

Building a Little Library:

How One Child Harnessed the Power of Persuasion to Mobilize Her Village

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If you're the parent of an elementary schooler, there's a good chance you are hearing a lot about project-based learning this semester.

The basic concept isn't new; innovative educators have long used hands-on experiences to engage students and help them develop critical thinking and problem-solving skills. Today, there's increasing recognition that a shift toward learning-by-doing not only cultivates interest and enthusiasm, but also better outcomes, for our youngest learners.

At my daughter Etta's public elementary school in Washington, D.C., the shift means recording scientific observations after monitoring our famous panda and eaglet cams, releasing butterflies in kindergarten, hatching chicken eggs in first grade, and collecting honey from the school's garden hives in second grade. Last spring, teachers and parents taught every 7- and 8-year-old to ride a bicycle and students showed off their skills by pedaling the school's fleet of tiny bikes around our neighborhood.

Experiential learning extends well beyond the classroom, but even inside the classroom, this approach can transform seemingly mundane assignments, like "writing a persuasive letter." Last spring, directed by second-grade teachers, parents dutifully sent our children to school with stamps and envelopes.

Etta was soon delighted to find our mailbox filling with well-thought-out, hand-printed, three-point persuasive letters from friends asking her to consider more playdates. They wanted to spend more time with her, they wrote, to see where she lived, learn what kind of after-school snacks we serve and especially to explore her toy chest!

She wrote similar letters herself, expanding her social circle to kids we'd never met, and in a letter to her teacher, Ms. Rae, she lobbied (unsuccessfully) for a classroom pet.

But one night as we were tucking her into bed, she said, "Mommy, what I really want to write is a persuasive letter to ask our neighbors if we can get a Little Free Library for our block." Exhausted and out of stamps, I suggested a quick text to two neighbors across the street, both book club enthusiasts and longtime supporters of Etta and her big sister.

"Dear Neighbors," I typed with thumbs on my cell phone as Etta dictated. "What would u think if we got a little library on our block? U could put in books for grownups. I could put in kids' books ..." Within seconds, Neighbor Dwight replied: "Excellent proposal!" Neighbor John quickly followed with an offer: "Etta, I will build it for you."

Over the next few weeks, my husband and I chatted with our neighbors in the front yard. We shared some scraps from our cedar fence project. We debated where the library would get the most foot traffic, how tall it should be for easy browsing by kids, and the best solar light solution to achieve Etta's dream of helping neighbors use the library after dark.

One neighbor gathered books; another contributed paint and scored some shingles leftover from a friend's roofing project. Etta and sister Ruby picked out a nameplate and registered the library online so that it would appear on the official map.

Then one afternoon, our doorbell rang and Neighbor John delivered a beautifully crafted library resembling a tiny house with white trim, a shingled roof, and a glass door with a miniature latch. On the last day of school, Etta hosted a lemonade porch party for her friends to celebrate and stock the library. Ms. Rae stopped by over the summer to deliver a hug and book donation.

Months have now passed and we've been distracted with summer camp, vacation and back-to-school activities. But each day, our little librarian races to check the Little Library and delivers her reports on what has been checked out and what has been donated, carefully curating the balance of kids versus adult books.

In the evenings, she peeks out our front window when the solar light clicks on and calls out to us whenever anyone approaches. "I think they are going to borrow a book! I think they left a book!"

Tucking her into bed one night, she read us a book she had borrowed from the library. We talked about how much we love to read, how lucky we are to have great teachers and wonderful neighbors, and how important it is to connect what you are learning in school to your everyday life.

"You are really good at writing persuasive letters. Everyone wanted to help you," I told her. "You are powerful."

"Sometimes I get a little shy and I don't show my full emotions," she said, "but can you believe Neighbor John built that Little Library for me? It was my idea, but the library is really for everyone. That's the whole point."

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