

Why Children's Dispositions Should Matter to **All** Teachers

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Dispositions are frequent and voluntary habits of thinking and doing.

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EARLY CHILDHOOD TEACHERS guide young children's learning in ways that support their development. Traditionally, foremost in teachers' minds is what knowledge and skills children should acquire. Today, however, many teachers are becoming aware of the pivotal role of dispositions in the education of children.

This article examines types of dispositions, their link to children's effective learning, and classroom practices/environments that support them. We emphasize that dispositions and learning experiences are equally important and that teachers can encourage certain dispositions.

Defining dispositions

Dispositions are frequent and voluntary habits of thinking and doing. These habits of mind are not to be confused with mindless habits, such as stopping at a red light (Katz 1993a). Lilian Katz has pondered, spoken, and written about the role of dispositions in children's education for nearly 30 years. She defines "a disposition as a pattern of behavior exhibited frequently . . . in the absence of coercion . . . constituting a habit of mind under some conscious and voluntary control . . . intentional and oriented to broad goals" (1993b, 16).

Another important characteristic of children's dispositions is that they are environmentally sensitive—meaning they are acquired, supported, or weakened by interactive experiences in an environment with significant adults and peers (Bertram & Pascal 2002). These significant adults obviously include teachers in early childhood settings. For example, in Reggio Emilia-inspired schools, teachers purposely integrate materials from nature into activities. A large, ordinary tree branch can become the core for cooperative ribbon



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weaving. The project's centerpiece supports children's dispositions, such as cooperation, creativity, problem solving, and inventiveness.

Educators can further delineate dispositions as desirable or undesirable. Children's desirable dispositions, such as resourcefulness, curiosity, and persistence, can be strengthened. Conversely, teachers can help diminish undesirable dispositions, such as selfishness, impatience, and intolerance. No doubt we all could list dispositions we would like to personally strengthen or diminish and foster in the children we teach.

Katz and Rath (1985) provide clarity to the concept of dispositions by contrasting it with the concepts of attitudes, habits, and traits. Briefly, *attitudes* can be thought of as "pre-dispositions to act positively or negatively with respect to a particular phenomenon" (Katz 1993a, 10). Having a particular attitude does not necessarily result in the display of an accompanying behavior—for example, a child may have a particular discriminatory attitude about children who are obese but may not exhibit discriminatory behavior. *Habits* and *traits* are behavioral patterns performed without conscious attention (Passmore 1972), as seen in some children who approach an art activity with great enthusiasm and vig-

or while other children approach the same activity tentatively and with considerable forethought.

There are three broad types of dispositions:

Inborn dispositions. Innate curiosity is one disposition that parents and teachers can readily see in typically developing babies' need to explore and learn. The ability to bond is another inborn disposition.

Social dispositions. We value some social dispositions, including "the tendency to be accepting, friendly, empathetic, generous, or cooperative" (Katz & McClellan 1997, 7). Conversely, adults tend to view bossiness as an undesirable social disposition.

Intellectual dispositions. These dispositions include making and checking predictions, solving problems, surmising about cause-and-effect relationships, to name a few. In a science center in a kindergarten classroom, a poster features a portrait of Albert Einstein. "Being a Scientist" is its bold heading, followed by a list of ideal dispositions for science: being curious, investigating, collecting and recording precise data, cooperation, communication, seeking answers, asking new questions, and persistence.

Classroom practices/environments that support dispositions

In a public preschool, a four-year-old approaches his teacher with six sheets of paper stapled together in a booklike fashion. Each sheet contains recognizable letters written with a different colored marker. When the teacher asks the preschooler to share a story, he eagerly reads six stories, one on each page. The child not only displays emergent literacy skills but, just as important, the disposition to read and to write.



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This teacher, a knowledgeable, thoughtful, and conscientious educator, however, feels as if she isn't effective in her teaching, that she isn't doing enough early literacy instruction. Her school district's assessment tool measures four-year-olds' abilities to make sound and letter associations as well as to recognize letters. But although the children are gaining knowledge and skills, she believes their dispositions are equally important.

All the children in her classroom—half of whom are English-language learners—engage in meaningful activities that support integrated learning of concepts and skills. The children invent play scenarios at a blanket-covered table labeled Cave for Hibernating Bears. They expand their creativity in the art center, investigate how body fat keeps bears warm by using a lard-covered rubber glove and a pail of ice in the science center, and read books depicting classmates engaged in classroom and field trip activities in the library center. All these activities demonstrate how this teacher is encouraging dispositions to explore, make predictions and check predictions, and communicate with others, which assessment does not measure.

When program expectations focus primarily on knowledge and skill acquisition, important dispositions are often ignored. When a teacher relies on drill and decontextualized activities to achieve mandated learning outcomes instead of fostering skill development through meaningful integrated learning, the dispositions that children need to use their skills will likely diminish (Hatch 2002). A prime example of decontextualized activities is the often inane letter-of-the-week task, such as having children glue rice on the letter *R*. More meaningful, effective activities include using children's names as a springboard to learn letters and promote early literacy (Kirk & Clark 2005; McNair 2007).

Practices that undermine the development of positive dispositions jeopardize the likelihood that children will become lifelong learners (Bertram & Pascal 2002). To be effective, teachers need to pay more attention to nurturing children's dispositions.

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The link between dispositions and effective learning

Bertram and Pascal identify three core elements of effective learners: "dispositions to learn, social competence and self-concept, and social and emotional well-being" (2002, 246). The researchers argue that a primary focus "on subject knowledge, particularly language and mathematics competency" (p. 241) is insufficient, and they urge teachers to focus on wider outcomes to sustain the development of young minds.

Four dispositions are indicative of the effective learner, according to Bertram and Pascal (2002). Below, an explanation of each disposition is followed by an example (from one coauthor's classroom or program) showing what a teacher can do to nurture the disposition.

1. Independence—the "ability to be self-sufficient, to self-organize, and [to] self-manage" (p. 248).

After a month of modeling daily classroom routines, procedures, and tasks, Sally begins assigning chores to the four-year-olds. The children have witnessed her daily upkeep of their room and are eager to help. Nicholas says, "Mrs. Haughey, we are the teachers now." Helping children feel responsible allows them to become self-sufficient.



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2. Creativity—“characterized by those children who show curiosity and interest in their world. . . . The creative child is imaginative, spontaneous, and innovative” (p. 248).

Sally avoids cookie-cutter art projects and instead encourages open-ended art activities. She periodically provides different media and schedules time for children to fully explore each art material and to complete their projects. As a result, children make their own decisions in the creative process.

3. Self-motivation—enabling “children, independently, to become deeply involved and engrossed in activities and challenges” (p. 249). Motivated children expend the necessary energy to achieve their goals.

Instead of worrying about Hector spending too much time with blocks, his teacher provides additional materials to support his continued exploration and elaborate block constructions. Hector is an English-language learner, and his block-building talent enables him to bridge the language barrier and invite his peers to join in his play. His teacher, Sally, knows that blocks are rich with opportunities to enhance social, cognitive, language, and physical development. She encourages individual interests and wants the children to experience the deep satisfaction of achieving a goal.

4. Resilience—evidenced by children’s ability to bounce back “after setback, hindrance, or frustration and retain temperament, personality, and spirit” (p. 249).

When teachers approach each day as a fresh opportunity and see children in a new light instead of dwelling on the previous day’s events, the children can feel comfortable in the classroom environment. In Sally’s room, Jimmy, a four-year-old whose hands, feet, and eyes constantly go in all directions, has little sense of boundaries. At times he is a danger to himself and others. He darts here and there as the children walk down the hall and during outdoor play. Cognitively, Jimmy doesn’t understand what it means to be part of a group; he has to physically experience being a group member.

Sally accepts this spirited boy and gives him opportunities to learn how to be part of the class. During transitions, she often gives him something to carry or offers him her hand. She also works with his family to establish limits at home. In this culture of acceptance, Jimmy relaxes and develops the social skills needed to participate in the classroom community.

With an understanding of what children need to be successful learners, teachers can set the stage for learning. This knowledge of needs compels those involved in the education of children, and future teachers alike, to advocate for broadening the goals of desired child outcomes.

Supporting desirable dispositions

When people describe good teachers, they mention dispositions such as being accepting, stimulating, and encouraging. Conversely, they describe poor teachers “in terms of such dispositions as impatience, remoteness, being rejecting, cold, and so forth” (Katz & Raths 1985, 305). One teacher educator routinely asks preservice teachers to reflect on their education experiences and describe their teachers’ positive and negative characteristics. Inevitably, the students describe such dispositions as caring, welcoming, considerate, and engaged versus aloof and impatient.



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In children

Effective early childhood teachers recognize their roles in strengthening desirable dispositions in children. They know their actions and attitudes send implicit messages. When teachers display curiosity and creativity and value the same dispositions in children, these are likely to flourish in the classroom.

Good teachers acknowledge and appreciate children's efforts. They provide specific feedback, such as "You used a lot of colors," instead of making general statements, such as "Good job." They refrain from using extrinsic rewards like prizes or food. In addition, the teacher who establishes a classroom ethos that values cooperation instead of competition creates the conditions that support and encourage children to get along as they play and work together.

Through families

Teachers can influence parents' perceptions of their children's dispositions. For example, during parent-teacher conferences, a teacher might reframe parental concerns in terms of dispositions. One mother worried that her daughter exhibited characteristics not typical of four-year-olds. Amanda was unusually sensitive to the emotions of her classmates. When Amanda began preschool, she often overreacted to children's responses to her by sulking, withdrawing, and refusing to participate. In response to these negative behaviors, Sally offered Amanda various art media, which she turned into flowery, tiny books that conveyed emotion. Next, Sally wrote Amanda's words in the books. In so doing, she could use the books to share her emotions in safe ways.

Sally allayed the mother's fears by pointing out that Amanda was a perceptive observer of her environment and sensitive to others' emotions. What Amanda's mother considered abnormal and worrisome, Sally viewed as strengths. Her affirming alternative viewpoint highlighted Amanda's positive dispositions: her deep curiosity about the world around her and her uncanny ability to accurately perceive others' emotions. She said Amanda's insights continually amazed her, and that with guidance and encouragement, Amanda now felt safe sharing herself and her feelings with her classmates. Many times she organized and began special projects such as building huge block constructions.

Sally vividly recalled when Zack, a shy boy, transferred to her morning class midyear. Zack would not participate in any play activities and often hid under a table. On the first day that Amanda joined the morning session instead of the afternoon class, she invited Zack, who was hiding under the table, to "come play with me. You are my new best friend." Zack emerged, and in response to Amanda's "I'm the mom," he spoke for the first time, declaring, "I'm the dad."



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Instead of comparing Amanda with her peers, her mother began seeing her as resourceful, insightful, intuitive, observant, articulate, curious, and creative. She left the conference feeling relieved and empowered to support her daughter's dispositions.

By using good practice

Teachers sometimes inadvertently weaken children's positive dispositions. The increased emphasis on early literacy in some schools has resulted in the use of inappropriate teaching strategies and a decrease in children's eagerness

to be readers and writers (Neuman & Roskos 2005). Katz (1995) calls this situation the damaged disposition hypothesis. For example, when a teacher asks a four-year-old to write the alphabet on lined paper, odds are the child will not enjoy writing because many children, especially boys, have not developed the fine motor control to complete this task.

Regrettably, educators have paid scant attention to the damaging of children's desirable dispositions. Katz and Chard (2000) propose two reasons for this lack of attention: first, dispositions are rarely assessed in early childhood programs; and second, direct instruction in reading readiness activities yields better outcomes on some standardized tests—no matter that heavy reliance on formal instruction methods can

harm young children (Hart et al. 1993). Overreliance on drill can increase test scores at the expense of dispositions.

With children our focus

The National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE), the teaching profession's accrediting body, now requires documentation of how pre-service teachers use, nurture, and assess children's dispositions. Evidence of dispositions is required in three of the six NCATE standards (NCATE 2006). Clearly, the field is giving more attention to the nature and role of dispositions in children's learning.

Conclusion

Teachers can diligently plan learning experiences that help children acquire skills *and* the disposition to use those skills. Our university preservice students, who sometimes are mothers of elementary school children, often tell us in exasperation that their children have stopped reading for pleasure. This anecdotal evidence may indicate that some educators, while trying to

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We have the power to open up the world for children and their families.

create proficient readers, damage children's disposition to read. The unintended outcome is *aliterate* children—that is, children who can read but don't want to or avoid reading (Noyes 2000). Knowledge and skills and the disposition to use them are inextricably connected.

Early on, Lilian Katz cautioned, "Dispositions are always more or less influenced by experiences in early childhood education programs, whether by intention or by default" (1977, 66). Does placing too much emphasis on conformity and uniformity undermine the disposition to be creative? How does insisting that children change learning centers every 15 minutes affect children's dispositions to become deeply absorbed in an activity?

Effective early childhood teachers consider whether their behaviors empower or undermine children's dispositions, then alter their practices accordingly. We have the power to open up the world for children and their families. Let's not miss opportunities to reframe children's behaviors into positive dispositions.

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