

Guidance MATTERS

Dan Gartrell



Young Children is pleased to introduce **Guidance MATTERS**, a regular feature by Dan Gartrell. In this column, “Dr. Dan” shares and comments on early childhood educators’ use of guidance to foster young children’s development and learning.

A concerned director writes:

I recently gave a tour of our center to the mother of a young child. I explained that our program is both play based and developmentally appropriate. The mother asked if academics were included or if the children just played all day. I explained that the academic standards are embedded in the planned activities for the day; therefore, the children are playing and very busy doing the educational work of young children.

The mother then asked a question that caught me completely offguard: “Does anyone ever fail in your three-year-olds’ program?”

I am sure the look on my face was complete amazement. “Absolutely *not!*” I told her. “We strive to develop a love of learning in every child. We want children to feel free to hypothesize, experiment, and reach conclusions. They cannot possibly develop these thinking skills and a love of learning if they are concerned about being right or wrong.”

The mother looked relieved. She then told me her son Amos was in a program that would retain him if he were unable to write his name by the end of the year. We talked about what was developmentally appropriate for three-year-olds in the context of name writing. She enrolled Amos on the spot, pulling him out of the other center.

A successful outcome

Since this incident, the director of the preschool that took Amos in reports that he has completed a happy and active year in the three-year-olds’ class and moved on with his group. Amos prints a pretty clear *A*, and the flourish that is the rest of his name contains an increasing number of recognizable letters.

This director got it right. In a developmentally appropriate setting, we should expect the progress that Amos is making, in his own time. Research on the brain informs us that in any act of learning, there is a thinking component and a feeling component. When a child learns something and feels positive about the learning experience, the brain is developing optimally. Internal development and external teaching are in harmony. The child’s engagement in the learning act is total. The child’s brain secretes happy hormones (apologies to brain researchers) that make further learning intriguing, not stressful. For this moment and the next, all is well in the child’s world. And happy children very much want to get along with each other.

The heart of guidance

This is the first of a series of short pieces I have been invited to write for *Young Children*. I am honored. My area of expertise is using guidance—the commitment a teacher makes to teaching children how to solve their problems rather than punishing them for having problems they haven’t learned how to solve. Developmentally appropriate practice means that within the context of an encouraging community, each individual child is empowered to engage wholeheartedly with *all* the problems of learning. For this reason, developmentally appropriate practice is at the heart of guidance.

Only in developmentally appropriate practice are chances maximized for healthy development in *all* the human intelligences. And we must not underestimate the importance of two intelligences in particular: social and emotional—the capacity to feel special “just for who we are” and to treat others kindly because we can accept that they are special too.

The role of teachers

Think about your favorite teacher (and I fervently hope you can recall at least one). I’ll bet that teacher not only

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Illustration by Patrick Cavanagh.

made subjects intriguing but accepted you as a developing person with your own unique approach. You probably accomplished a lot in that class—and still feel warmly about the experience. You may even be a teacher because of that teacher! So, okay, you did have some conflicts, but the teacher helped you understand that you could learn from your mistakes. That teacher knew enough, cognitively and emotionally, to try to make the program developmentally appropriate for you. Am I right?

You know, millions of us

- can read, but don't much
- would prefer that someone else balance our checkbooks (me for sure)
- might never write a letter to a politician or speak up at a hearing—even though we could.

Teaching the whole child

In a democracy like ours, these are basic abilities for every adult to have and use. When education is reduced to group-focused instruction of a sequenced curriculum—assessed in standardized ways—much joy goes out of learning (and usually teaching).

Too many in our population find little personal meaning in the knowledge and skills they learn at school. Most of

these folks just sit there until the time is up, pass their standardized tests—because they have been trained to—and then get out. On the other hand, some young people become stressed, act out, rebel—and are “disciplined.” Sometimes these students adjust and become able to sit and listen, but other times they can't change enough for the system and may eventually drop out or be forced out.

Think of the future for a child who must repeat the three-year-olds' class because he cannot write his name. At age three, he may already be regarded as a failure by his family and teachers. Think of an adolescent who drops out because she cannot hide the fact that she hates school and believes she cannot pass state-required examinations. Losing faith in one's ability to learn is a long-term, psychologically jarring life experience.

From my viewpoint, a major task is teaching adults and children the vital role of healthy personal development in education. One could say (without blame to many early childhood educators) that this task should have been accomplished in the last century. It has become our challenge to accomplish the task during this one. Social and emotional intelligences (above all others) will bring our world successfully into the twenty-first century.

To increase your knowledge:

Visit the Web site of The Center on the Social and Emotional Foundations for Early Learning (<http://csefel.uiuc.edu>). This national center, funded by Head Start and the Child Care Bureau in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, is a multi-university, multi-organization collaboration focused on strengthening the capacity of child care and Head Start programs to improve the social and emotional outcomes of young children. A series of “What Works” briefs describe practical strategies, provide references to more information, and include a one-page handout highlighting major points. The Web site also offers English and Spanish versions of trainer and participant materials for four training modules on social and emotional development.

A step you can take:

Think about what you can do to help others understand that development and learning must be in harmony for a child's education to be of lasting value.

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