

Social Patterns of Children Are Changing

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Vicki Justis has seen a lot of changes throughout her 42 years of being a teacher in the childcare system of what is now the Santa Monica-Malibu Unified school district. All the teachers she works with are now licensed through the state of California, gangs were certainly never a concern, microwaves weren't an option for a full meal, and technology has grown tremendously. Another thing Vicki has noticed? The kids are growing up faster.

Some of these changes are admittedly daunting - Vicki immediately stops me when she sees me, an unfamiliar face, roaming about campus – but some of the changes are for the better. Childcare now focuses on nutrition, physical activity, and D.E.A.R. (Drop Everything And Read), which were not programs that existed or that were talked about when Vicki first started. With all these gradual changes throughout the years, one element remains constant: the fundamental essential of having profound teachers like Vicki is still as timeless as ever.

“I tell them, ‘be proud of what you do and be proud of who you are everyday,’” said Vicki. “We try to make sure that the kids feel successful in what they’re doing. You did your best. I think they’re a little overwhelmed sometimes.”

The encouragement certainly helps considering that kids in kindergarten who used to come home with finger paintings and drawings are now only coming home with more homework. Vicki cites 1957’s Sputnik as the turning point in this country for when children started to receive extra pressure to learn more and do more. It was as if America was upset that their country hadn’t created artificial satellites, so they pushed their kids harder. There is also much more for these youngsters to learn now. Back in the day, education focused primarily on penmanship. Nowadays, if all you have is a pen and paper, then you’re technologically illiterate and less likely to be successful in today’s competitive job market. Technology has also allowed the world, in many different forms, to be more accessible with sites like Google, where one can go on and find the answer right away, no reference library or pad of paper needed.

Vicki’s classroom - consisting of six mismatched computers, a tiny kitchen, a rug with a map of the United States, some plates decorated with hand prints on the wall, plenty of games and books, some tables and chairs - is quiet, all the children are outside playing. A little boy named Matthew sneaks inside and politely interrupts our conversation about his generation’s future.

“Um, Ms. Vicki?”

“Yes, Matthew.”

“There are these kids spying on me and I couldn’t even say anything and I couldn’t even do something.”

Vicki sympathetically shows her concern for the said spies and politely tells Matthew that she’s busy but that she will help him later when she’s through, and to tell Ms. Allison in the meantime. He watches me curiously and then turns his gaze back to Vicki before thanking her and retreating back outside. Vicki smiles adoringly as she watches Matthew go outside to face the world that is apparently watching him. It is clear that another aspect that hasn’t changed for Vicki is the ability for herself to grow and learn from her students

as they do from her. Vicki may have endured many changes throughout the years but her love and respect is shared mutually with all her students.

“These are the future leaders in this country,” said Vicki. “If I ever walk out of a room and say I haven’t learned something from a child, that’s the day I quit teaching because that’s the day I gave up. You can always learn something from kids.”