

Testing in the Real World

by Mark & Helen Hegener

Our daughter Jody, 12, passes the time while we're washing dishes or driving to town by asking us to think up words for her to spell. She insists that we give her at least two chances to get each word right before telling her the correct spelling. She often asks why words are spelled the way they are, wants us to point out words which sound alike but have different spellings, and she likes to have words that she's missed before reintroduced in later games. For the past few weeks she's asked to play this game at every opportunity, and her brothers, never very interested in orthography, are now challenging her with their increasing spelling skills.

Our youngest sons, Michael and Christopher, ages 6 and 10, often play little games such as "Can we name all fifty states?" or "Who invented the ...," or they'll try to name all of the colors of the spectrum in order. Sometimes they'll quiz us or their two older brothers, wanting to know if we can spell words like 'aluminum' or 'university,' or if we can name the dates of certain historic wars or presidential terms, or if we know whether an armadillo is a reptile or a mammal.

We suppose one could say that they're testing themselves with these little games. But they are always so eager to play these games, and they take them so seriously and spend so much time "brushing up" so that they can do better the next time around, that it's difficult for us to consider them tests in the traditional sense. To the kids, the spelling and geography games they've invented are just pleasant little challenges. It's something they enjoy doing, much like playing tag or hide and seek. And yet these games do fit the dictionary definition of a test: "an examination for determining what students have learned about a particular subject."

Tests come in many shapes and sizes, they're given for many reasons, and the way a person perceives testing is shaped by his experience with tests. Our children have never been tested in the traditional sense for one simple reason: we trust them to learn what they need to know. They're intelligent children well aware of what it takes for their parents to get along in this world. We know that they understand that this includes the basics; to read to write to spell and to do math. They take these basic skills quite seriously and each one has gone about learning them with a self-styled dedication and perseverance. They realize that mastery of these and other skills leads to more responsibility and greater independence.

They have no distaste for test taking because they've never taken a test and their learning has not been defined by the subject matter that will appear on the next test. They've discussed the (to them) odd practice of testing children to ascertain what they know and they all agree that if they were faced with such a test they'd give it their best shot but wouldn't be too concerned about the outcome. To our kids failing a test would be much like losing a game - better luck next time around and if it's really important to you you'd better practice up in the meantime!

And yet they don't ignore the need to continually strive for excellence in much of what they do. Our kids are testing themselves all the time in many different ways - testing their abilities and their limits. They hold themselves accountable for their own learning and responsible for each others' learning. They not only quiz each other, asking questions and constantly checking to see what each one knows,

but they're also continually helping each other figure things out, put pieces together, sort fact from fiction, and build on their knowledge and experience.

We've always been impressed by their recall abilities. A song or a poem that they like will be memorized after hearing it only a few times. Names of people we've met, towns we've been through, things we've seen or done - they remember it all so much more clearly and easily than we do. We cannot imagine cluttering their phenomenal little minds with dates of the reigns of English kings, or the symbols of the Periodic Table of Elements, if the only reason for knowing these facts is for passing a test of questionable merit. If someday they find a use for the information or an interest in those subjects they'll learn them quickly and much more thoroughly than we could ever hope to teach them.

Our children live in the real world, and their tests are real, not contrived to meet some arbitrary educational guidelines or standards. They test knowledge that is important to them, that is somehow immediately useful or interesting. Reading, spelling, arithmetic, designing and building a new speaker system, changing a recipe to see how it turns out, redesigning their horse's bridle to see how it changes control, endlessly practicing cart wheels and headstands for gymnastics class - these activities are like tests which they design for themselves, meaningful tests which have real significance for them.

And the more we look the more we see that our kids are just like most other kids out there. They are not super kids, we are not super parents and we do not have the super answers. We have simply found trust in ourselves over trust in test scores.