Family Spotlight: Why I am Excited about the Children’s School

My name is Anna Fisher and I am the mom of Sasha (Morning 3’s). In addition to being Sasha’s mom, I am also an Assistant Professor in the Psychology Department. I am one of several researchers who conduct studies at the Children’s School. In fact, if you are a parent of a 4- or a 5-year-old, you may even remember seeing my name at the bottom of the parent letters that briefly describe the purpose of the study in which your child participated. Though my perspective on the Children’s School is admittedly unique, I’d like to share two of the many reasons why I am excited that Sasha is starting Children’s School.

First, while closely collaborating with the Children’s School since January 2006, I have come to believe that its teachers are doing a great job of promoting the development of executive function in children. Executive function includes such important processes as planning, delay of gratification, and self-regulation. Years of research show that deficits in executive functioning during the preschool years are associated with adverse outcomes, such as drug abuse and academic problems, later in life. Although the causal relationship has not been demonstrated, recent research shows that executive function is trainable, both in the lab, when a child is engaged in a series of executive function exercises and in the context of daily routines at a preschool program. I believe that Children’s School teachers are very effective in fostering development of executive functioning through gentle but consistent setting of expectations (“We are going to clean up for circle time in three minutes.”) and use of routines (“When you hear your name, you may line up to go to the Discovery area.”). I’ve been trying to promote development of executive functioning in Sasha through my parenting, and I am excited to have found a school that values and fosters this important set of skills.

Articles on Executive Function that may be of interest to you:


The second reason I am excited about enrolling Sasha is her participation in research projects. The school’s polices give parents the peace of mind that the research sessions will be brief (no longer than 20 minutes), voluntary (a child can decline to participate for any reason), and safe (all researchers are trained and have child abuse clearances; all projects have been reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board at CMU and Dr. Carver). When participating in these projects, Sasha will tackle a variety of problems, questions, and tasks that I could never dream up on my own! In studies of Dr. Siegler, Sasha may be presented with numerical reasoning problems. In studies of Dr. Klahr, Sasha may participate in scientific reasoning tasks. In my own studies, she may...
be presented with executive function tasks and relational reasoning problems. And who knows what tasks Sasha will do for research projects conducted by CMU psychology students! I often teach “Research Methods in Developmental Psychology” and my students study diverse topics, such as moral reasoning, gender roles, mental rotation, pro-social behavior, understanding of emotions, and effects of different types of praise. I find it fascinating that Sasha will be challenged with new kinds of questions (of course, only if she chooses to participate!). At the very minimum, I think it will expand the topics of our dinner conversations. However, I hope that it will do much more than that – I hope that participating in research will enrich her thinking in ways I cannot even imagine!

9-month-old Sasha participating in a heart-rate study in the laboratory of my PhD advisor, Vladimir Sloutsky, at the Ohio State University.