

# From Policing to Participation

## Overtuning the Rules and Creating Amiable Classrooms

Carol Anne Wien



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Sylvie Wickstrom

We were playing outside after a rainy day, and there was a huge mud puddle the size of a large table and of course a rule about no playing in the mud—children get dirty. The children played around the perimeter of the puddle, digging with shovels and throwing rocks in and watching them splash. Then some started tapping their toes in the water. We thought, “Well that’s OK, they’re wearing boots.” Then they were up to their ankles in water. We were really hesitant but thought, “What’s the big deal? It’s only mud.” But then we were anxious: “They are going to be really dirty, what will the parents say?” Before we knew it, they were jumping off the bench into the mud puddle, tumbling over each other. They were covered in mud. We were all standing back, kind of white-knuckling it and thinking, “Oh, should we let them?” We decided yes, and went to get the camera.

**H**ow did the staff of three child care centers transform their work lives from continuous policing and correction of young children to a pedagogy in which they and the children participate together in constructing richly lived events? How were they able to let children engage in such wild activities as playing in a fresh mud puddle? Their experience shows that, contrary to common sense, aggression, accidents, and the stress of constantly enforcing rules are all reduced and transformed when many rules are eliminated by staff in a collaborative process.

The process of reexamining and then removing multiple rules for children’s behavior permitted fuller participation in the life of the centers and led to an overall transformation of power relationships: both teachers and children gained more power to affect what happened in the programs. While reexamining the rules was not the only thoughtful process undertaken by the teachers, it seemed to be especially powerful in opening up practice toward more expansive living. Simultaneously, teachers reexamined the physical environments (organization of time and space) and the ways these contributed to a stressful atmosphere that generated aggression. As Karyn Callaghan

Four early childhood educators and two professors took part in the discussions that form the basis for this article:

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comments, “The whole question of letting go of power just flies in the face of [established] practice.”

## The children and families served

The three centers are all nonprofit sites—one with 63 children on a university campus, one (42 children) in a workplace setting, and the other (32 children) in a high school. In the latter, eight children have special needs and another 16 are considered to have general developmental delays. All three centers are inclusive settings with resource-teacher consultants for children with special needs. Staff are qualified early childhood educators, and the centers accept early childhood education students in practicum placements. As an example of diversity, in one center 40 percent of the families served use English as a second language in their homes, with 10 percent being newly arrived immigrants. Cultures

and languages of the families include Mandarin and its dialects, as well as Spanish and Portuguese. The centers serve many single-parent families and families with two parents on shift work.

## Established practice in the centers

In all three centers the established, conventional practice was rule based, yet staff felt they had few rules and no problems as a result. Safety for young children was the highest priority, with rules often designed to prevent harm to children. However, in creating the rules the educators did not consider the possibility that harm might come to the children and teachers in other ways as a consequence of these rules. Callaghan noted, “Safety, you can justify any rule with safety.”

Another justification was government requirements, that is, the authority of the official regulating body.

Sometimes these regulations were real; sometimes they were assumed to exist by the teachers but in fact did not. Teacher anxiety over responsibility for young children’s lives is clear. Rules proliferated out of fear for the safety of the young and vulnerable charges.

Bobbie-Jo described how her center had been “very structured.” For example, “we had pictures of three faces” defining how many children were permitted in a location, and “children were not allowed to take toys



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with a team to create an environment to support children’s interests.

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## ASSESSMENT

[from one play area to another].” Brenda, at another center, said, “You always had to go down the slide feet first, and you always had to sit up going down the slide.” Laurie noted that in the center serving many children with special needs, staff were “stopping things from happening all day long.” For instance, only four children were allowed in the water play area, so any additional children who tried to join the play would be redirected to another activity.

With tightly defined spaces for every activity, teachers acted as traffic officers, directing children to available spots. The time segments for activities were brief, play spaces rigorously defined, and play areas small and tight. In one center, for instance, two separate playrooms each had precisely the same interest areas, all of them small.

To give an idea of the tone at the centers during their rule-governed regimes, here is a partial list of what children could and could not do. One center discovered they had 26 rules for outdoor play, including this sampling:

**No swinging from the slide.**  
**No crashing riding toys.**  
**Only run in one direction.**  
**No sitting on balls.**  
**No using big brooms.**  
**No banging on shed.**  
**No licking the door.**

Another center found that it had many indoor rules, including such specifics as the order for eating lunch and other rules such as

**No blowing on food.**  
**No other toys used with playdough.**  
**No toys traveling around the room from area to area.**  
**Sit in the same seat for lunch every day.**

When I asked the educators to define a *rule* in such practice, Melita said, “Something necessary to keep control.” “And control is conceived as?” Several teachers responded, “Children obeying, children doing as they are told.” Brenda added, “It was a comfort for teachers to know there was a rule in place and everything would run smoothly.” “Ah, you believed that this control would in fact work! [chorus of yeses] But in fact it didn’t, because people were policing all the time!”

The amount of energy teachers spent on enforcing the rules to govern the children was immense and

highly stressful. Laurie said, “The energy the staff were expending on policing the center, redirecting children, and giving time-out was just so draining.” She described the block area at her center:

Children would go in, and things would start flying, blocks would get knocked over, kids would get pushed, and there would be yelling and screaming. Half the time you would not want the block center open because you couldn’t deal with it. It was so loud. That whole half of the room would get really crazy. The noise level would go up, and then children would start bouncing off each other and teachers would start pulling out their hair. You could make a comedy movie of it.

## Reexamining the rules

How did changes to practice begin? Callaghan offered workshops for the early childhood community in which the match between values and practices was examined. Influenced by interpretations of the Reggio Emilia approach (Malaguzzi 1996; Cadwell 1997; Hendrick 1997; Edwards, Gandini, & Forman 1998), she invited teachers to explore their images of children, and she gently questioned some scenarios observed in the community, such as

**Children told what position to lie in on their cots.**  
**No toys allowed from home.**  
**Weekly themes planned for the entire year without considering children’s interests.**

Callaghan asked, “If we believe that children are unique and to be respected, and yet we are making children finish all the food on their plates before they get to have a drink, or there are designated times when they can go to the washroom, then what must the view really be?” The notion of a regulated child forced to follow prescribed institutional scripts for living had not occurred to those attending the workshop.

The invitation to consider the contrast between the rule-based scenarios seen in their centers and the lovely images of children to which the teachers gave lip service prompted Bobbie-Jo to challenge teachers at her center to rethink

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their rules. This process was difficult. When they tried to discuss their rules as a group, individuals reacted so strongly to one another's rules, laughing and making faces, that they had to make a rule not to be judgmental about rules. The teachers described so many rules that the group could not deal with all of them in one session.

A decision to have a second meeting with a focus on one area only—outdoor play—allowed the staff to note 26 teacher-generated rules for children's play. This was many more than they *thought* they had, but these rules had never been written down. Bobbie-Jo noted, "Individually we had only a few rules, but when you put all those rules together, for a child there were a lot of different rules because staff had different expectations."

Collaboratively, the teachers decided on three criteria for a rule: Did it [the behavior targeted by the rule] harm the child? Did it harm others? Did it damage property? With the criteria in mind, the group began to examine the rules. Someone noticed that play areas were closed when parents picked up children. Did this rule meet the criteria? No. The teachers asked, "So why do we have that area closed?"

Applying the criteria to their rules opened up the process of discarding rules. On the outdoor playground, for example, the 26 rules were reduced to five:

**Riding toys are for riding.**  
**Riding toys stay off the climber.**  
**Sand in the sandbox.**  
**Safe bike riding.**  
**Hockey sticks stay down.**

Bobbie-Jo provided an example of the process of questioning that could lead to rule reduction. One day a child brought in a new action figure and told Bobbie-Jo about it. A teacher interrupted, saying:

"That needs to go in his cubby."

"Wait a minute. Why?"

"Because it's not his show-and-tell day."

"Let's put this in adult perspective. Suppose on the weekend you got engaged. You come in with your engagement ring and want to show everybody, and I say to you, 'Whoa, whoa, it's not your day. But you can put that in your locker.' It's the same thing."

"OK, he can keep it in here [the class], as long as he shares it with everybody."

"I can go along with that as long as I can have a turn with your jewelry when you're done."

Bobbie-Jo argued that there are many toys to share in centers but "not everything is for sharing." "If it's not OK for me to borrow another adult's jewelry, watch, or sweater, I don't think it's OK for us to expect children to share their things."

Teachers worried that welcoming play materials from home would not work, and they called Bobbie-Jo to

come and see how upset children were the first few times such toys were brought into class. Gradually, it became easier to permit items from home to be part of classroom life. Melita said, "It really reduced stress. You are not in power struggles with children." Brenda added that "parents really appreciate it too," not having to struggle over telling a child to leave a precious item behind. Children's self-investment in their belongings shows an attachment to their identity, and separating from something that contributes to identity is emotionally difficult.

Two months after the initial workshop, Bobbie-Jo, the first to stimulate a reexamination of rules in her center, presented the experience at a local teacher network meeting. After handing out a revised list of new and reduced rules, Bobbie-Jo said, "They thought it was completely crazy. They said, 'I would like to see you come and do that at our center!'" Removing rules seemed counterintuitive.

Laurie said of her center, "We started to abandon the rules and then understood their impact on both children and teachers. We were dealing with 'behavior' on a regular basis. We asked ourselves, 'Why are we doing this? Why are only four children allowed in water play? How is that promoting children's development?'"

The teachers began allowing as many children as wished to come to the water play area and found that the focus of the teachers became one of negotiating and developing children's social skills for entering play. The teachers made the water table more accessible, pulling it away from the wall so children could crowd all around it. The playdough table too went from having three places to many places. The staff focus became "giving children the skills to learn to enter the situation," such as problem-solving how to find another place to play.

Overall, the teachers in all three centers found that eliminating rules reduced stress. In addition, Callaghan was struck by the process of *negotiating* rules when incidents arose, with teachers asking each other, "What do you think about this?" Children were invited to join the discussions when teachers asked, "Do we need a rule about this?" Of interest is the fact that the changes and their consequences were consistent across the three centers and that the changes appeared quickly, over months, not years.

We asked ourselves, "Why are we doing this? Why are only four children allowed in water play? How is that promoting children's development?"

## Changes in the physical environments

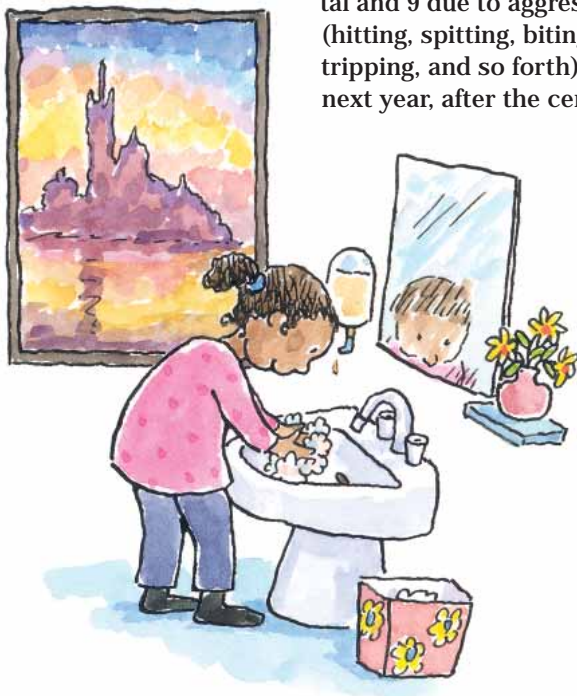
Reducing the rules in a setting, and experiencing positive change as a result, also led to explorations of the organization of the physical environment. Laurie described how the aforementioned block area in her center was reorganized and enlarged (from 4 by 6 feet to 10 by 20 feet) with much better results for the children. Teachers also found ways to permit block structures to remain standing, rather than insisting on tidying up each day, so children could return later and continue building. This meant redesigning the layout for cots at naptime, but teachers did this now that their priority was children's activity rather than adult convenience. The impact of the change astonished the teachers. Laurie noted,

The mania in the block area just started to die down. Children began to interact in a much nicer way. There was less fighting because there was more room. Children were not bumping into each other.

There were more materials available. There were fewer rules about what you could and couldn't do, and therefore the teachers, instead of having to stand over the children and police them, could go in and participate. They could build with the children. They could draw, take photographs, go get other materials. There was a lot more spontaneous interaction.

Surprisingly, it was also much quieter. In addition, teachers in this center found the incidence of accidents and aggression decreasing. A government requirement calls for all centers to complete accident reports for any injuries. One year, among 12 children there were 42

injury incidents—33 accidental and 9 due to aggression (hitting, spitting, biting, tripping, and so forth). The next year, after the center



had reduced its rules, incidents were reduced considerably among the same 12 children, with aggressive acts down by 50 percent. Total incidents were 25, of which 21 were due to accidents, four to aggression. While many factors affect accident rates, the teachers' perception was that the reduction resulted from the changes in pedagogy. This was both remarkable to them and corroborated their sense that the changes they made resulted in much more positive environments for children. The entire emotional tone of their center is more positive.

Many things were happening simultaneously. The examination of rules, teachers' surprise at their numbers, and the subsequent reduction created new degrees of freedom for both children and teachers to act spontaneously. This process stood out as momentous in its impact on changing practice. Other changes included a softening of the environment, such as creating conversation areas, adding Monet prints and flowers to bathrooms, and inviting parents to contribute family photos. Brenda said, "I love the fact that each of the three centers is different."

**Teachers' priority was children's activity rather than adult convenience.**

## Consequences of changes in pedagogy for the children

The biggest effect of rule reduction was that settings became quieter and calmer with less fuss about enforcing minor rules. With less monitoring to do and calmer children, staff could participate more fully, engaging with children in their activities. The teachers developed greater interest in following the children's lead, such as permitting them to interact fully and vigorously with a mud puddle in springtime.

Brenda made a videotape showing children deeply engaged in block play, woodworking, playing with Legos, and dramatic play in the loft. Half an hour into the video, children are still playing in the same areas. Laurie commented, "When children made their own choices, the time spent at activities increased." Concentration spans for self-initiated activity became long and sustained.

The children began to generate their own rules and to involve themselves in self-governing, a process Vygotsky long ago showed as necessary to the development of will power (1976; [1930–1935] 1978). For example, at Bobbie-Jo's center a group of boys made a space for hockey on the small playground, with rules about how to swing the hockey stick ("Not off the ground"). They made a net and demarcated their area

with pylons. Such opportunities to generate rules for group activities make people feel they belong to the social group. Feelings of belonging are essential to any notion of community, and to the commitment of members to that community.

### From rule-driven, clock driven practice to values-based, responsive pedagogy

The teachers felt several things happened simultaneously. As they let go and gave more control to the children, the children learned that the adults thought of them as capable. By reorganizing the environments into more expansive spaces and reducing the number of rules, staff began to see new possibilities for practice. Several teachers joked about their previous focus on time and efficiency: "I remember always looking at the clock, thinking, 'OK, let's go, let's go' [laughing]; how many kids can you get to pee in five minutes?"

Previously, children were lucky if they had 15 or 20 minutes in an area. It was often 20 minutes of play, 5 minutes of tidying up, 5 minutes of transition, and then play in a new area. A teacher noted, "Time was a rule." Time was a rule that could not be broken. Time as a production schedule, and teachers as keepers of the schedule (Wien 1995), produced policing to maintain the schedule. With the changes in stance, practice was more relaxed, less clock driven.

Callaghan saw teachers taking ownership of their practice. They wondered, "What do I like?" and "What's driving me crazy?" and saw possibilities for changing to practices that they preferred, chose, and assessed for themselves. We might say the teachers removed themselves from the established scripts for institutional routine and were inventing practice to fit their own contexts.

All the teachers found that the changes reduced stress. The energy of policing, correcting, and giving time-out was exhausting for teachers; it created negative energy, tearing at the emotional well-being of staff and children. Laurie said, "That energy is now turned into facilitating social interaction among children, exploring their interests, and actually talking to children." With staff chatting with and observing children more, the children are receiving more positive attention and, according to the teachers, "there are fewer behavior problems to deal with."

The teachers have noticed increased calm among the children and a sense of emotional satisfaction. For example, after the vigorous mud-puddle play, the wet and dirty children had to be cleaned up, and their

clothes washed and dried before parents arrived. Melita said: "It was the calmest, most easygoing change and cleanup ever. I couldn't believe it. They sat and helped each other. It was amazing, and we noticed that, as we were right in the middle of it."



### Resistance to change

All the teachers note the role of resistance in the process of change.

Laurie said, "When I entered practice in 1984 or '85, I was very much a controlling sort of teacher. I was very consistent, [thinking] this is the fastest, most convenient way we could get it all done." She added that after the radical change in her practice, it was interesting to look back on the way she had been. The teachers agreed that it is difficult to think there are better ways to function as early childhood educators.

Bobbie-Jo commented that when she began as supervisor, one teacher said, "You're that Reggio girl, and don't think for a minute you are going to do that here!" Whatever interpretations people make of the term *Reggio*, advocates of the Reggio approach note that they first create their practice out of whatever provocations stimulate a sense of ownership and participation in their own teaching. "Of course we're not going to force you to do anything," Bobbie-Jo responded to the teacher and proceeded to talk with staff about their view of children and what they wished to see in the center. She described how an especially resistant staff person was later overheard telling visiting teachers the results of following the children's lead: "I can't believe what a difference this has made. I am no longer stressed when I go home."

### Teachers taking ownership of their teaching practice

What happened and how did it happen? From the teacher educator's perspective, Callaghan believes a crucial moment in changing practice was beginning with teachers' images of children. "To start with the view of the child is pivotal." Making this positive image of children explicit permits a conscious investigation of whether the pedagogy of teachers supports their images of children. When teachers see mismatches between their newly explicit image of what children can do and their teaching practices, they begin to see openings for doing something differently that better honors their values.

Once the reexamination of established practice had begun, possibilities for teachers' participation in creating their own pedagogy opened up. Teachers asked, "What's possible?" or "Do you think we could \_\_\_\_?" Bobbie-Jo noted that "the adults are doing exactly what we are doing with the children. We are asking the children, 'What are the possibilities on this? What can happen? Make your theories. Let's try it out. Let's revisit that.'"

What has happened is a change in teacher stance. There is a new disposition to think in terms of possibilities, to invent in response to context—an aspect of good constructivist teaching (Forman 2002). Laurie commented that this change requires redefining what it means to be a good teacher and that expectations for job performance also have to change.

These teachers are no longer "keepers of the routine" (Wien 1995), programming according to the production schedule, but partners with children. If teachers take control of their own practice, and of assessing the match between their values and their pedagogy, then teaching becomes not performing a job to someone else's criteria, but instead living in responsiveness to children and families and sharing a broad sense of possibilities about all the ways to participate together. Something about the change is profoundly democratic, if democracy is conceived as full creative participation of all members of the community.

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## Conclusion

The emotional tone of the three centers has changed from surveillance in order to enforce the rules and schedule to one of positive, even joyful participation. There is a release of energy, a "raising of windhorse" (to borrow a phrase of the Shambhala Buddhists)—a new, positive energy. Callaghan says, "You can taste it when you walk into a center. You just feel there is this life there." Bobbie-Jo adds, "You can feel it, the energy rising; it is just so exciting."

Vecchi (2002, 56) reminds us of Gregory Bateson's phrase "the pulsing of life," as one element relates to another and both change in response. Part of what makes rising energy so exciting is that the changes are occurring collaboratively for the group. Callaghan describes the changes as occurring "within the context of a real community of learners. We were coming together regularly and sharing these stories, bringing in documentation, bringing these lists of rules, and there was a fabulous sharing in the community."

There are now three more centers in their second year of reorganizing their practice, and six others have joined the project to begin the work. In her former practice, Brenda notes, she "couldn't wait to get out at the end of the day," whereas "working this [new] way is like being on vacation."

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