

GUIDANCE MATTERS

Dan Gartrell



Jeremiah was almost three when I started teaching at the center. He was one of those very physical kids, whose feelings and thoughts always moved through his body first. He'd had a turbulent life and when I came to the center, he was living mostly with his mom, and some with his dad. They were separated and neither made very much money. Jeremiah was curious about and interested in everything. He loved stories and connected with others with his whole heart. He knew much about the natural world and was observant and gentle with animals, insects, and plants.

When I first started working with Jeremiah, he had a lot of angry outbursts. The center used time-out at that point (the dreaded "green chair") and Jeremiah spent considerable time there. While I was at the center, we moved away from using time-outs. Instead we introduced a system called "peer problem solving." By the time Jeremiah graduated to kindergarten, we had been using the system for three years, and he was one of the experts.

One day, I overheard a fracas in the block corner. I stood up to see what was going on, ready to intervene. The youngest child in the room, who was just two and only talking a little bit, and one of the four-year-olds were in a dispute over a truck. I took a step forward, ready to go to their aid, and then I saw Jeremiah approach them.

"What's going on?" he asked (my standard opening line). He proceeded to facilitate a discussion between the two children that lasted for five minutes. He made sure both kids got a chance to speak; he interpreted for the little one. "Jordan, what do you think of that idea?" he asked. Jordan shook his head and clutched the truck tighter. "I don't think Jordan's ready to give up the truck yet," he told the four-year-old.

It was amazing. Jeremiah helped the kids negotiate an agreement, and then he walked away with a cocky tilt to his head I'd never seen before. His competence was without question; his pride was evident.

—Beth Wallace

THIS PRESCHOOL TEACHER has continued to follow Jeremiah's progress since he graduated from preschool. Jeremiah is well into his education now and is doing very well.

The National Prekindergarten Study of nearly 4,000 prekindergarten classrooms was published by the Yale University Child Study Center. One recently released report from the study includes this sobering summary: "Results indicated that 10.4 percent of prekindergarten teachers reported expelling at least one preschooler in the past 12 months. Nationally, 6.67 preschoolers were expelled per 1,000 enrolled . . . 3.2 times the rate for K–12 students. Rates were highest for older preschoolers and African-Americans, and boys were over 4½ times more likely to be expelled than were girls" (Gilliam 2005, 1).

The Yale study, together with the case of Jeremiah and other children and teachers I've known, keeps bringing me to this question: What is it in the dynamics of teacher-child relations that allows a child with "a lot of angry outbursts" to become a peer mediator in one program while in another program he might be expelled?

Early childhood professionals cannot expect to love, perhaps even like, every child in their groups. Most feel guilty about this, but early

childhood teachers are human, not angels. If they are truly professionals, however, they learn to build positive relationships with every child—whatever their personal feelings.

When a teacher gives up on a child—sees "a lot of angry outbursts" and decides, consciously or unconsciously, that "this child does not belong here"—the young child's fate is sealed. When teachers reach the point of mental rejection, it is evident to the child—and to the others in the group. Soon enough, the child gets verbal and nonverbal messages. He begins to see himself as not okay, as not belonging in the group. The child feels stressed and may have more conflicts than before being labeled. Because of his behavior and the aura of teacher-rejection around him, the child will also be rejected by other children. He now has become stigmatized. Often from there, in a matter of time, it is out the door.

While the classroom may run more smoothly—and staff may be relieved—the child and his family must deal with the emotional aftermath. As noted in the Yale study, "Expulsion is the most severe disciplinary sanction that an educational program can impose" (Gilliam 2005, 1).

The teacher in the anecdote accepted Jeremiah. She chose to see him as a child who possessed more

DAN GARTRELL, EdD, is director of the Child Development Training Program and professor of early childhood and elementary education at Bemidji State University in northern Minnesota. A former Head Start teacher, Dan is the author of *The Power of Guidance* and *A Guidance Approach for the Encouraging Classroom*. Thanks to Beth Wallace, the teacher, and to Redleaf Press, St. Paul, Minnesota, for allowing the reprint of the anecdote, which first appeared in Dan's book *What the Kids Said Today* (2000). Please send your guidance anecdotes and other comments to dgartrell@bemidjistate.edu.

Illustration by Patrick Cavanagh.

assets than were visible during conflicts. Her vital lesson to us is: Know the child beyond the behavior exhibited during a conflict; from friendly relationships much else becomes possible. When we consider children like Jeremiah not as impediments to our program, but as what our programs essentially are about, we avoid becoming part of the child's problem. We commit ourselves to trying to free the child from his vulnerabilities.

For a while our group may have to suffer a bit with us—and this is hard on any teacher. But we must keep in mind that the experience can teach other children important life lessons about redemption and the acceptance of others—lessons they will be deprived of if we give up on the child.

Mental health resources for children and families *are* essential. Some states, like Michigan and Connecticut, are making real progress in this direction (Gilliam 2005), but more progress in all states is needed. Early childhood professionals also need personal resources and support, both within the program and at home.

The challenges of working with some young children clearly are tremendous. But look at the benefits for educators, the group, families, and the child: "His competence was without question; his pride was evident" (and the two-year-old got to keep the truck).

To increase your knowledge:

Locate books and articles and consult Internet resources to learn more about working with children who have frequent conflicts. One useful site is the Center for Evidence-Based Practice: Young Children with Challenging Behavior (<http://challengingbehavior.fmhi.usf.edu/>), which offers many positive, evidence-based practices to help children with challenging behaviors. Talk with colleagues about techniques you find particularly promising. Together, work for mastery using these ideas.

Try These Techniques with Children You Find Challenging

1. Welcome new children and families. Use phone calls, greeting meetings, positive notes home, conferences, and even home visits to let the family and the child know you welcome them as members of the classroom community. When children begin to have conflicts, working *with* parents you know is preferable to coping with parents you have not yet developed a relationship with.

2. Use contact talks. Contact talks are moments of quality time outside of conflict situations between the teacher and individual child. The teacher finds the time and makes the talks happen by becoming a willing, active listener. Through regular talks, the teacher gets to know the child and the child gets to know the teacher. Trust builds and conflicts become less severe. Finding quality time upon arrival can really reduce conflicts during the day.

3. Offer compliment sandwiches. With the child and the family, use the coaching technique of compliment sandwiches to show you are working with—and not against—them:

Compliment: Clearly recognize efforts and progress the child has shown.

Behavior: Address a challenging behavior and direct the child or family to a specific alternative behavior the child can use next time

Compliment: Again, comment on the child's effort and progress.

Watch for signs of progress you can continue to acknowledge.

4. Keep interventions private and respectful. Embarrassment can result in lifelong, emotionally painful memories. Move to the conflict so you can address the situation privately. Compose yourself, then help the child to calm down. Keep your voice low and be firm and friendly, not firm and harsh. Ask the child to share his view of what happened. Respect his feelings and perceptions. Teach a specific alternative behavior the child can use next time. Have him repeat back to you the behavior to use. Do not force an apology, but ask the child what he can do to help the other person feel better.

5. Build your own support system. It is okay to discuss (and vent) your frustrations with trusted others, as long as you do not use real names and everyone understands that the information shared is confidential. Remember that the purpose is *not* to reinforce negative attitudes about the child but to lessen your own anger and frustration. After honest venting, children sometimes don't seem so challenging. 😊

6. Engage others in using a comprehensive approach. Involve the family, classroom staff, nonclassroom personnel, and outside professionals in developing a comprehensive plan. Implement, review, and modify the plan as needed. Respecting issues of personal dignity and confidentiality, a plan sometimes might include class meetings to help other children understand or conferences with parents to explain your approach. (This is a tough decision; give it thought.) Only *after* comprehensive approach strategies are fully tried should the team discuss the future of the child in your class. (A comprehensive approach may bring together the resources you need to make expulsion unnecessary.)

A step you can take:

Read the Yale study and discuss your reactions with your colleagues. Find out what your state is doing to increase mental health resources for young children. Together with others, advocate for these services.

Reference

Gilliam, W.S. 2005. Prekindergarteners left behind: Expulsion rates in state prekindergarten systems. New Haven, CT: Yale University Child Study Center. Online: www.fcd-us.org/PDFs/NationalPreKExpulsionPaper03.02_new.pdf.

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