

Inquiring Minds Want to Know

By Diane Trautman

This past May, Newhall Elementary School conducted their annual Science Fair. My husband Allan and I once again served as judges for this exhibit, which has been lovingly organized for many years by teacher Ethel Carleton.

The students who presented to us seemed genuinely happy to participate in the fair. Some prepared elaborate displays with carefully kept journals, while others offered more basic exhibits. All projects were clearly created by the students with only minimal assistance from parents. The differences were mainly in the depth of the scientific questions posed and the degree to which each student pursued the scientific basis for the answers that were revealed in the process. Some students were obviously more curious than others, more willing to ask deeper questions.

Children are naturally inquisitive, but that tendency can be subdued or eliminated if we tell them not to ask questions or we don't encourage them to think critically and formulate appropriate questions about the world around them. This lack of curiosity was demonstrated in their projects when a student would ask simple cause and effect questions (e.g., What happens to x when I do y?) instead of posing hypotheses that can be tested to reveal the reasoning behind the answer.

We hope you had time this summer to encourage that curiosity in your children, and that you continue to do so throughout the school year. Weekends and school holidays are good times to take your children to the Museum of Science and Industry, the Los Angeles Arboretum, the Getty Museum, the Aquarium of the Pacific, or just into your own backyard. Follow the guidebook, but ask your children questions about the exhibits. Talk about the historical context in which an artist produced their works. Watch an episode of Nova and do some additional research on the Internet. Take and test soil samples in your yard, then find out which plants would work best for your garden and why.

As I've written before, I believe our teachers, by and large, do a wonderful job in our classrooms; but they're working to meet a barrage of requirements and testing deadlines and they simply don't have the time to light a fire under every student. We parents need to spark their interest in learning and fan that desire until they become inspired and self-directed.

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