



“Why don’t you tell the other kids?”

I was walking to preschool with my four-year-old son, Caleb, in late March when he turned to me and asked, “How do leaves get back on trees?” I responded, “What do you think?”

Caleb: “I don’t know.”

Silence

Me: “Do you have any ideas?”

Caleb: “Maybe people come around and find them on the ground and pick them up and put them back on the trees.”

Me: “That’s an interesting theory. Do you know what a theory is?”

Caleb: “No.”

Me: “It’s an idea you have about how to make sense of things you don’t understand.”

Silence

Me: “Why don’t you tell the other kids in your class your theory and see what they think.”

Silence

Me: “Have you ever seen anyone do this?”

Caleb: “No.”

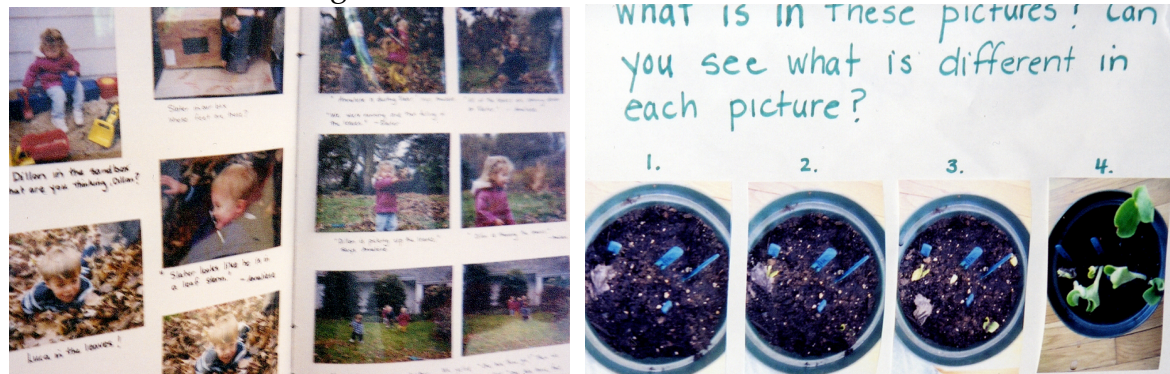
Me: “So that’s more information for your theory.”

Silence

Caleb: “I don’t think kids could do it because they’re not big enough...well maybe some teenagers could.”

We arrived at Caleb's classroom and I mentioned our conversation to his teacher, Ellen, who asked Caleb to share his theory with the class. After hearing Caleb's ideas, his classmate Camila pointed out that even grownups couldn't reach the high branches on trees. Someone probably used a cherry-picker truck to put the leaves back on the branches. Taigue suggested that leaves grow from buds, and Philip said buds grow from inside the branch. The children suggested an experiment: Get branches, put dirt on them, then put leaf seeds on them and see if buds grow. They collected branches on the playground, but the next day Ellen said she had looked everywhere, but couldn't find any leaf seeds. The children looked at the branches and a new question came up: "If the branch is broken from the tree, can it still grow?" A new experiment began. Branches were placed in different situations. To determine whether the branches were growing, the children decided to measure them with plastic links. Jake suggested taking a photograph of the branch with buds to remember what it looked like at the beginning of the experiment.

The branch with the buds grew while the others did not. Though the buds opened, no leaves came out. "Strings with little green flowers at the end" grew instead. Then the "strings" died and little green leaves started to grow. After the experiment, Ellen asked the children what they had learned so far. Caleb said, "I learned that leaves come from buds. They grow from inside the branch, but I don't know how. I also learned that if you put a branch from the ground in water, it won't grow. Taking pictures is good so you can see how the buds change."



Since my encounter with Reggio, I have changed the way I interact with children. I don't accept an initial "I don't know." I allow for silence. I wait more. I encourage children to share their ideas with other children, and refer them to other children to find things out. I try to understand and explore their world view for longer, rather than lead them (even if ever-so-gently) to another one. I value whimsy and fantasy along with science in the development of their theories. I am more comfortable with conflicting thoughts and ideas, and consider us all intellectuals learning from and with one another. And I am a better listener, but will always need to work on improving that quality.

Later that same March day, Caleb and I were walking to the park and he noticed some buds on the trees. "Mom—look at that, I see buds." Me: "That's great. More information. Why don't you tell the other kids?"

Mara Krechevsky (with many thanks to teacher Ellen Goldberg for her careful and sensitive listening, and priceless documentation)