

**Interview at the Toy Tree**

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### **Observation 6: Interview**

#### **Case and Setting Description:**

As an interviewer, I had the pleasure of speaking with Debbie Sanders, the owner of The Toy Tree in Plano, Texas. Debbie began her career in education after a friend suggested that she become a teacher. She found the classes easy and natural and discovered her love for working with kids. As someone with learning disabilities herself, Debbie found her niche in educating children with learning disabilities, behavior degenerate disorder, and gifted and talented students.

Debbie taught for 15 years, taking time off to have five children. After leaving teaching, Debbie spent five years working at a toy store. Now a grandmother and first-time business owner, Debbie has decided to pursue a new venture instead of retiring by opening her own toy store six months ago. Debbie's toy store has a vast collection of children's toys, as well as a playroom where kids can not only try out the toys, but also indulge in free play during their visit.

#### **Interview:**

Debbie believes that play is one of the most critical things for all children, particularly younger ones. She notes that while many parents come to her store seeking toys or activities to boost their child's academic success, she believes that the best education is through play. According to Debbie, kids learn by play, and a child with a rich imagination can achieve limitless things. Jones & Reynolds (2011) suggests that for effective learning, children should participate in activities that are self-initiated and enjoyable. She supports this idea, and says, "They are learning if you're doing a puzzle, or if you're playing ball outside, there's always lessons to be learned." Debbie believes that play is often underrated and that it is crucial for a child's happiness and learning. She tries to find unique and different options tailored to the

child's interests, such as sports, games, puzzles, or art. If information is not available, Debbie draws from her own experience and suggests options that are universally enjoyable.

In her role, Debbie aims to stimulate children's thinking and encourages them to use their brains. Asking "What do you think?" lets children use syncretic thinking to solve problems for themselves (Elkind, 2008). Furthermore, Debbie strives to provide positive and supportive encouragement, especially when children feel anxious and doubtful of their abilities. She encourages children to use their own creativity in play, stating that "there's no specific way to build a castle, or to build blocks." She emphasizes positivity over negativity and reinforces children's self-expression as a mediator, showing respect for the child's intent and the content of play (Jones & Reynolds, 2011). Debbie believes that if play is not abusive or harmful, there is no right or wrong way to do it.

Debbie organizes her store by categorizing items by age and gender, but she also includes areas with mixed items. Through the intentional organization of materials based on their function, she creates an environment that encourages children to freely engage in play and exploration, making it easier for them to access and engage with materials that promote their development and creativity (Frost et al., 2012). She constantly changes things around in her store based on what works best, ensuring a dynamic and captivating environment for visiting children.

Debbie's toy store also offers a variety of hands-on activities such as blocks, a sorting game, and scooters for kids to play with. According to her, utilizing digital devices such as phones or computers for playtime does not hold the same value as playing with tangible toys and games in real-life situations. She says, "'I don't want kids on their phone, I don't want them on the computer, I want them hands on, I want them using their hands and using their brain. I don't want screens'". Debbie suggests that in modern times, many parents are preoccupied with busy

schedules and may not prioritize playtime with their children. As a result, many children struggle to engage in normal play and may resort to technology as a form of distraction or entertainment. Children who spend excessive time playing with technology such as chip-embedded toys, computers, and television have less time for interaction with tangible elements, which can impede their ability to learn from those experiences (Elkind, 2008).

While Debbie acknowledges that technology can have its benefits, she prefers natural play environments for children. Debbie describes an optimal playground environment as safe but also challenging. Safe playgrounds with appropriate measures can transform negative risks into positive gains, allowing children to benefit from physical play without major injuries (Carlson, 2011). She believes that children need to be challenged in order to learn and grow, and that overly safe environments can be limiting. Debbie would like to see features such as trees, hills, and tunnels that allow kids to climb and explore. Providing children with fewer play equipment options and more open, unstructured spaces can foster creativity and encourage vigorous, imaginative play that flows naturally (Carlson, 2011). She also mentioned her love of animals and would like to incorporate them into the playground, saying, “Children learn a lot through animals, I’d love to have a whole animal unit outside”. Children's active involvement with plants and animals can be a powerful means of learning, and they often find much enjoyment in these experiences (Elkind, 2008). Other features she would like to see include sandboxes and sand/water play areas. Using elements such as water in play facilitate the learning of labeling, classification, and ordination (Elkind, 2008). They also allow children to understand that elements can have multiple uses (Elkind, 2008).

When teaching students with behavioral issues, Debbie utilized animals in her classroom to teach valuable life lessons. She says, “We had mice that were pets, and then we had mice that

were food. Then we had snakes that we fed the mice to. It was a full circle of life”. Exploring our social world, plants, and animals allows children to ask questions and create their own learning experiences (Elkind, 2008). Debbie used to take her students outside and on field trips regularly, including visits to grocery stores where she taught them life skills like using coupons, budgeting, and making wise choices with their money. Debbie also took them to a factory where they learned about different types of work. She believes that life skills are important for all students, not just academic subjects like algebra. She states that every student is different and learns differently and that she tries to tap into each child’s learning style.

**Transferring Observations to Practice:**

My interview with Debbie was inspiring and reaffirmed my previous beliefs on children, learning, and play. Debbie’s philosophy is that children who feel good about themselves will learn and excel at their own pace. To achieve positive outcomes in the learning and development of children, it is essential to prioritize their well-being in both play and academic settings.

Debbie and I share the belief that increasing play time in schools is beneficial for children. We believe that shorter recesses, limited free-play opportunities, and increased technology use may not only negatively impact learning outcomes, but social outcomes as well. Debbie stresses the importance of interaction, verbal greetings, touch, and hands-on play in creating well-rounded, balanced individuals.

I admire her toy store, as well as her description of her past classrooms, as they provide examples of balanced environments that allow children to play and learn essential life skills. I strongly believe that more schools and care centers should adopt technology free-play, class pets, outdoor learning experiences, increased field trips, and more fulfilling play environments. Lastly,

by serving as a mediator and communicator to children and parents, Debbie prioritizes the child's success and holistic development.

## References

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