the interest in [adult] [coloring books](#) comes from. That we're always looking for some way to release this inner voice that is really, in children, quite easy to release—if we create the right kind of environment for them.



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