Mission and Point of View

The Child Development Institute (CDI) was established in 1987 by a dedicated group of faculty. It functions as an outreach arm of Sarah Lawrence College to promote a developmentally informed view of children, childhood, and education and also to act as an internal resource on campus. CDI’s mission is accomplished by:

1. representing and promoting our views on child development and progressive education to the world beyond the College;
2. providing meaningful educational experience, support, and intellectual challenges to educators and child development professionals locally and nationally;
3. serving the campus community by providing co-curricular programming, offering research opportunities for students, and serving as a resource for and participant in campus-wide conversations about issues such as historic and changing ideas about educational pedagogy; the role of experiential learning in education; and assessment methodologies able to capture both qualitative and quantitative aspects of learning.

In the past year, we continued to build our capacity for developing programs that directly serve both the campus and the community. We also worked to extend our outreach beyond the Westchester/NYC area, serving as a resource for parents, educators, and other professionals across the country. Our contribution to the understanding of crucial issues in child development and education has continued through small scale research studies and capacity-building efforts that expand our reach. We have also successfully developed projects that engage Sarah Lawrence students in community-based research and service, and we have increased Sarah Lawrence’s visibility by providing material for the Web site, for InTouch and the Sarah Lawrence magazine, and for the local press. Regularly-scheduled planning retreats have helped the CDI group to set priorities; to explore and benefit from each other’s thinking, work and ideas; and to move forward with intentionality.

In the perspective of progressive education with which we identify, the child is viewed as an individual in the social context, actively engaged in constructing knowledge through interactions with other people and the physical environment. We believe that the child’s educational experience should encompass social, emotional, and imaginative aspects of life in concert with intellectual development. We emphasize that the individual child, as well as groups of children, should always be considered in the context of their environments—family, neighborhood, school, and culture. Further, we are concerned that schools and other institutions be developed as communities that attend to the interests and needs of children from diverse backgrounds.

Who We Are

We are currently a working group of seven: director, coordinator, faculty advisory group (four psychology faculty), and chairperson of the CDI Professional Advisory Board. The four faculty members are also directors of programs: the Empowering Teachers program under CDI, the Early Childhood Center (ECC), the Art of Teaching graduate program, and the Child Development graduate program. The director is also a faculty member in the Health Advocacy graduate program at the college. We have two consultants who generously offer their expertise to CDI, along with an advisory board, which is chaired by Abigail Angell Canfield and made up of professionals in education, social work, developmental psychology, media, and advocacy, as well as others with a strong interest in children and child development. As of November 2010, the Institute will function without a director.
Web Site

Our Web site (www.sarahlawrence.edu/cdi) is updated regularly. It includes notice of upcoming events, descriptions of ongoing programs, and related links and resource materials. We continue to increase the usefulness of the site and make it more interactive.

Public Events

A series of public events sponsored by CDI each year brings our College community together with colleagues, experts, community partners, students at other institutions of higher education, and the public at large for lively presentations and discussions on a range of topics germane to children and childhood. These events help the campus remain connected to existing community partners of all kinds, and also to reach out to new constituencies with whom the College can fruitfully interface and collaborate.

The Longfellow Lecture

The Longfellow Lecture is an annual event, initiated in the first year of CDI (1987) and funded by an endowment established by friends and family of Cynthia Longfellow (SLC ’72). The 2010 lecture, “The Way I See It: A Personal Look at Autism and Asperger’s,” was presented by Temple Grandin on September 23, 2010 to a full house in Reisinger Auditorium and (via a live Webcast) to overflow crowds elsewhere on campus and beyond. Dr. Grandin also held two seminars for a total of approximately 80 faculty members, staff, and students during the day—one on autism and education and another on the science of animal handling.

The Thomas H. Wright Lecture

In 1996, the Leon Lowenstein Foundation gave us a grant to launch a fund in child development honoring Thomas H. Wright, former member of the Sarah Lawrence College Board of Trustees. The Lowenstein Foundation provided additional funds in subsequent years. Following consultation, the decision was made to use the income from the fund to establish an annual lecture, the Thomas H. Wright Lecture. Since 1997, the lecture has been the keynote of the Empowering Teachers Summer Institute. This year we varied the format and presented a panel discussion entitled “When Parents, Educators, and Clinicians Collaborate: Classrooms for All Learners.” Our panelists were Stephanie Petrillo Gould, Maggie Hoffman, and Cassandra Hyacinthe, respectively, a school psychologist, parent of children with special needs, and school principal. Together with Jan Drucker, the moderator, they explored how parents, educators, and clinicians face challenges together to create classrooms that accommodate all learners. We had a modest but engaged audience in Heimbold, including Empowering Teachers participants, SLC faculty, ECC teachers, professional advisory board members, and others from the community.

Special Events

Leading up to the Longfellow Lecture by Temple Grandin, CDI co-sponsored a series of autism-related events with the Health, Science, and Society Group during the spring of 2010. These included Peter Bearman of Columbia University discussing the epidemiology of autism in a talk titled “Fact or Artifact: Understanding the Increased Prevalence of Autism” and Trevor Pinch of Cornell University talking about “Expertise, Parenting, and Risk: Autism and Vaccine Controversies.”
CDI Professional Development Programs

Professional development programs are a core commitment for CDI. These programs open up our campus to working professionals in a variety of fields; provide meaningful educational experiences for participants; keep the Institute’s own thinking and practice energetic and informed; and serve as laboratories for exploring ideas.

Empowering Teachers Program
Jan Drucker, Director

The Empowering Teachers program was established in 1989 as a forum for professional development and support for teachers, administrators, and other professionals working with children in early childhood, elementary, and middle school settings. For one week each July, we hold a Summer Institute centered on a current educational topic. Sarah Lawrence faculty and distinguished guest presenters facilitate the exploration of each year’s central theme. The Summer Institute typically opens with a keynote address, the Thomas H. Wright Lecture. The program has served as a resource and network for more than 300 beginning and experienced professionals from school districts in Westchester and adjacent counties in New York, Connecticut, and New Jersey, as well as regions as far flung as Florida, Georgia, Michigan, California, Texas, Maine, and Venezuela. Participants who complete the program receive a letter of attendance for 30 contact hours for which public school districts traditionally offer professional development credit.

The 2010 Empowering Teachers Summer Institute was held July 12-16 and attended by 25 participants. We had a mix of teachers and administrators who work with children from infancy through middle childhood. Our focus for Empowering Teachers was the classroom community, particularly the diversity that enters the classroom from the larger world, families, and individual developmental differences. Under the theme of “Making the Classroom a Community for Everyone: Nature and the Arts Help Pave the Way,” we looked through a variety of lenses at issues of the environment, the arts, and inclusion in the classroom. The participants’ evaluations of the entire Summer Institute were again extremely positive.

Starting in the summer of 2008, we increased the nominal fee charged to participants to $150 per year to help offset a fraction of the program costs. We offer financial assistance when needed, and we encourage participants to explore funding options that may be available through their employers. The bulk of the Empowering Teachers program continues to be funded through income from the Thomas H. Wright Fund (including the Wright Lecture and other faculty expenses), as well as through CDI endowment funds generously supplemented by donations from Mariela Cisneros (in 2003) and Mary Lynn Bianco (via The Marcled Foundation in 2006).

Play’s the Thing: Facilitating Play for Young Children
Barbara Schecter and Rachel Grob

The Facilitating Play program was established in 2008 as an outgrowth of our strong interest in promoting and strengthening children’s play. With start-up funding from Community Playthngs, this week-long program has now served a total of nearly 75 professionals who are engaged with children’s play, including early childhood teachers, social workers, therapists, children’s museum educators, playground developers, parks department personnel, and our own graduate students in the Art of Teaching and Child Development programs.
The 2010 Facilitating Play program ran the week of June 14-18 and brought together 21 participants and diverse faculty from CDI and other partner institutions and agencies. The curriculum focused on a broad range of issues, including the developmental importance of play; observation and documentation of children’s play; the role of environment in facilitating play; therapeutic uses of play; play advocacy; and cross-cultural perspectives on play—all of which was well received by the participants.

Unlike the Empowering Teachers program, Facilitating Play is primarily funded through registration fees. As a result, the program is more expensive to attend. We encourage participants to seek funding through their employers. However, in the current economic climate, the full fee of $750 has proved challenging for participants and employers alike. The grant from Community Playthings allowed us to extend significant financial assistance during the first three years, and we are now exploring new funding and financial models to sustain the program moving forward.

The Learning Child Series

The Learning Child Series, which is produced for public television by Jonathan Diamond Associates in association with the Sarah Lawrence College Child Development Institute, is one of CDI’s most successful outreach tools. All four of the films continue to reach the general public, and they have aired on more than 150 stations across the United States, with re-broadcasting and DVD sales expanding that reach. The documentaries are also powerful tools for communicating CDI’s work in a broad range of public venues. The visual display of children interacting in educational and home environments sends a powerful message about how children learn, creates an immediate shared experience in the room, and stimulates a meaningful dialogue about educational, parenting, and program-design issues. Our efforts to reach educators directly have had positive outcomes, and we continue to expand our outreach in this area through the Workshop and Speakers Bureau and through conference presentations (see below).

When Learning Comes Naturally, the fourth film in The Learning Child Series, began airing on public television stations nationally in September 2009, was highlighted in honor of Earth Day in April 2010, and continues to be broadcast around the country. Well-attended premieres for the film, which included spirited panel discussions, were held in September and October 2009 at Sarah Lawrence College and in three venues in California (the California Academy of Sciences, the David Brower Center, and the Katherine Delmar Burke School). Since its premiere, CDI has used When Learning Comes Naturally for outreach and workshop events in a number of local and national venues. Like its companions, this documentary supports parents and educators in engaging children to become motivated and thoughtful lifelong learners. When Learning Comes Naturally, along with the written guide produced by CDI for parents and teachers, offers a critical tool for raising awareness about the importance of connecting young people to their environment and a substantive resource for parents and educators who live and work directly with children.

Descriptions and clips of the documentaries appear on our Web site and on the producer’s Web site (www.thelearningchildseries.org), which also contains ordering information.
Outreach and Collaborative Projects

In accordance with our mission, CDI pursues a range of outreach initiatives and collaborative projects. These include:

Workshop and Speakers Bureau

During 2009-2010, CDI formally launched a Workshop and Speakers Bureau and enlisted the expertise of the ECC teachers to expand our capacity to reach beyond the campus community to connect directly with groups committed to facilitating lifelong learning. Funding from the Marilyn M. Simpson Charitable Trust, the Wallace Global Fund, and a number of donors supported the Bureau’s launch. Our programs are designed for educators, school administrators, children’s librarians, parents, community coalitions, and others who are engaged in the complicated, rewarding process of promoting children’s creativity and healthy development. We address a range of topics and issues around children, childhood, and education, including but not limited to play, early literacy, ethics, and children and nature. Many – though by no means all – of our programs are designed to explore the themes embedded in The Learning Child documentaries. Showing these films creates an immediate shared experience in the room, which our expert speakers then build on in a facilitated dialogue. We envision this as a way of reaching a wider audience in the community and of meeting the increasing number of requests for workshops, speaking engagements, and partnership that greater visibility has brought to CDI’s door. If it continues to grow, it can also be a mechanism for giving graduate students valuable experience as members of the Workshop and Speakers Bureau, as well as for connecting in a sustained way with alumni who now work in education, child development, or related fields.

During 2009-2010, we worked with the following groups:

- Stepping Stones Museum for Children (Norwalk, CT): In October 2009, we led a discussion about the importance of play for the Parents Zone program.
- Brooklyn Children’s Museum (Brooklyn, NY): In October 2009, we facilitated a workshop about observing children at play for museum staff and interns.
- Pembroke Town Library (Pembroke, NH): In January 2010, we presented a screening of When Learning Comes Naturally and facilitated a discussion with a small group of formal and informal educators in New Hampshire.
- Keep Rockland Beautiful (Rockland County, NY): In March 2010, we presented When Learning Comes Naturally at the 2nd Annual School-to-School Symposium on Environmental Education for approximately 100 teachers, parents, administrators, and other community and health professionals connected to schools in Rockland County.
- In Defense of Childhood: Play and Active Learning in Urban Schools (New York, NY): In March 2010, we were invited to present a screening of When Learning Comes Naturally and facilitate a panel discussion as part of the closing session at this conference for approximately 400 educators at The City College of New York.
- The Children’s School (Stamford, CT): In April 2010, we presented a workshop and screening of When a Child Pretends for 25 early childhood teachers as part of an annual series of lectures and workshops that The Children’s School sponsors for the Connecticut Association of Independent Schools and the Southern Fairfield Association for the Education of Young Children.
- North Rockland High School (Thiells, NY): In May 2010, we screened *When Learning Comes Naturally* and facilitated discussions with two sections of a high school child development course.

**Participation in Community Groups**

Members of CDI regularly attend meetings and contribute to the following community organizations, among others:

- Alliance for Childhood
- Child Care Council of Westchester
- Environmental Consortium of Hudson Valley Colleges and Universities (including the PreK-12 task force)
- North American Association for Environmental Education (NAAEE)
- New York Coalition for Play (Steering Committee and Membership Groups)
- OMEP-USNC (U.S. chapter of the World Organization for Early Childhood Education)
- The Teacher Institute of Lower Westchester (formerly B.E.P.T. Teacher Center)
- Westchester Association for the Education of Young Children
- Westchester Children’s Association
- Westchester Community College’s Early Childhood Curriculum Advisory Board
- Westchester Library System
- U.S. Play Coalition

On campus, CDI has had an active presence on committees including the Sustainability Committee, the Health, Science, and Society Group, the “Living and Learning” cornerstone group connected with the College-wide strategic planning process, and the Advisory Board for Service Learning and Community Partnerships.

**Service Learning and Community Partnership Initiatives**

In 2009-2010, CDI strengthened some of its key community partnerships so that the knowledge and experience gained at Sarah Lawrence over the decades could be synergistically invested and augmented off our campus — with the involvement of faculty and students — as well as on it. Specifically, we launched two new projects, both of which are off to a healthy start as of the writing of this report. Sarah Lawrence undergraduate and graduate students participated enthusiastically in each of them.

- **Pilot research about public perceptions of play.** Building on the Kindergarten Research Project carried out by a group of CDI faculty between 2006 and 2008 with funding from the Alliance for Childhood, the Institute initiated a new study (in collaboration with our partner at Yale University) about public perceptions of play. Specifically, we are investigating what these perceptions are; how they connect to familiar ideas and images (e.g., play as recreation, play as trivial, play as learning); and how messages about the importance of play can be developed and honed based on these public perceptions for maximal policy impact. This research was initiated, along with evaluation-related work we had been asked to undertake, at the inaugural event of the “Ultimate Block Party” initiative. This event, which took place in Central Park in October 2010, was itself designed to emphasize the importance of play to parents, policymakers and the general public. With a little bit of start-up funding, we trained a group of 24
students (18 of them from Sarah Lawrence) to do short interviews with parents at the Block Party. The data thus collected (approximately 250 interviews in total) will assist Block Party organizers with an important element of their initiative, and it allowed us to gather pilot data we can use to apply for substantial research funding on this important topic. The principal investigators on this project participated in a National Science Foundation debriefing on the Ultimate Block Party initiative immediately after the inaugural event.

- **Pop-up adventure playground initiative for Sarah Lawrence and Yonkers.** In September 2010, again with pilot funding from grants and donations, CDI formed a partnership with Groundwork Hudson Valley and with consultants from the New York Coalition for Play to launch a “pop-up adventure playground” initiative in Yonkers. This initiative provided an optimal vehicle for introducing elements of the internationally-recognized adventure playground model – and the playwork approach to facilitating play that accompanies it – right here in our home community. The flexible, temporary playspace created at Yonkers Riverfest on September 11th was built largely with recycled material. Ten Sarah Lawrence College students received training in the playwork model, staffed the event all day, and joined a debriefing session in the evening. Partnerships and experience gained through this initiative, which the Institute hopes to continue, will feed back into the curriculum and recruitment for our annual Facilitating Play program; allow us to continually deepen the practice-based learning element of the College’s own educational pedagogy; and give us the opportunity to creatively extend existing campus/community partnerships in new ways.

**Research and Publications**

Research projects and publications are another key tool for fulfilling CDI’s mission.

**Occasional Papers**

In 1998, CDI began a series of Occasional Papers, some written by members of our group and others by speakers at our events or other invitees. As part of our efforts to increase outreach and build our Web site as a resource for professionals and parents, we have now made full-text versions of the papers available online. Limited supplies of the printed papers are still available, and, prior to our conversion, we sold well over 1,500 copies. Several of the papers are also listed, with abstracts, in the ERIC database.

**Current Research Projects**

See above text regarding pilot research on perceptions of play.

**Forthcoming and Recent Publications**


Conference and Festival Presentations


- Environmental Film Festival in the Nation’s Capital 2010: Screening of When Learning Comes Naturally in conjunction with another film as part of the annual festival in Washington, D.C.

- Citywide Infant/Toddler Annual Conference 2010 at the City University of New York: “Is My Healthy Child Sick? The Impact of Newborn Screening and Other Forms of Risk Assessment on Early Parenting.”


Publicity and Awards

- The cover story, “Adventures in Tree Land,” by David Hollander (MFA ’97), in the Spring 2010 Sarah Lawrence magazine was inspired by the East Coast premiere, at Sarah Lawrence, of the film When Learning Comes Naturally.

- CDI’s Workshop and Speakers Bureau was profiled in an article titled “Workshop and Speakers Bureau Takes Child Development Institute to the Community” in the Summer 2010 issue of InTouch.
• Sara Wilford was honored as an Early Childhood Champion at The Guidance Center’s benefit gala in June 2010.

• Rachel Grob appeared as a guest on “Nora’s Neighbors,” a local radio program, in July 2010.

• In an article titled “Kids Love Pop-Up Playground at Riverfest,” Yonkers Rising reports on the Riverfest pop-up adventure playground project (September 24, 2010 issue).

**Fundraising and Finances**

As of the most recent available information, CDI had a total endowment of approximately $1,400,000. This total is comprised of six endowment funds. The Marx Challenge and the Canfield Fund provide income for the operating budget. The Wright Fund and the Longfellow Fund provide income for two lecture programs. The Cisneros Fund supports the Empowering Teachers program. A final endowment fund (anonymous) provides for special projects. Approximately 83 percent of the CDI budget is covered by endowment income.

During this year, CDI applied for a range of small grants to support its new Workshop and Speakers Bureau. We are very grateful to have successfully obtained funding (in some cases with assistance from SLC’s Director of Foundation, Government, and Corporate Relations) from two foundations, a corporate sponsor, and a number of donors enthusiastic about the Institute’s mission, work, and vision for the future.