

The SelfDesign Learning Plan

Putting Children
at the Center
of Their Learning
Experiences

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There are perhaps as many reasons why families choose to have their children learn at home as there are families, but the overarching reasons could likely be narrowed to just a handful – the individual needs and desires of the learner, the prevention of labels or negative behavior in school or on the playground, geographic location, and family values. As parents, we might combine some of these reasons in our choice-making, or we might have a particular slant on the basis for our decision to keep our kids at home for the majority of their learning. How-

ever, we probably all agree on one thing – we want something different from the traditional school model.

Many of us might also agree that because life itself is not separated into the boxes of straight math, social studies, or science, the most effective learning doesn't happen when subjects are separated out into the core categories of a typical curriculum. Life is about integration, and effective learning often has more to do with synthesis and relevance than with the rote memorization of specific facts and figures.

How, then, can we take our fundamental belief about how learning really happens and use it to create a meaningful Learning Plan for and with our children? If we are searching for something different from traditional schooling, can we find a correspondingly non-traditional model for designing a yearly plan for learning? One model that sets the tone for such an approach is the SelfDesign Mandala, a tool for a lifelong learning approach.

Brent Cameron, founder of the Wondertree Foundation for Natural Learning and creator of the SelfDesign Learning Community, based in British Columbia, has researched processes of effective learning over the past 23 years. Working with children and youth from ages five to 18, Cameron's theories and strategies have gradually transformed into the kinds of maps and models that can be used by families anywhere, whether they are part of a formalized alternative program or are working independently with their children at home.

Cameron's "SelfDesign" name reflects his belief that the most effective learning is designed by learners themselves, based on curiosity and fired by enthusiasm. When this type of learning is supported by the family, the environment becomes a rich resource for the natural, emergent development of skills and processes. By viewing life as the creative act that is most foundational to learning, and by placing our children in the center of the picture, we begin the process of designing a learning plan that reflects our

children's passions and quests to understand their world.

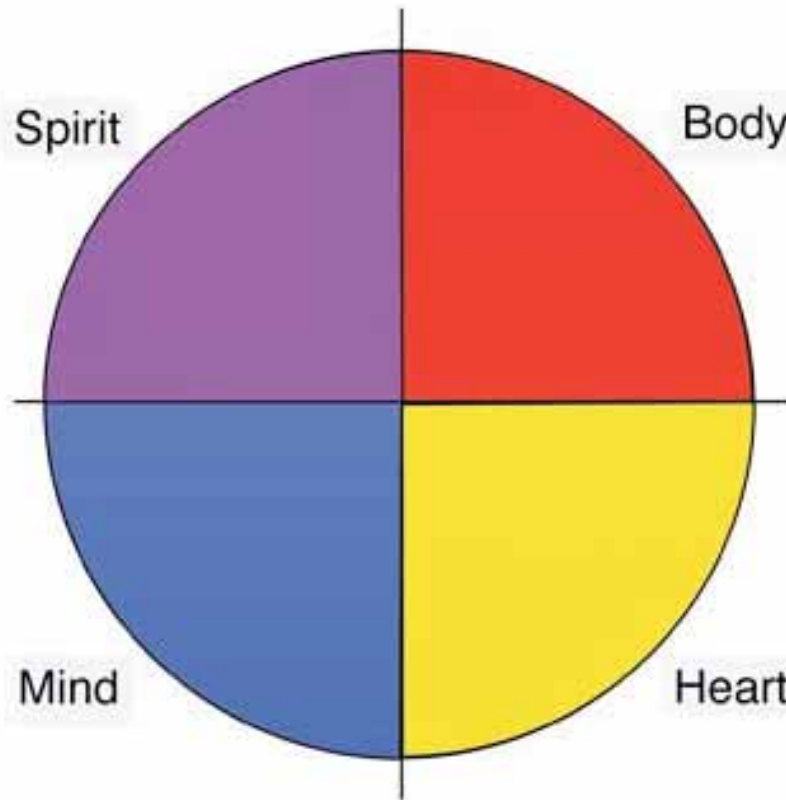
It is, indeed, no small thing to put children truly at the center of their own learning experience, although many education specialists and curricular theorists scatter the phrase "child-centered" throughout their literature as though saying it makes it so. In moving from an externally imposed set of standards that is often prefaced with "It is expected that the student will . . .," toward an internal measure of what is uniquely important to *each* child, we are actually creating what Cameron refers to as a paradigm shift.

Advocating for our children to begin moving from an atmosphere of imposed skill development to one of self-determination is the first step in demonstrating our belief that children, and indeed all human beings, are designed to learn. The act of learning is one of our greatest callings, and we are hard-wired for it.

The Qualities of Our Interior Experience

We all live and learn within four general domains of life, and the SelfDesign Mandala uses the

qualities of these arenas as the basis for the model's design. Although much of Cameron's work is three-dimensional (moving the concept of our external three-dimensional world into an inner-scape that replicates the depth and breadth of life), the written word still lends itself best to two-dimensional representations. Thus the four domains can be viewed as illustrated in the diagram above.



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“If our children are their own greatest works of art, we can spend no better time than putting consciousness to the warp and weft that shapes them.”

While traditional schooling focuses mainly on the qualities of the mind, working toward the acquisition of knowledge in core and supplementary areas, sharpening thinking skills and developing motor skills that support those thinking skills (using math manipulatives, learning handwriting, etc), the four-domain approach presents a way to also assign equal value to our other human realms of heart, body and spirit. In other words, it reflects the full nature of our humanness – our integrated human nature. The holism of this fundamental approach resonates with many home-based education families, who instinctively understand what is missing in the traditional schooling approach. And having a conceptual map to illustrate our instinctive comprehension gives us a place to begin to talk about why and how we support learning in our homes, both in discussions with our children and with others in our lives.

The SelfDesign Mandala

The four domains now become a background feature, creating quadrants within which to further explore areas of integrated learning. The overlay of the 12-pointed star of the Mandala onto the domains broadens the concept of “Body” into various aspects of Self, “Heart” into aspects of Relationship, “Mind” into Understanding and “Spirit” into an area we might call Meta-Self.

A sampling from each of the four quadrants of the Mandala demonstrates the richness of this type of model by looking at the qualities learners tend to develop within specific areas. For in-

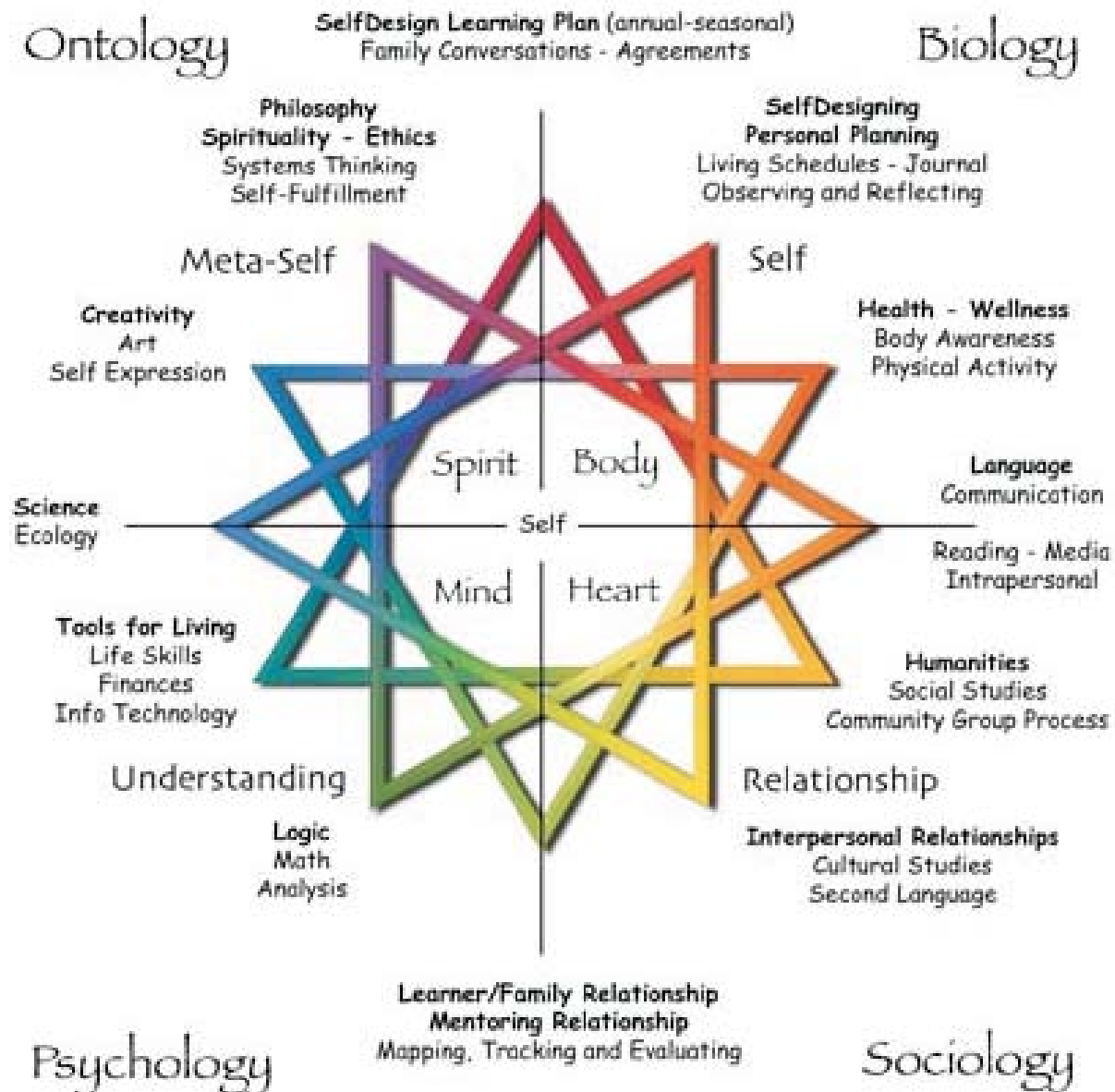
stance, when learners choose to focus on the SelfDesigning aspect within the Body quadrant (upper right hand corner), they begin to pay close attention to the very process of their own lives. As an example, the self-observation of the teen can be an all-consuming life task. As parents, we may see our teens becoming introspective and reflective, questing for “truth,” exploring boundaries, and evaluating their own worth through the activities in which they are involved. They may set goals and design projects, self-managing schedules or activities that lead to those goals. The skills of time management and resource use may be developed, with the ability to focus and to be self-directed becoming important ingredients.

It is important to note that our youth may not always be successful in the tasks they undertake; this type of heuristic, or trial and error, learning is an important component of the learning itself. It is equally important to recognize that some children don’t display interest or success in this aspect until it becomes relevant to them. As parents or mentors we can certainly model SelfDesigning in our own lives and we can help break down the steps leading to success, but the external imposition of the “you should”’s rarely seems to inspire children to jump enthusiastically into any learning area.

Most important to note in this discussion, however, is the fact that the Mandala-based Learning Plan validates SelfDesigning as a legitimate aspect of overall learning, acknowledging that children and adults alike may be working on skill-and quality-development in this area all their lives.

Moving around the Mandala to the Heart quadrant, we ex-

SelfDesign Mandala



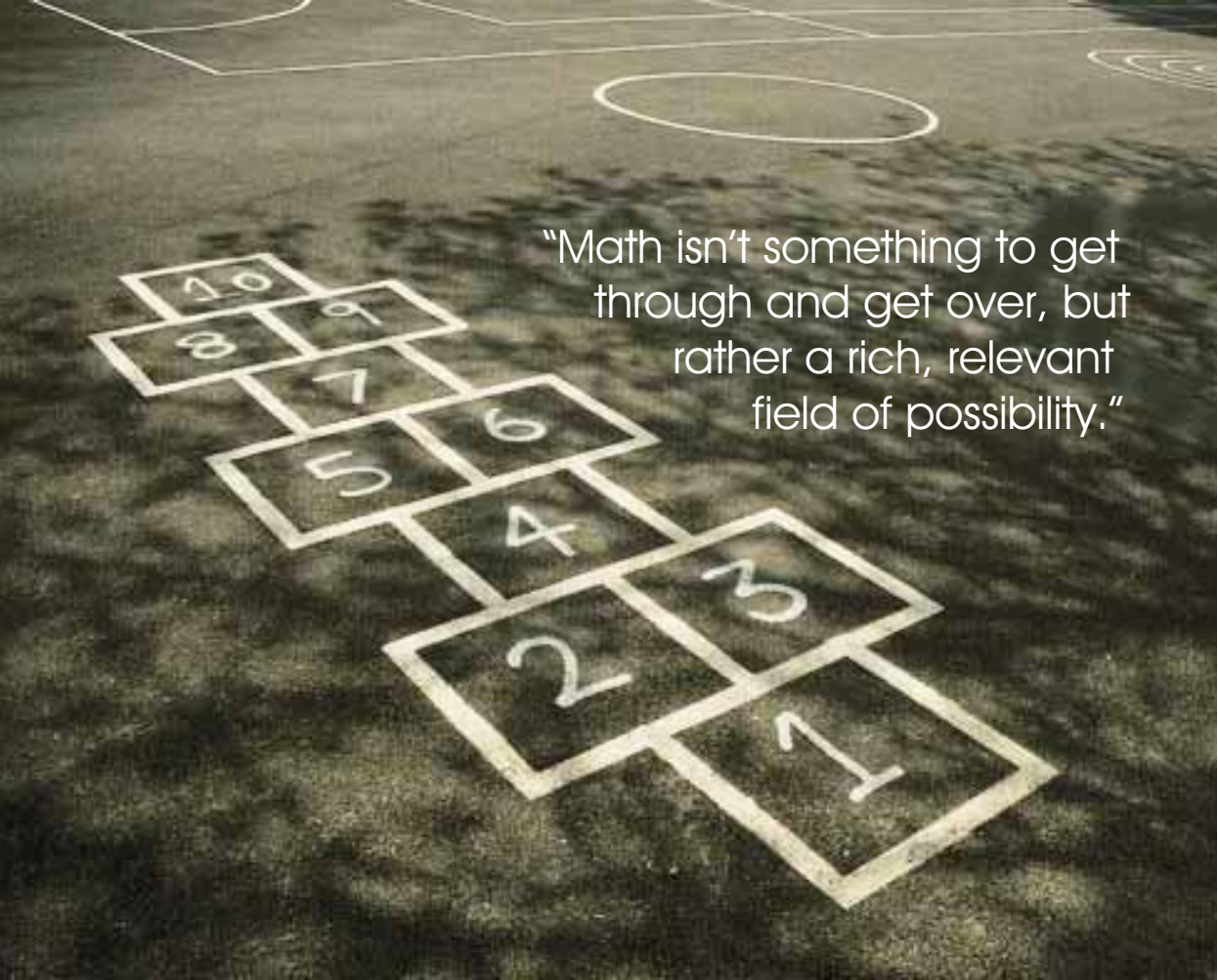
“As humans, we dip and weave within a variety of learning aspects as naturally as the fiber artist creates a cloth of many colors. It seems as important to honor each learner’s individual design as it is to value the beauty of the weaver’s process, of all the choices leading to the integral, unique beauty of the resulting tapestry.”

plore with our learners whether there are aspects of Relationship that they wish to deepen this year. Because Language is a naturally emerging skill for the vast majority of children, the basics most often happen without any formal plan. But many children are entranced by the spoken and written word and may want to give extra focus to this area in their plans. Qualities may develop around becoming an active and engaged listener, learning how emotions, or exploring the nuances of languaging. If writing is a passion, children may want to understand more about sentence construction or word origin, or they may wish to start a journal. Interestingly, the process of daily journal-writing also falls into

assumptions, analyze and evaluate, apply systems and demonstrate the relevance of these very meaningful skills. While at first blush it may look like a small shift to move from expectations to explorations, from rote learning and direct application to a focus on the process itself, the comprehensiveness of this type of approach soon shows its own significance through the learners' growing enthusiasm about *how learning really works*. In the SelfDesign program we frequently see that youth who are never formally taught the traditional math facts and figures come out with a deep understanding of the concepts, as well as an ongoing excitement about continuing their explorations –

math isn't something to get through and get over, but rather a rich, relevant field of possibility.

The fourth quadrant of Spirit looks at aspects that move us beyond the individual persona, into the very nature of our human-ness. A focus on Creativity or Philosophy often takes learners to a place of connecting with something larger than self, where intuition and imagination fuel a sense of life purpose and meaning. The Self-Design Learning Plan, located at the top of the Mandala, crosses into the quadrant of Body/Self as well as Spirit, but in examining why it might belong in Spirit we look at the actual process of its de-



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the arena of SelfDesigning, in that it can greatly contribute to self-observation and reflection. With this example we begin to see the crossover that replicates how life and learning really work, in an integrated form.

The Mind quadrant features Logic, with mathematics as an inclusion. Instead of building around the rote memorization of equations or multiplication tables, however, the Mandala focuses on the critical thinking and the sophisticated processes involved in good logic. Learners who choose to include this aspect in their year's plan are developing their abilities to understand concepts, use deductive reasoning, challenge as-

development.

With the same intention of viewing learning as an integrated arena, the creation of the learning plan happens most optimally as a group effort, with parents, children and perhaps other mentors contributing thoughts and ideas. The atmosphere is one of conversation, and through this process an environment of collaboration is defined. Options are explored, various perspectives are honored, learning styles are taken into consideration and agreements are made. In respecting one another's needs and desires as related to the learning year, we take a step beyond our individual preferences. Looking at advocacy rather than opposi-



Benefits and Uses of the SelfDesign Mandala:

- The family as a whole can be involved in designing and creating the learning plan.
- The Mandala's multi-faceted view of how all the aspects tease out and yet are connected provides an opportunity to reflect where the learner is truly "living" at any given time. Some of our children naturally feel the pull of curiosity

toward aspects of all four of the quadrants, while others appear to live primarily in only one, experiencing the consuming passion of dance, the budding drive of the scientific mind, or a concentrated enthusiasm for studying other cultures. The Mandala legitimizes the type of focus that can unfold the giftedness of learners through our support.

- It allows learning to be seen as emergent, supporting the fact that children learn at differing speeds, in differing stages, using differing styles. Skills often emerge over a two- or three-year period, and this model doesn't measure for success, failure, or the need for remediation over a one-year period as traditional models do. Rather, it looks at children's strengths, interests and successes.
- The Mandala takes a holistic approach, not separating skills out as learning objectives or curriculum outcomes. In addition, it supports looking at the integration of specific activities into several areas (e.g. yoga could be listed for Wellness, Philosophy and/or Creativity, depending on the emphasis of the learner).
- The Mandala model offers concrete evidence of a conscious plan for short- and long-term goals, as well as providing a learning history document should the family desire to move toward a more formalized program – public or private – at any time.
- Because it focuses on the present and future of a child's learning experience, the Mandala becomes a living document of change, rather than simply a record of past demonstrations of skill acquisition. It offers an integrated, ongoing overview of the child's learning year. When used over a period of seasons or years, it becomes an archive for the entire family as a review of all that happened when they worked and played together, giving support to their child's true nature and passions.

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tion, we have set the stage for a rich experience. Be it formal or informal, we have a plan in place with our learner at center, surrounded by possibilities, supportive and encouraging adults, and the exciting mysteries of new understandings to come.

As humans, we dip and weave within a variety of learning aspects as naturally as the fiber artist creates a cloth of many colors. It seems as important to honor each learner's individual design as it is to value the beauty of the weaver's process, of all the choices leading to the integral, unique beauty of the resulting tapestry. When we create a collaborative learning plan that reflects the true passions and enthusiasms of our learners, we are taking the first step in weaving our year with our children. We watch to see what emerges, supporting shifts in the patterns and designs by common agreement. If our children are their own greatest works of art, we can spend no better time than putting consciousness to the warp and weft that shapes them. The Mandala Learning Plan offers a model for dynamic design, ongoing mutual evaluation and a sense of contribution toward our children becoming lifelong, self-determined and self-fulfilled learners.

To learn more about SelfDesign, look for the SelfDesign book coming out in fall, 2005, or go to www.selfdesign.com. -LL-