



GUIDANCE MATTERS

Dan Gartrell

Comprehensive Guidance

I MET JOE AND HIS MOTHER, Becky, at a Getting to Know You conference before school started. Joe seemed to be a curious, typical 2½-year-old. His mother was young and a full-time college student. I could tell immediately that Becky truly loved her son, and she appeared to be a good caregiver.

Two weeks into the program, Joe began to have trouble getting along with other children. His anxiety level, beginning at drop-off time, seemed to be high. When his personal space was “invaded,” often during group activities, Joe responded by pulling children’s hair, kicking, or yelling Shut up! When teachers intervened, Joe cried and kicked them. After a few weeks of attempting to guide Joe to use kind words and gentle touches, the director, other staff members, and I decided we needed to pursue a more comprehensive approach.

I began holding short weekly conferences with Becky to get to know her better and to offer her encouragement in her parenting. One day, shortly after our meeting I happened to look out the window and notice Becky sitting on the steps, crying. I took my break early and went out to talk with her. Becky shared her frustration over Joe’s behavior: “Why does he act this way? I am tired and don’t understand. He is so naughty!”

I responded, “Joe is a very sweet and special boy, and his behavior is the way he responds to stress. He feels threatened by many things right now, and he reacts in the only way he knows. It is mistaken behavior, and it is our job to guide him. It isn’t an easy job.” I reached over and gave her a hug.

My friendship with Becky continued to grow and so did her trust in me. Together with other staff members and the director, we developed an individual guidance plan for Joe. At one conference, Becky suggested that we implement a reward system. We tried a sticker chart that recorded and rewarded hourly progress.

Becky and I decided that we would call her any time three serious conflicts occurred in a day. When Joe and I called, I first explained the situation to Becky and then had Joe talk with her. Becky was firm but loving. Joe loved talking with his mother, and we would generally see a more relaxed Joe after these phone calls. (I kept tabs to make sure the calls didn’t become a “habit.”)

Joe’s conflicts with other children continued, and he needed someone nearby at all times to direct him to more appropriate behavior. I would calm Joe by holding and rocking him. Sometimes I sang. After Joe was calm, I used guidance talks, and he talked to me about what happened. These interactions encouraged bonding and a feeling of trust between us.

I also used humor. I gave Joe options of words to use when he was upset. Yelling “Pickle!” became a favorite. I also gave Joe a cushy ball to hold during stressful situations such as circle time and made sure that a student teacher or I sat next to him. We rubbed Joe’s back or arm or held him on our laps. The ball kept his hands busy and the touch calmed him.

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Please send your guidance anecdotes and other comments to dgartrell@bemidjistate.edu.

Thanks to teacher Robin Bakken, director Dacia Dauner, and the staff of Campus Childcare at Bemidji State University for their case study illustrating comprehensive guidance. Thanks also to Joe and Becky, whose names were changed.

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Drop-off time was difficult for Joe and set the mood for the day. With the director's assistance, I arranged to meet him in the office or lounge to spend one-on-one time with him, playing a game or reading. The other staff noticed the difference in Joe—and the entire group—on the days I helped ease him into the class.

Eventually Becky agreed with the staff that an outside mental health assessment was needed for Joe's behavior. Dealing with people outside our center made Becky uncomfortable; to ease her stress, I stayed involved during the assessment process. I worked with the director and others to find resources for Becky; these included a family play therapy program and the school district's Early Childhood Family Education classes for young parents. To keep up communication, the teaching staff who worked the later shift talked daily with Becky, and I left Happy Grams. Throughout this whole time, the director was a great support to me—and to Becky too.

One day, four months into working with Joe, he was building with Legos when a classmate sat down next to him and took a Lego off Joe's tower. Joe's previous response would have been to pull the child's hair. This time, however, he shouted, "NO, thank you!" We were so proud of Joe for using his words.

Our guidance plan was finally showing success. Joe learned to say what he needed and what he didn't like. Baby steps were all we needed. Joe grew and so did we.

THE EXPERIENCED PROFESSIONAL in this case study teaches young preschoolers at a university lab center located, like some university child care centers, in converted dormitory space. Her success with Joe and Becky was due to her belief in them and hard work to provide the leadership that supports comprehensive guidance.

From this column and many other sources, teachers can learn ways to address children's conflicts that build social-emotional skills—through teaching rather than punishment. Teachers use comprehensive guidance when the individual techniques that usually resolve problems don't work by themselves and a child's conflicts continue.

Comprehensive guidance begins with a plan for use with a particular child and family, sometimes (but not always) called an individual guidance plan (IGP) (Gartrell 2007). The plan includes a mix of strategies that build relationships (teacher-child and teacher-family), reduce the need for conflicts, guide children to resolve their conflicts, and teach children to get along in groups. (See "To Increase Your Knowledge," p. 4) Comprehensive guidance relies on the teacher working with other staff and the family as closely as possible, so that the child receives a unified message from the important adults in his or her life. As suggested in the case study, the program administrator must give support for comprehensive guidance to happen.

Relationship with the family

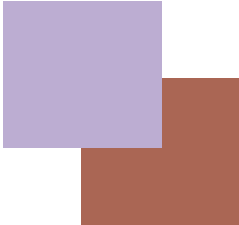
Teachers often find relationships with families the most challenging part of comprehensive guidance. Robin began building a relationship with Becky even before Joe started his first day. Knowing a custodial adult *before* conflicts (or accidents) happen is important. Notice also that Robin didn't just meet with Becky to deal with Joe's problems. Sometimes teachers see families only as a "cause" of the child's conflicts and a likely obstacle to improving the situation (Manning & Schindler 1997). The relationship with a child's family members should have a life of its own. The teacher takes an interest in the family because they are members of the classroom community.

Individual guidance plans

Individual guidance plans often are the outcome of a formal meeting of all staff who work with the child, family members, and even (with the family's permission) outside professionals. The plans can be written out on forms and periodically reviewed and revised or can be arrived at more informally, through a series of phone calls and on-the-run discussions. In either case, family and teachers must be on the same page. (See "A Step You Can Take," p. 4, for information on using an IGP.)

Robin got Becky actively involved in writing and using the plan and even facilitated an outside assessment for Joe. The teacher kept the cooperation going, taking suggestions and giving them in a friendly way. Robin also worked out a series of techniques that she consistently used with Joe—and encouraged other staff to use. The approach

- recognized Joe's need not just for attention but for a positive attachment with a teacher who cared about him.
- engaged Robin in contact talks (quality time) with Joe outside of conflict situations to build Joe's sense of worth and belonging. Key here were Robin's "good morning" contacts when Joe first arrived.
- used crisis management techniques, especially touch, that calmed Joe and helped maintain his relationship with the teachers (Carlson 2006).
- taught Joe coping skills to handle strong feelings through guidance talks.
- was "unrelentingly positive" (to borrow a term I once heard Marian Marion use), giving ongoing acknowledgment of Joe's and Becky's efforts, progress, and worth as individuals.



Comprehensive guidance takes teamwork among staff, family members, and sometimes outside professionals. Comprehensive guidance means trying, evaluating, and modifying a mix of guidance techniques that convey to the child this message: "You are special because you are you and are in this class. You can learn to get along with others and have a good time." All staff, beginning with the director, need to work together in this complex effort. Administrative support is essential.

Only after comprehensive guidance has been used to the fullest ability of staff without success should anyone raise the possibility of removing a child from the program. In such a case, the staff should work hard to help the family find a good alternative placement that will address the child's needs.

Comprehensive guidance can and often does succeed. Joe remained in Robin's classroom for the whole program year. He and his mom moved to another community the following summer. Were their lives touched for the better? What do you think?

References

- Carlson, F.M. 2006. *Essential touch: Meeting the needs of young children*. Washington, DC: NAEYC.
- Gartrell, D.J. 2007. *A guidance approach for the encouraging classroom*. 4th ed. Clifton Park, NY: Delmar/Cengage.
- Manning, D., & P. Schindler. 1997. Communicating with parents when their children have difficulties. *Young Children* 52 (5): 27–33.



To increase your knowledge

Teachers are rarely taught how to discuss troubling information with parents about their children. These articles offer some useful ideas.

Kaufman, H. 2001. Skills for working with all families. *Young Children* 56 (4): 81–83.

Kaufman offers strategies for building working relations with families with low incomes and those that speak a home language other than English, a key element in the guidance approach.

Gartrell, D. 2004 *The Power of Guidance*. Clifton Park, NY: Delmar Learning/Cengage; Washington, DC: NAEYC.

Chapter 10 discusses comprehensive guidance and includes a case study illustrating the use of an IGP.

A step you can take

Develop and use an individual guidance plan with a child who is having continued conflicts over time. Go to <http://danielgartrell1.efoliomn2.com>. Here you can access information on comprehensive guidance and individual guidance plans, including *Seven Steps of Comprehensive Guidance and Notes for Conducting IGP Meetings*. You can also get an Individual Guidance Plan Worksheet by clicking on Download Versions.

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