

CHAPTER 1

The Power of “Good Morning”

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It’s 3:30 a.m., and Nathaniel, a 3-year-old in my preschool classroom, is awoken by a familiar hand. As Nathaniel’s mother does each weekday morning, she wakes him and his 1-year-old sister so they can get ready for their day. Nathaniel and his sister will spend the morning at their grandmother’s house until school starts, and Nathaniel’s mother will head to work as an EMT (while balancing schoolwork of her own).

Once Nathaniel and his sister arrive at their grandmother’s house, they usually fall back asleep until it’s time to leave for school. Their grandmother drops off Nathaniel’s sister at a child care center and then Nathaniel at our preschool before she goes to work.

At the beginning of the year, Nathaniel often arrived at school late and either crying or concealing outward signs of emotion. As the weeks passed, he took a long time to warm up and generally kept to himself. It was clear that Nathaniel struggled with big emotions. I was concerned that he continued to engage in solitary activities; he often stayed alone in the cozy corner of the classroom instead of interacting with his peers.

As Nathaniel’s first teacher, I had an important job. I needed to create a secure relationship with him and find ways to be responsive to his individual strengths and challenges, his interests, and his approaches to learning and interacting with others. With his trust in me, Nathaniel could feel comfortable exploring the environment and curriculum of his new classroom community.

I engaged with Nathaniel during different activities, and I observed and took notes throughout the day. I talked with his mother to learn more about their family life and routines, her hopes for Nathaniel, and the challenges facing her family. As I got to know Nathaniel and his family more, I decided that I needed to change my actions as a teacher. Even in my intentional practices, there was more for me to do. I made the conscious and deliberate effort to be right at the door each day when Nathaniel arrived at school.

Intentional Morning Greetings

At the beginning of the school year, I had worked to establish a predictable morning routine to help children adjust to coming into school. I used pictures for instructions, and I talked about arrival time during our first circle time. Many children were able to come into the classroom, hang up their belongings, wash their hands, and engage in free play with ease. However, I noticed that some children struggled during this period of transition and needed more support. When the struggles continued after the first two months of school, I realized that I needed to change my intentional practices in order to meet the needs of all of the children.

Upon making the decision to adjust my morning greetings, I changed where I positioned myself and the words I used. For Nathaniel, I got down on his level and said greetings like, “Good morning, Nathaniel, I’m so glad you’re here!” or “Good morning, Nathaniel, I’ve been waiting to see you!” At first, Nathaniel did not respond to my attempts to make a connection. Knowing that building a strong relationship takes time and consistency, I maintained my new morning greetings. After a few months of this new approach, Nathaniel smiled; soon, he was comfortable responding to me in different ways and, in time, our morning greeting consisted of a hug and a cross-handed high five, a greeting Nathaniel chose.

During our more intentional morning greetings, Nathaniel began to open up and share parts of his world with me. He told me that he loves dinosaurs, especially pterodactyls, and he wonders what it must be like to fly like one. He mentioned that his sister loves her teddy bear and that she had recently been sick. The morning greeting took only a few minutes, but in that time, I learned about what interested and concerned Nathaniel and about the people who are most important to him. Had our greeting remained the same as it was at the beginning of the year, I would

have missed valuable moments to learn about and be responsive to Nathaniel.



Educators use their knowledge of each child and family to make learning experiences meaningful, accessible, and responsive. They plan the environment, schedule, and daily activities to promote each child's development and learning.

One morning in early spring, Nathaniel arrives with a wide-eyed smile on his face. I realize that his mother has come to drop him off today. Nathaniel and I go about our now well-established morning greeting. Nathaniel looks up at his mother and says, "See, Mom—I told you our 'good morning' would make you smile."

As Nathaniel continues his morning routine, his mother tells me that Nathaniel is more talkative at home and shares more about his school day. He has told his mother that he and I have a time set aside to say "good morning" when he arrives, and it makes him feel special. He has also told his mother that he feels excited to come to school and share a smile with me. His mother says, "Thank you. You have made him excited to learn and to come to school. He is smiling so much now."

This conversation gave me insights into the power of morning greetings. By being intentional, I was able to connect with and respond to Nathaniel, and this intentional morning greeting offered connections with the important people in his life. Nathaniel's mother began to trust me and share her struggles and difficulties, which allowed me opportunities to share helpful resources with her.

Planning for and Carrying Out Intentional Morning Greetings

The practice of an intentional morning greeting can empower young children to embrace their day and their learning. Young children may be experiencing challenges or anxieties beyond the classroom, whether their teachers are aware of them or not. Classrooms must be safe and secure environments where children are free to explore and learn and are able to build and practice resilience.

Here are four effective ways to plan for and carry out individualized morning greetings in your program:

- › **Greet each child with a smile.** You help set the tone for the day. A smile signals to each child that they are in a safe place and that they belong there.
- › **Use each child's name.** When a child hears their name, not only do they realize that the greeting is for them, they also understand that the teacher is thinking about them.
- › **Include personalized information.** Use statements such as "Jordan, I remember you had swim class last night. I can't wait to hear all about it!" and "Jada, you were excited to watch a movie with your family last night. Tell me more about it during breakfast." "Sofia, I noticed you brought a toy dog with you today. Is that dog similar to your dog at home?" or "Antonio, I remember you wanted to play with the blocks today, so I put them out for free play. I can't wait to see what you are going to build!" Statements like these show each child that you pay attention to their interests and look forward to learning more about them.
- › **Offer options for morning greetings.** Some children need physical touch and support to start their day: handshakes, hugs, high fives, or other movements can help you greet each child when they arrive. Other children prefer a wave, facial expressions, or words rather than physical touch. Introducing these options, providing pictures that model various greetings, and asking for a child's preference give children the sense that they belong and are cared for and enable them to be comfortable with their individual morning greeting.

Although Nathaniel has since moved on from my classroom, his mother still keeps in touch. Nathaniel and his sister are both doing well in and outside of school, and their mother has completed her degree program and is thriving in her work as a nurse. While I won't forget Nathaniel's start of the year, I cherish the smile Nathaniel gained from the power of "good morning" and the lessons I learned moving forward as an intentional teacher.

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