



Tattling

It Drives Teachers Bonkers

One year in my kindergarten classroom, the amount of tattling was way more than I wanted to deal with. Tired of it, I created a Magic Concern Box and left it in the front of the room with paper and pencils next to it. I introduced the box in a class meeting.

I told the children, "When you need to share your concerns, write them down and put them in the Magic Concern Box." I explained that if someone was injured or crying, they should come to me. I also told them not to worry about whether I could read their writing, but to print their names clearly.

We discussed how the box was magic because when they shared their concerns, a lot of times things could get better. If something didn't get better by choice time, near the end of the day, they could talk with me about it then. We would start with their notes from the box. Occasionally, I did have to follow up. Sometimes I talked with two or three children, and once in a while we held a class meeting to jointly resolve an issue.

I think the children learned a lot, and this approach definitely saved my sanity. Tattling really went down. I got to thinking maybe there was magic in that box.

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, A Guidance Approach for the Encouraging Classroom*, and *What the Kids Said Today*.

Please send your guidance anecdotes and other comments to dgartrell@bemidjistate.edu. Thanks to Amanda Wilcox-Herzog, associate professor of psychology at California State University in San Bernardino, for sharing the anecdote, modified somewhat for this column. Children's names in all anecdotes are changed.

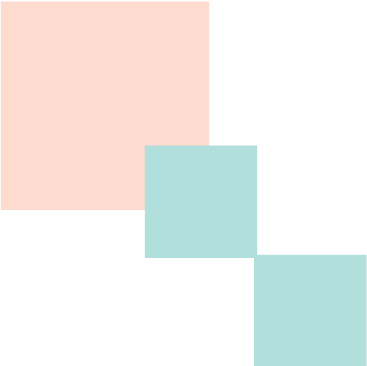
Illustration by Patrick Cavanagh.

LIKE THE TEACHER IN THE ANECDOTE ABOVE, we all want children to learn to solve problems on their own. What we sometimes forget is that the cluster of social/emotional skills involved in social problem solving is complex. To one extent or another, even adults are still learning these skills. Children with only months of life experience and brain development are just beginning to learn social problem solving. No wonder young children frequently make mistakes!

Teachers tend to complain about tattling more than any other behavior. Some teachers, as in the anecdote, are creative and positive in their responses to tattling. One preschool teacher brought in a Big Mouth Billy Bass, the singing fish (without batteries), and told children they could privately share their concerns with Billy. Each day at least two or three children (often the same ones) had lengthy conversations with the nonsinging bass.

Another example is a kindergarten teacher who purchased at a rummage sale a very large model ear that would listen to children if they had a concern to share. A few years later one child, by then a fifth-grader, told her former teacher that she still remembered talking to the ear and feeling better about things when she did.

As noted in the Magic Concern Box anecdote, we adults do want children to report events—if a child is hurt, for instance, or if a new student is going over a fence because he has decided it



is time to go home. It is important for us to teach children in class meetings in what circumstances they should report their concerns. Brief puppet plays by the teacher and another adult can be a helpful way to teach this lesson and others. During the play, the teacher stops the performance and asks the children to analyze what has happened and discuss what they can learn from the situation. The puppeteers then may incorporate the lesson into a second act. The play's theme might be when to report to a teacher or what children can do instead.

Few four-year-olds are likely to address a conflict this way: "Morris, my esteemed classmate, you have absconded with all of the playdough. I ask you please to cease, and instead, please share." Even if a child complains to us about Morris (and without this eloquence), in an encouraging classroom our job is to teach children how to resolve the conflict.

The teacher might say, "Thank you for telling me. I will watch from here, and maybe you can think of how to talk with Morris about this." Or "I can see you are upset. Do you think you can talk with Morris about this yourself, or do you want me to help?" (If the child selects option one, watch, in case you are needed.)

THERE IS NO MAGIC ANSWER HERE. The teacher tries not to get pulled into a conflict; the children may learn more by solving it themselves. At the same time, we need to teach children democratic life skills. Sometimes our direct guidance helps children progress toward this goal.

Remember, we enter conflicts reported by children in order to *mediate*, not because we have lost patience with either child. After calming both, we help the children discuss how each child sees the problem. Our concern is to help the children reconcile their conflicting perceptions, not to find out whose version is true (who knows, anyway?).


It is important to understand that children report concerns for different reasons. A child who believes that harm is being done is probably honestly asking for help. Some children report concerns, often repeatedly, because they feel unimportant in this new classroom world. Only children with a high charm quotient can consistently get teacher affirmation in ways that aren't occasionally irksome. With just-developing *savoir faire*, some children, for example, get our attention by plunking onto our laps from out of the blue, or by tattling. Often, this kind of tattling involves situations in which the children themselves are not involved. Does this pattern sound familiar?

When classrooms are encouraging communities, teachers work hard to help each child feel like a valued citizen. Where children feel encouraged, most have little need to manufacture problems to get teachers' attention.

With individual children who do get into the "tattling habit," however, teachers might take a two-step approach. First, address the situation. Pay enough attention to it so that you know children are *not* being harmed. Second, figure out how to acknowledge the child in other ways, building your relationship and the child's self-esteem.

For example, "Emily, thank you for your concern. I will watch the situation and take care of it if I need to." (Repeat if needed.) "Say, would you like to read a book with me later? Why don't you go pick out one!" (During conversation with the child around the book, you might talk about how the child can make contact with you in other ways besides tattling.)

All children have a right to feel they belong in the classroom community. But some haven't learned yet how to ask for affirmation in less trying ways than tattling. Our job is to teach them those ways.



Finally, a child may report a situation out of a need for power—to control the teacher and maybe get another child in trouble. Perhaps this occurs because the teacher harbors negative feelings about the implicated child; I have seen some teachers get sucked into this situation. The teacher then is reinforcing the inappropriate power of the reporting child. This happening is not pretty.

Conversely, we do want honestly concerned citizens to play a part in our lives. Take a hypothetical traffic accident where an uninvolved third party lends a cell phone. Maybe this person's responsible citizenship began in a preschool classroom.

To many teachers, tattling is irksome, but there is more to this behavior than meets the eye. When we make child reporting into an opportunity for teaching and learning, we are validating the fact that guidance matters.

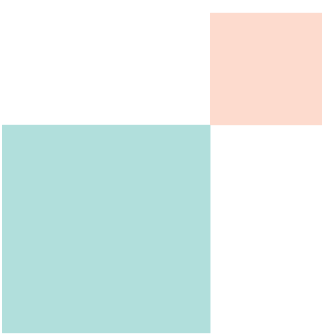
To increase your knowledge:

Check out chapter 10 of Dan's textbook for a more detailed section on working with child reports!

Gartrell, D. 2007. *A guidance approach for the encouraging classroom*, 4th ed. Clifton Park, NY: Thomson/Delmar Learning.

A step you can take:

Think of the children in your class who frequently tattle. Is it because they haven't yet learned how to resolve problems themselves? Are they asking for attention through the act of tattling? Are they seeking to control the situation through the report? Think of a strategy to educate the child away from the need to tattle. Discuss your strategy with other relevant adults. Try it for a week and assess the results. If necessary, make modifications.



Copyright © 2007 by the National Association for the Education of Young Children. See Permissions and Reprints online at www.journal.naeyc.org/about/permissions.asp.