

Tips for Parents by Susie Kohl

A Loving Embrace of the Arts

IN “ROAR OF THE TIGER MOM,” Michaela Jarvis’s insightful article in the May issue of *Diablo* magazine, the author, editor, and long-time Meher Schools mom explores Amy Chua’s controversial memoir, *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother*, and the forceful parenting tactics she used to pressure her two daughters to become musical prodigies (no play dates, sometimes no dinner until a piece was mastered). Michaela’s article is available online (www.diablog.com). Chua reports her extreme methods with humor, but her book has ignited a hailstorm of controversy.

Questions about the value of a child becoming proficient at a musical instrument are common. The Meher Schools has always emphasized immersing children joyfully in the arts from a young age, and Michaela’s article contrasts our school’s approach with highly pressured approaches to the broad spectrum of education. In a recent conversation about music, Michaela told me that her third-grade daughter, Annikka, “feels vitally involved in creating music at school.” She says that chorus director Terry Hogan Johnson doesn’t tell children they have to learn a song and proceed to drill them in it. She asks children their ideas about fresh material and collaborates with them on filling their music with love and vitality. Children practice their material, but in a loving atmosphere.

On May 24, Annikka and many members of our Children’s Chorus traveled to San Francisco to sing for several hundred low-income children from the city’s Mission District. That culminated a year of performing in many venues for a variety of audiences, including the elderly. Beaming photos of Annikka and other chorus members singing seem to reveal their inner discovery that they can make people happy through music.

Amy Chua decided participating in plays would distract her children from music practice. At The Meher Schools we invite children to act out stories and little plays beginning in preschool. These experiences offer delightful lessons in cooperation. This year one of the classes worked on writing a play about friendly pirates, and they love practicing for their end-of-the-year party. Fifth graders culminate their years at school by working together to present an elaborate theatrical production.

The class of 2011 will present *Alice in Wonderland*. Drama teacher and director JanLee Marshall has delighted in watching the group awaken to the new possibilities drama provides during the intense process of preparing to perform. She says, “This is a class project, and they begin to appreciate strengths in their classmates—qualities they always knew were there. They hadn’t seen those talents brought out before, and it’s fun and exciting. There’s a lot of work and self-discipline involved, and a light goes on inside them when they see that all of their practice is paying off. They start to say, ‘That was a good rehearsal.’”

The spirit of embracing the arts lovingly permeates every class at The Meher Schools. It’s more difficult for parents like Amy Chua who have to decide in isolation how to involve their children in the arts. Practice does make perfect, but Chua admits that she was humbled when her daughter Lulu came to hate the violin. Perhaps the most important foundation for a parent or teacher is playing the role of a co-appreciator of art forms by making them a frequent topic of conversation.

We also need to enthusiastically note a child’s pleasure in painting a picture, his sense of accomplishment at learning a song, her excitement of being part of the group effort of a play. The arts often require self-discipline, but essentially they are meant to lift and connect us more fully to one another.

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