

GUIDANCE MATTERS

Dan Gartrell



Build Relationships through Talk

KIM, A GRADUATE STUDENT doing a practicum in a kindergarten classroom, shared this story.

It's Monday morning and the children are working on their journals. The assigned topic is "What did you do over the weekend?" Raymond is staring at his journal and has not picked up a writing instrument. The teacher comes over and asks about his weekend to help him narrow down the topic.

Teacher: So, Raymond, what did you do this weekend?

Raymond: Nothin'.

Teacher: Oh, I bet you can think of something. What did you do on Saturday?

Raymond: I didn't do nothin'. Go away!

Teacher: I just want to help you get started thinking of some ideas. Why don't you pick something to write with? That would be a good place to start.

Raymond: Go away! I'm not doing my !@#%~ journal and you can't make me. (*Raymond goes to another part of the room and gets under a table. The teacher tries to coax him out. Raymond runs out from the other side, goes into the hall, and climbs into his cubby. His teacher approaches him.*)

Teacher: Raymond, what you said was inappropriate. You need to look at me when I am talking to you. Do you understand? (*Raymond doesn't respond.*) I am going to count to five

and you will look at me or you will go to the principal's office until after recess. You don't want to miss recess, do you? (*Still no response.*) One . . . two . . . three . . . four . . . five. I see you have made your choice. You will go with me to the principal's office.

Raymond follows the teacher to the principal's office without looking up or saying a word. When he returns to class, the teacher does not speak with him about the incident.

Later in the day I talk with Raymond as we build a Lego house. He tells me his mom and dad fought over the weekend, and his dad was arrested and put in a police car while Raymond watched.

Writing about what children know best—their lives—is a developmentally appropriate learning activity for most children, most days. On this Monday, for Raymond, it wasn't. Kim wrote that she was frustrated about the whole situation. Although she told the teacher what had happened to Raymond, Kim felt she couldn't talk much about it with her. Kim decided she could comfort Raymond, though, and sought out the opportunity. With all that happened to him, Raymond needed a friend in the classroom that day. It is good that Kim was there.

The transition from the familiarity of home to this new place—school—with its many strangers, young and old, must be odd for young children. If a child's

perception of the world is that it is tumultuous—due to environmental, neurological, or combined factors—the challenges of entering the classroom become magnified. Incidents at home, ranging from an argument about which cereal to eat for breakfast to experiencing family violence, will definitely have an effect—perhaps numbness at arrival giving way to graphic frustration at "simple" challenges later on. In addition to conflict, a fear of abandonment—provoked by the kind of experience Raymond had—can exacerbate children's anxious feelings.

Quality moments between teachers and children are vital, especially upon the children's arrival to school each day. Rich (1993) reports that in his kindergarten class, spending 5 to 10 minutes each morning with a child who was experiencing multiple conflicts proved to be a worthy investment of his time. (An assistant supervised the other children during this time.) The gift of time conveys to a child, "My teacher cares," making at least part of the day seem less challenging for the child—and perhaps for the teacher too.

LYNN, A KINDERGARTEN TEACHER I KNOW, isn't a morning person. Over time, though, she began arriving at her classroom far earlier than she would have liked. Getting things ready by the time the first child arrived allowed her to give each child the "Lynn greeting": a hug, high five, or handshake, and an eye-to-eye "Good morning, darling, how are you feeling today?"

Lynn used her daily greetings to find out who got new sneakers at the mall, whose dog got hit by a car, and who saw dad get arrested for fighting with mom. She used the information to influence her actions, as a caring professional should—being more gentle than

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Please send your guidance anecdotes and other comments to dgartrell@bemidjistate.edu. Thanks to Kim Elke and Lynn Hart, whose anecdotes first appeared in Dan's book *A Guidance Approach for the Encouraging Classroom*, and to Sharon Hoverson, whose full anecdote first appeared in Dan's book *What the Kids Said Today*, for sharing their expertise in building relationships with children.

usual with one child at transition times, showing understanding if another child swept the glue off the table in frustration when it spilled, celebrating with a third about going with her long-absent older sister to buy ice cream.

In the years I knew Lynn, I never remember her sending a child to the principal. Over the years students occasionally would visit their former teacher for a Lynn greeting and a hug—including, one day, a fifth-grader Lynn had never had as a student!

In her classes of 20 to 30 children, Lynn (by herself) worked hard to overcome the “mass class phenomenon,” which still plagues much of public education. In settings with two or more adults, such as many preschools, it is definitely more possible to give the gift of time. Whether it happens at start-up or later in the day, when a teacher and a child talk together I call these times *contact talks*. There are always tasks to do in any classroom—hence there is a lot of *task talk* in schools. Contact talks are open conversations between an adult and child, with the child usually taking the lead.

Important to note is that the adult must decide that a contact talk will happen. The teacher uses wait times (for the child to put thoughts into words), reflective listening, and open-ended questions to get to know the child better, which is *the purpose of the talk*.

IN A HEAD START CLASSROOM, a student teacher and a child were about to read a book about the first snow. For a paper, Sharon recorded her contact talk with Linnea:

Linnea: My grandma lives in Arizona, and she said they don't ever get snow there.

Sharon: Why do you think they don't get snow in Arizona?

Linnea: It's too far for Santa to drive 'cause he brings the snow. My mom says it's too far for us to drive. I wanted to go last night. We went one time on a big airplane. It was scary, but only a little.

Dan is looking for anecdotes on friendly and creative ways to handle “tattling.” Please send them to dgartrell@bemidjistate.edu.

Sharon: It is a long way to Arizona. Your grandma must be a pretty important person to you, and I bet you miss her.

Linnea: She's my favorite.

Sharon: What is your favorite thing about your grandma?

Linnea: But . . . I think there might be another way it snows.

Sharon: I'd like to hear about it. Could you tell me about the other way it snows?

Linnea: Maybe the clouds just melt 'cause they move in front of the sun, and the sun is hot and then they melt.

Sharon: That's neat. Maybe the sun does melt the clouds. It's pretty sunny in Arizona. Do you think that if it got cloudy there that it might snow?

Linnea (laughing): No! There's too much cactuses. Didn't you know there are cactus everywhere there? We saw big ones that were bigger than my dad, and they had really sharp prickles on 'em.

Sharon (pauses): How do the cactus keep it from snowing?

Linnea: Because, silly, snow doesn't like the prickles on the cactuses! When the snow gets on a prickle, it hurts 'em and they don't like that. So that's why. (*The conversation ends. The two begin to read the book.*)

The whole contact talk took about three minutes. Contact talks don't have to be long, but they do need to happen. Student teacher Sharon had not talked with this child before. Later that day at circle time, Linnea sat in Sharon's lap.

At the NAEYC National Institute for Early Childhood Professional Development in June 2006, a participant shared that the students in her teacher education program often ask how to build relationships with children. “Use lots of contact talks,” I said. That is what Kim did with Raymond. That is what Sharon did with Linnea. And, with hugs and affirming greetings, that is what Lynn did with the children in her classes.

As young children and teachers get to know each other, classroom life becomes more encouraging for the children, and the children (along with their families) become more understandable to their teachers. Teachers are then in a better position to work *with* children on their behaviors, rather than just reacting to specific incidents and perhaps regretting their reactions later. They are

more able to use guidance rather than traditional discipline, and to build a relationship with each child.

To increase your knowledge

The following resources highlight the importance of building relationships with children, one child at a time, to assist with social-emotional development:

Gable, S. 2002. Teacher-child relationships throughout the day. *Young Children* 57 (4): 42–47.

Loomis, C., & J. Wagner. 2005. A different look at challenging behaviors. *Young Children* 60 (2): 94–99.

Watson, M. 2003. Attachment theory and challenging behaviors: Reconstructing the nature of relationships. *Young Children* 58 (4): 12–20.

A step you can take

Implement a planned approach to contact talks. Before you begin, make a chart including each child in your group and covering a four-week period.

Week 1: Note each contact talk with a child (in which you took the time to listen and follow a child's conversation) in that child's box on the chart.

Week 2: Fill in the blanks on your chart from the first week by talking with children with whom you had few (or no) contact talks.

Weeks 3 and 4: Select different children each day, have contact talks with them, and note the talks on your chart. Have talks with each child in your class.

Week 4: Reflect on what you learned about each child from having had the contact talks. Think what the children may have learned from talking with you.

For extra measure: Initiate contact talks with fellow staff and parents.

Reference

Rich, B.A. 1993. Listening to Harry (and solving a problem) in my kindergarten classroom. *Young Children* 48 (6): 52.

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