

The Exquisite Machine

Walt Askew

December 17, 2023

“I’m worried he isn’t really learning anything.” The couple paced back and forth on the sidewalk, their stroller pacing with them, waiting for the bus.

“What do you mean?” she asked, exhausted to be having this conversation again. “He’s figuring out colors, shapes. Learning a few words. He’s just where he should be developmentally.”

“But that’s the the thing — is he really learning? Like, actually learning?” He kept pacing, his arms bouncing up and down like a conductor’s. “I feel like I should be going over things at a whiteboard with him. Like, actually doing lessons. Powerpoints? Really teaching.”

“He’s two. He is two and a half years old. This is how two year olds learn. Repitition, copying, mimicking. It’s just how they learn at that age.”

“But that’s just it! He’s just copying us. Is he really learning anything? Does he understand anything he’s saying? Or is he just figuring out how to copy us and use the right word at the right time and copy us correctly? Like, he knows he’s supposed to point at the dog and say ‘dog,’“ He paused his pacing for the first time, pointing at a fire hydrant. “Because he’s seen us do that a thousand times, but does he, like, really get what a dog is? Or is he just really good at mimicking us?”