

Building **21st** the **Century** **Child**

An instruction manual
based on respect,
self-confidence,
and health

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Published by
Open Door Publications

The 21st Century Child:
An Instruction Manual based on respect, self-confidence
and health
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Printed in the United States

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Published by
Open Door Publications
27 Carla Way
Lawrenceville, NJ 08648
www.OpenDoorPublications.com

Cover Design by
Sandy Gans
www.SandyToesCreative.com

ISBN: 978-0-9789782-6-6

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Chapter 2: The New School

Julia's first day of school was a very big day, not only for Julia, but for her children, four year old Zachary and two and a half year old Olivia, who were starting their first day at their new preschool. Their neighbor had recommended the Choice School to them, saying how happy her children had been there, and Julia had taken Zachary and Olivia to visit the school the day before. They had seemed happy enough at the time, but of course, Julia had stayed with them that day. Today they understood they were being left there alone.

Zachary, in particular, wasn't too happy about it, even though Julia had emphasized all the fun he would have at the preschool and all of the new friends that he would make. Once they arrived at the preschool she had to practically pry the four year old from her leg to leave him in his class. The teacher smiled a warm smile and introduced Zachary to the rest of the students. Zachary quickly turned his head away and tucked his chin into his shirt, hiding his face.

"Not this again," Julia thought, as Zachary did his 'pulling away' routine. This was his reaction every time he met new people or encountered a new situation. She leaned down to comfort him, hugging and kissing him.

"It will be all right," she said, hugging him close. "Mommy will be back soon. It's only for a little while." She continued to hold him as she spoke, reluctant to let go even when he began to wiggle and squirm.

Julia felt that she had tried to help Zachary be less of afraid to try new things or meet new people, but nothing seemed to work. If anything, instead of getting better as he got older,

the situation got worse, and Zachary seemed to need more coaxing and comforting with each new experience.

The teacher looked at Zachary. “Shy, are you? We’ll take care of that in no time,” she said with a warm, yet confident tone.

Julia let out a “humph!” and dropped her shoulders as she thought “good luck, we’ve tried everything.”

As Julia walked out of Zach’s room to drop off Olivia, she couldn’t help but think about the absolute confidence in the teacher’s voice as she had contemplated helping Zachary get over his shyness. Nothing Julia had tried had worked. Her heart sank as she watched from a side window as Zachary stayed in the back of the classroom, watching her through the window too.

“The first day is the hardest one,” said a voice from behind her.

Julia turned and saw a tall, slightly plump woman with long, flowing brown hair with blonde highlights standing in front of her, hand outstretched.

“Hi there, I’m Angela, the Director. I was the one who spoke to you on the phone. If I heard correctly, then that must be Zachary, and you must be Olivia,” she said with a bright smile for Olivia. She put her palm out and Olivia high-fived her. “And you must be Julia,” she said.

“Many children are scared for awhile until they get used to their new environment. However after a week or so, the children make friends and get so involved in their work and play that you wouldn’t be able to recognize them. Look over there by the teacher,” Angela said as she pointed to a

bubbly, happy, blonde child who was smiling and talking to her teacher. “Daisy’s first day was spent mostly hiding under her desk, but look at her now.”

Julia sighed and actually began to feel a little better about leaving Zachary, knowing he was in good hands.

“Let me show you to her room,” Angela said, nodding towards Olivia as they all walked over to the other side of the school. Olivia looked inside her room and as soon as Julia started to walk away, Olivia ran to her and grabbed onto her hand. Olivia would not let go of Julia’s hand. Just as she had with Zachary, Julia hugged Olivia to her, whispering words of comfort. After a few minutes of tears she was able to convince Olivia to join the other children in her class with the promise that she would see her very soon. Julia turned around and walked out the door to the sounds of Olivia crying, “Mommy, Mommy!” Julia’s heart sank once again as she pulled herself away from Olivia’s classroom.

Angela looked at Julia and said, “Remember, the first week is the hardest. It gets a lot easier and better after that. Are you ready to start this week?” Angela asked as she raised her hand in the air and held it there.

“Is she giving me a high-five, too?” Julia thought. Julia lifted her hand to give a half hearted high-five. When her hand connected with Angela’s and their eyes met, Julia felt a burst of energy and hope. She tried not to smile, but in the end, she did.

“You have to smile when you get a high-five. Try it today and you’ll see. Have a great day. See you later. Your precious gifts will be treated like diamonds here,” Angela said.

The New School

Julia felt reassured and started thinking about the next part of her day. Her sadness turned to excitement as she remembered that her children weren't the only ones starting at a new school that day. Julia had been an elementary school teacher for only one year before she had had Zachary. She and her husband had decided she would take about a year off to spend time with Zachary after he was born, and before she had been ready to return to teaching she'd become pregnant with Olivia. It had been four years now since her first year as a classroom teacher. She couldn't wait to teach her new third grade class. She knew she'd been lucky to find this job; a teacher had suddenly developed health problems and had decided to retire, even though school had already been in session. They had needed someone who could quickly step in and work the rest of the year. When she got the phone call, she had jumped for joy at the opportunity.

As Julia pulled into the staff parking lot an hour before the school bell was scheduled to ring, she pictured the classroom she had taught in four years before: the Thanksgiving turkey pictures, traced with the outline of the children's hands that had hung in the classroom, the children singing excitedly as they learned holiday songs for the winter festival, the hugs that she had received from her students on the last day before summer break.

Julia walked into the school and introduced herself to the secretary and principal who greeted her with a smile. Mr. Michaels had been the principal of Werner Elementary for the last seven years. Julia's impression was that he was very professional. Julia was glad to be working with him. She knew her teaching skills were a little rusty and hoped that under his leadership she would learn. She was determined to handle any situation that arose.

Her hour of prep time passed quickly and soon her new students were trickling into the classroom as their school buses pulled up. When the bell rang, Julia said, "Good morning class, my name is Mrs. Kennedy." The children in unison said, "Good morning Mrs. Kennedy." "Today *is* a good day," thought Julia as she opened up her lesson plan book.

At lunchtime Julia headed to the staff lounge to introduce herself to the other teachers. It was comfortable and after several years as a stay-at-home mom she was looking forward to spending some time each day with other adults, particularly other teachers who obviously must have the same passion she did for working with children. Two of the senior teachers sat next to each other and talked about everything but their students and school. Julia was surprised. She was so excited about teaching and wanted to talk about her lesson plans and tell the other teachers about the great ideas she had for some fun, new activities.

Julia also wanted to find out who had been Danny's teacher last year. Obviously, being new, Julia expected that some of the students would test her. She'd been prepared for that, but after only a few hours in class, Danny was already displaying particularly inappropriate behavior. He talked back every time she asked the class to do something and he harassed the other students.

"He's completely wild and undisciplined," Julia thought. "Is it just to me, or did he act this way last year too?"

Danny had thrown something at one child, pushed another, and at one point had actually gotten up and wandered down the hall while she was busy with students in the reading circle. He'd moved so quietly she wouldn't have noticed he

was gone if it wasn't for one of the students calling out, "Mrs. Kennedy, Danny's leaving the room again." From that comment she had an idea that this type of behavior was pretty common for Danny. The day was only half over and Julia already felt exhausted from dealing with him. She didn't remember having any children like Danny in her classroom during her first year of teaching, she told the other teachers in the lounge.

"Oh, that's not a big deal. He can be tamed. I had his older brother last year. They both have issues. He just needs some medication and he'll be fine. I hope you have an easier time convincing the parents to give him medication now that his older brother is already on it," said a teacher.

"Well at least that pair talks! This year I have one child who's so afraid of everything she won't participate at all in class, or even talk with the other children at recess," another teacher said. "If I ask her a question she looks away from me. She won't even make eye contact. Every time I try to talk with her, she just tucks her head in her shoulders and acts like she can't hear me. I don't know. I think she's got a screw loose."

The other teachers laughed, but Julia immediately thought of Zachary.

"Wow, that's kind of harsh, it just sounds like he's a little shy," Julia thought to herself, wondering if over at the preschool Zachary's teacher was saying something similar about her child. Julia continued to listen and because she was sure the older teachers had more experience than she did, she didn't offer an opinion.

“Oh yeah! I have a little boy in my class,” the other third grade teacher chimed in. “He whines at the drop of a dime about anything. If he can’t do something or he can’t solve a problem the first time, he starts to cry. I’ve tried to help him, ask him what it is he doesn’t understand and try to explain things to him again, but it never does any good. He never gets any better. The next time he is the least bit frustrated he just cries and whines,” she stated.

Julie could hear the frustration in the teacher’s voice. “He’s got issues, but I don’t know how to help him,” she continued. “Sometimes I think maybe all he needs is a good spanking. When I was growing up if I used to cry and whine like that my mother would say, ‘you either stop crying or I’m going to give you something to cry about.’ It seems like I spend ninety percent of my time in the classroom helping him, and the other children get the ten percent that’s left. Maybe he’s ADHD, and a little Ritalin will take care of him. I’m going to schedule a parent conference and suggest it to his parents.”

“I’m glad I’m retiring in a few years,” added the first teacher. “Kids are just different today; so many of them have these problems. It seems like the only way to deal with it is to put them all on medication, but half the time you can’t convince the parents there’s an issue.”

Julia was upset by what she was hearing; if these older, more experienced teachers were frustrated, how was she ever going to help the children in her classroom?

Julia headed back to her class after lunch, pondering what she had heard.

“I don’t get it, I really don’t get it. I thought with all their experience they’d have some good suggestions on how I

can help Danny, but they don't have any better ideas. Is it the parents' fault? The children's fault? The teachers' fault? Whose fault is it?" Julia wondered.

At that moment, the doorway filled with excited smiles as all of her children rushed back into the classroom after lunch and recess. She opened the blinds and three of them, including Danny, rushed over and ran their hands through the light, smiling and giggling at the shadows they made. Julia looked at them, including Danny, and saw the happiness and purity that she felt sure the older teachers had forgotten about in their jaded discussion of "issues" and medication.

As she watched the beams of light bounce off the children, she came to a realization. "I can't blame the light for being too bright. It is what it is. However I can be in control by opening or closing the blinds. I can't blame the children for being children. I can't expect them to change by themselves. They are just a product of their environment. I, as the teacher, need to change so I can have some power to help them."

She looked at her students and said, "I'm so glad you all had a great lunch. Now we're going to talk about nouns." She pushed her troubling discussion with the other teachers to the back of her mind and made a decision to figure out a way to help Danny and the other students with similar problems.

A week later, Julia was still having problems with Danny. He continued to disrupt class, and he and two other children, each with their own set of issues, seemed to take up all of her time and energy every day, leaving little left over for the rest of the classroom.

Julia continued thinking about her students as she pulled into a spot at the Choice School and walked in to pick up her own two beautiful children. As she walked into Zachary's room, she was pleasantly surprised. Zachary was playing a circle game with the entire group, including the teacher. This was a complete change from his behavior on his first day of preschool. Zachary saw her and smiled. He ran up to her, saying, "Mommy, Mommy, I had such a fun day. I've missed you. Today we learned about math, about birds, and we learned about playing soccer and helping your team. I scored a goal in team class!"

Julia was taken back. "Team class? What do you do there?"

Zachary smiled at her and said, "We pick up our friends if they fall down."

Julia was slightly confused. "Okay we'll talk about that a little later. Let's go get Olivia." She walked to the other room and picked up Olivia.

Her two year old also had a smile on her face and yelled "Mommy!"

Julia said, "I was thinking of you all day, let's get home."

Julia made chicken and rice with peas and carrots for dinner. Olivia was very excited at the table as she started to yell, "Yes Ma'am! Yes Ma'am!" to everything Julia told her to do. Julia asked where she learned to say "ma'am," and Zachary told her that in Respect Class they learned to always use "ma'am" or 'sir."

"Respect class? Team class? This school is something else," she thought. During dinner, Olivia didn't want to eat her peas and carrots. It was a running battle that Julia had

almost every night. Olivia would refuse to eat some portion of her dinner and Julia would alternately coax, plead and threaten a variety of punishments if she didn't eat. Julia usually ended the meal exhausted, and half the time Olivia had not eaten most of her dinner.

Tonight, however was different. Before Julia could raise her voice, Zachary raised his index finger right at Olivia's face, stared her straight in her eyes and said, "That's a *one!*" in a firm voice. Olivia looked at her brother, stopped crying instantly and slowly brought her fork to her mouth, filled with the hated peas and carrots.

Julia was floored! Her shy little boy had just displayed such confidence and actually had his sister stop crying and gotten her to begin to eat her dinner. "What is going on in that school?" she pondered. "I need to see this for myself."

Julia was determined to find out what her children were learning at the Choice School. She didn't know exactly what it was, but she knew it was working. She thought about Danny and the other children in her classroom. She hoped their system could work there, too. The next day, she decided she would find out how.



Life Skills Toolbox

Food for Thought

- When you are feeling sad or blue, give someone a high-five. It is hard for a person not to smile when either giving or receiving a high-five.
- Some people forget their commitments to help others over time. Don't forget who you are and what you mean to your children.
- It is easy to blame the children, parents, or teachers for their behaviors. It is harder to look past that so you can help them.
- Children will amaze you if you give them the opportunity.