



GUIDANCE MATTERS

Dan Gartrell

Aggression, the Prequel

Preventing the Need

Harrison was 27 months old when he joined the toddler room. After a few days, Harrison began to have conflicts just after arriving in the morning. He would not wash his hands or come to the breakfast table. When teacher Rena tried to invite him, he worked himself into a rage, yelling the *F* word (with his own particular pronunciation) and throwing things. Because his behavior distressed the other toddlers, Rena had to physically move him to a far corner of the room and hold him until he calmed down.

When Harrison repeated this behavior over the following days, Rena talked with Betty, his young mom, whom she had met only a few days earlier. Rena said she enjoyed having Harrison in her group. But, she told Betty, he was having a problem, especially after he arrived, and she wanted to help him. Betty shared that their house was small, and the activities of some family members often kept Harrison from settling down and getting to sleep. From their conversation, Rena concluded that the toddler's aggressive behavior was due to lack of sleep related to conditions at home.

Rena worked out a strategy with Betty and the other staff. When Harrison arrived in the morning, she approached him in a low-key way and gave him the choice of getting ready for breakfast or snuggling. Harrison usually chose snuggling and occasionally fell asleep. During the day, Rena gave him choices between two activities. Harrison began making choices and participating more. Rena and the two assistant teachers also sought out opportunities for one-on-one snuggling and *contact talks*—a

few minutes of shared quality time—with him throughout each day.

Over that first month, Rena developed a relationship with Betty, who disclosed a bit more about the family's home situation. Rena learned that two male members of the family were particularly affected by poverty and clinical depression. This led Rena to refer the family to Early Head Start, where they could receive family assistance; however, there was a waiting list and therefore no opening for Harrison.

Sometimes Harrison ate breakfast. He tended to eat late and eat little, but at least he started eating. Gradually Harrison accepted the toddler routine. Rena remained open to his need for a morning snuggle, but Harrison needed closeness on arrival only some days. The staff realized that while they could not change Harrison's home environment, they could help him feel safe and welcome in the toddler room and maintain a positive relationship with his mother.

Harrison was clearly bringing a high stress level to the toddler room. Rena guessed that the stress was largely due to Harrison's having to transition from one chaotic situation at home to what he perceived as another chaotic situation in the classroom. When he was tired and stressed by his family situation, Harrison's fear about getting on with the day with a classroom of strangers totally occupied his mind.

"Teacher, I am stressed by my home life and overwhelmed by the prospect of today's program. I need immediate cuddling to allay my stress" is not a sentiment that a toddler brain is capable of communicating. Instead, Harrison expressed his anxiety, frustration, and anger by swearing and throwing things. The conflict, along with the teacher's immediate reaction, resulted in an adrenalin rush, temporarily masking the stress he was feeling. The toddler concluded, pre-consciously, that (in the toddler room, anyway) having a tantrum was powerful behavior. Using the vocabulary of two previous Guidance Matters columns, Harrison's *reactive aggression*

Dan Gartrell, EdD, is emeritus professor of early childhood and foundations 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 possible guidance anecdotes and other comments to dgartrell@bemidjistate.edu.

This column is dedicated to the staff of Campus Childcare (CCC) at Bemidji State University. Several anecdotes for the column, including this one, were adapted from stories related by the program's caring teachers, student teachers, and administrators. After two decades of service, CCC has closed.

An archive of Guidance Matters columns is available online at www.naeyc.org/yc/columns.

(Gartrell 2011a) was becoming *instrumental aggression* (Gartrell 2011b).

Rena's strategy for supporting Harrison is a key to helping toddlers and young children move past the need for aggression. Giving Harrison a choice of going to breakfast or cuddling may seem permissive, but the staff understood Rena's plan. Her strategy was to lower Harrison's stress level through a stable relationship with his teacher, which then made it possible for him to learn coping skills other than acting out (Gartrell 2011a). She was able to affirm the toddler's self-worth by having him directly participate in the resolution of his problems.

Because the start of the day is such a busy time, teachers often find it challenging to have personal contact talks when a young child first arrives in their classroom (Gartrell 2006). Still, I have found that this can be a wise time investment that frequently benefits the

Contact talks with toddlers tend to be snuggly; with preschoolers and older, the talks tend to be more one-on-one, friendly conversations—though sitting on a lap is still a possibility. The talks don't have to be long, but they do need to happen. Talks may occur spontaneously, but teachers also proactively make the time for this essential relationship-building practice—on arrival and throughout the day.

entire group. Rena and the assistant teachers also continued the contact talks during the day. They understood that building a relationship requires them to have personal time with the child outside of conflict situations.

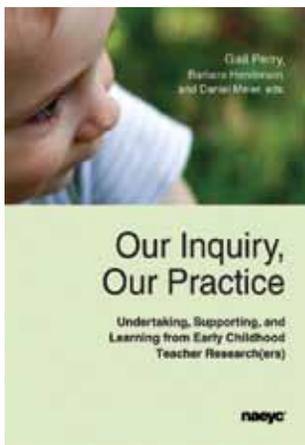
The neuroscience of attachment

An authority on neuroscience (the study of the structure and functioning of the brain) and human relationships, Daniel Siegel (2001) begins his clas-

sic work, *The Developing Mind: How Relationships and the Brain Interact to Shape Who We Are*, with a basic concept: the brain is an open system that physically changes throughout life in response to experiences, especially those engendered by close relationships. Experiences shape not only the information that enters the mind, but also the way the brain "develops the ability to process that information" (16). Siegel emphasizes that the most important relationships for building healthy brains occur in early life.

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During the early years, the making of a mind results from an amazing dual function of the genes each person is born with (Siegel 2001). Siegel's colleague Louis Cozolino (2006) explains the miracle of *plastic neuroarchitecture*—the brain's ability to develop in form and function—this way: At first, human genes build a basic brain structure that is plastic. Then the genes trigger continuing brain development by converting the individual's perceptions of experiences into actual brain matter.

As a result of social experiences, some parts of the brain develop greatly and other parts, circumvented and unused, are pruned back. In this way, our relationships fundamentally affect how our brain develops and functions, which in turn influences the brains of the people with whom we interact (Siegel 2001). The transcription of experience into brain matter is best understood by recognizing that 70 percent of the brain's structure forms *after birth* (Cozolino 2006).

During early childhood, healthy relationships with caregivers support development of the prefrontal cortex in the left hemisphere of the brain (Siegel 2001; Cozolino 2006). Healthy formation of the prefrontal cortex ensures development of *executive functions*. These are the gradually emerging abilities to manage emotions, recall and process thought, make decisions, and interact with others.

Problems occur when a child's primary caregiver, due to personal circumstances, cannot provide a secure attachment. As a result, the child perceives the caregiver to be distant and rejecting, seriously inconsistent, and/

or flat-out frightening (Cozolino 2006). The more serious the attachment disconnect, the more difficult it becomes for the child to develop healthy executive functioning.

Young children who experience chronic high stress

- become oversensitive to the threat aspect of situations, making fight or flight reactions likely
- develop a self-fulfilling expectation of rejection, based on their emerging negative self-image
- imprint hurtful experiences in long-term unconscious memory—for example, a learned dislike of school that might show itself in a variety of stress-caused behaviors (even into adulthood) (Siegel 2001; Cozolino 2006).

With stress levels high, the child is in danger of falling into the habit of using aggression as a mistaken coping mechanism (the best defense is a good offense). The danger for the child is a cycle of stress, conflict, adult rejection, negative self-messages, and renewed stress. Siegel and Cozolino make the case that aggression is a symptom of a hurting brain, a child's cry for help.

Application

Through Rena's use of guidance practices, she was able to build a secondary, but still essential, secure attachment in Harrison's young life. Through her relationship with Betty, Rena worked to further Harrison's healthy attachment with his mother. His renewed trust in key adults in his life enabled Harrison to reduce his stress

level, see the world as less threatening, and begin the long-term work of developing executive functions.

Rena had the ability to see the child beyond the behavior and to teach Harrison rather than punish him. In *Mind in the Making*, Galinsky (2010) discusses teacher practices that lead children to develop essential life skills:

- Perspective taking, being able to see situations as others do. Rena sought to understand Harrison rather than to judge him.
- Practicing what we preach. Rena modeled calmness, compassion, and acceptance in her actions with both child and mother.
- Understanding that a warm relationship is the best foundation for healthy personal growth. Rena helped Harrison feel known and accepted as a worthy child.

By the time he turned 3, Harrison had made real progress in Rena's room, although he still had a way to go. Teachers have the opportunity to provide warm, trusting relationships with children that can help mitigate the impact of difficult life circumstances. As a caring professional, Rena did just that. The teacher made a difference in Harrison's life that will stay with the child long after his year in Rena's toddler classroom.

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