Director’s Corner:  
Importance of Interdependence

As we consider life lessons from nature during our exploration of animals in the wild, a central concept is the **interdependence among organisms** within a habitat. The benefits of biodiversity and advantages of adaptation have their best effects within a community context of interdependence, particularly with careful communication. For the animal kingdom, in addition to depending on the non-living environment for some basic needs, such as water, air, etc., many organisms need other organisms to survive. For example, organisms that cannot make their own food must eat other organisms to get the energy they need to live. Within nature, food webs are one way of viewing the interdependence necessary for survival of the species, but scarcity of resources forces competition such that only some individuals benefit. In human society, we can aim to imitate the closely connected symbiotic relationships in which both species benefit and survival is strengthened for diverse individuals. For example, oxpecker birds eat the ticks that bother zebra and even eat some of the blood from the tick wounds; but, in addition to ridding the zebra of ticks, they are easily startled and so provide an early warning system for impending danger.

As parents and educators, we often prioritize support for children’s independence, particularly in American culture that emphasizes individuality. For example, at the Children’s School, “self-esteem and independence” is the goal we list first in our set of developmental objectives. Notice, however, that it is closely followed by our goal of fostering “interaction and cooperation”. As Mahatma Gandhi said, **“Interdependence is and ought to be as much the ideal of man as self-sufficiency. Man is a social being.”** Developmental psychologist Erik Erikson seconds the notion; **“Life doesn’t make any sense without interdependence. We need each other, and the sooner we learn that, the better for us all.”** Civil rights leader Martin Luther King, Jr. highlights the impact of interdependence on each individual. **“Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly. I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be. This is the interrelated structure of reality.”**

One of the keys to our success at the Children’s School is that we consistently seek “win-win” approaches wherein the children, families, students, researchers and other learners in our community can all do their best learning in ways that are mutually beneficial so that each individual can not only survive but actually thrive. In policy and practice, we aim to support our educators in being their best selves both professionally and personally. The same idea applies to family life, particularly as each new child joins the family. Naturally, our initial focus is on providing the best possible nurture for the new child, whose very survival depends on that consistent and loving care. At the same time, family members do well to consider a cooperative approach to building an interdependent nuclear family and extended circle of friends and family so that the needs of each member can simultaneously be met by the efforts of the group. Taking the apprenticeship approach that I discussed last month is very helpful in this regard because children build skills that are valuable to the group and they are motivated to contribute meaningfully when they experience the creative and constructive ways that the group can adjust to changing conditions and welcome new members. The importance of this healthy interdependence has been particularly evident in the past month as we have welcomed new children, undergraduates, and even a new teacher to the school and witnessed the seamless transitions. Thanks to the whole community for continually striving for such symbiotic connections.