CHILD-GUIDED experiences are especially important for learnings such as:

Social Awareness | **Feeling empathy**

Empathy involves comprehending another person's feelings and being able to imagine oneself in that person's place. Being empathic includes traits such as care for others, compassion, and altruism. Empathy has both a cognitive and an affective dimension. To be fully capable of experiencing and demonstrating empathy, a child must be developmentally capable of seeing a situation from someone else's perspective (Cigala, Mori, & Fangareggi 2014; Piaget [1932] 1965). This is an ability that is just emerging in the preschool years. Yet, there is evidence that even infants and toddlers have some ability to pick up on another's emotions (Bulgarelli & Jones 2023; Decety & Holvoet 2021; Uzefovsky, Paz, & Davidov 2019).

Teaching strategies. The main strategies intentional teachers use to support the development of empathy are modeling, acknowledgment, and encouragement. Here are some examples:

- Demonstrate concern and empathy in your interactions with children and others. Describe your reactions and actions; for example, "I'm giving Taryn the fuzzy monkey to cuddle. She's sad because her grandma is going away today." Other children notice these displays and will begin to follow your example.
- Help children recognize and understand the feelings of others through role playing or discussing scenarios where empathy is important. Engaging children in activities where they can take on different roles and perspectives can help them understand how others might feel in different situations.
- Help children recognize emotions in others by pointing out facial expressions, body language, and tone of voice. When discussing behavior, help children understand how their actions affect others and how they would feel in the same situation: "Look at Cammi's face. She's looking down at the floor, and her lip is trembling. I think she feels sad that you took the last puppet."
- Help children develop skills to resolve conflicts and problems peacefully, which requires understanding the perspectives of others (see "Engaging in Conflict Resolution" on pages 86–88).

ADULT-GUIDED experiences are especially important for learnings such as:

Social Awareness | **Developing a sense of community**

The early childhood classroom is often children's first experience with a community outside of the home. This community should provide a physical, emotional, and cognitive environment that values the contributions of each member and supports the collective growth of the group (NAEYC 2020). Early childhood communities are grounded in sensitive and responsive adult-child, child-child, and adult-adult relationships.

Teaching strategies. Intentional teachers create a sense of community in the classroom by employing strategies such as these:

- Show interest in each child's knowledge, skills, and experiences, and use opportunities to talk about these. Encourage children to reflect on the unique contributions of their peers.
- Expect children to be respectful and kind to each other, and model how this is done. Refer to the children and adults in the classroom with phrases such as "our class," "all of us," "our group," and "all together." Using the word "friends" can be problematic and displays a false cheeriness; it's okay if a child feels they are not "friends" with a peer. Support children's right to make choices in who they want as a friend. Respect for and kindness to others, however, is always important.
- Call attention to occasions when children are working or sharing an experience together as a group. The occasions can be routine ("We got our things put away at cleanup so we can find them tomorrow at choice time") or special ("Look at all the pine cones we gathered outside. I wonder what we could do with them?").
- Organize activities that foster children's participation with others. Supporting children in social engagement not only helps to strengthen their social skills but also is "the key to teaching social-emotional skills and preventing challenging behavior" (Hemmeter, Ostrosky, & Fox 2021).
- Model an understanding that all children have different ways they play. For example, if a child with a developmental delay or disability wants a pretend hamburger for a longer period, explain to a peer that the child wants to hold on to it because that is their favorite toy and they find comfort in it. Encourage or suggest ways for peers to play with a child who has a developmental delay or disability, if needed. During classroom routines, make sure a child with a developmental delay or disability does not always go first or last.
- Create comfortable and convenient opportunities for families to be active in the community. For example, many programs invite families to read books to the children, but this activity may exclude families who are hesitant about their reading skills, have poor vision, or prefer not to be the center of attention. Provide a variety of opportunities that families can choose from or ask them how they would like to engage in the program.

- Some children share your interests, temperament, and/or culture, so making a connection with them is easy. When this does not occur, make an extra effort to build a relationship by making contact with the child each day, even if just for a minute. Strategies that can help build positive relationships with all children include greeting children by name, acknowledging and celebrating accomplishments, delivering positive messages to families in front of the child, and finding out about and incorporating the child's interests into your conversations and classroom (Joseph & Strain 2019). As you do this, monitor yourself to see whether your previous perceptions of a child, especially those whose culture or home expectations differ from yours, are changing for the better. This helps you to have a clearer perspective, especially if a child's behavior or personality is challenging for you.

Connecting Teaching to Children's Lives

By Kimberlee Telford

Keith, age 4, and Nevaeh, age 4, are tugging on and arguing over a green scarf in the music and movement center. Keith loses his grip on the scarf and falls backward as Nevaeh runs off with the scarf to a different center. Mr. Cliff walks toward Keith, who is visibly upset, and sits next to him.

Mr. Cliff: Hi, Keith. Are you all right?

Keith: (*Pounds his fists on the floor.*)

Mr. Cliff: I see you banging your hands on the floor. It looks to me like you are feeling frustrated.

Keith: (*Speaks in a growling voice*) No, I am inikk.

Mr. Cliff: Oh, inikk. That means angry, right?

Keith: (*Nods.*)

Mr. Cliff: Why are you feeling inikk?

Keith: I wanted that scarf for my dancing! Nevaeh ripped it away from me. Now I don't have anything.

Mr. Cliff: I understand that you would like to dance with a scarf. How do you think we can solve this problem?

Keith: I don't know.

Mr. Cliff: Perhaps we could go and talk to Nevaeh about the scarf, or we could look for a different scarf you could use for dancing.

Keith: (*Pauses.*) Let's look for a different scarf.

Mr. Cliff and Keith look through the scarf basket together, and Keith selects a blue scarf.

Keith: Blue is my mom's favorite color. Mr. Cliff, can you get my music from home?

Mr. Cliff retrieves the music Keith's mother shared with him and plays it in an open space. Keith starts bouncing and dances with his arms in the air. Isabella, age 4, hears the music and comes over.

Isabella: This is kind of like my mom's mountain music, but different. (*Turns in large circles as she begins dancing.*)

Mr. Cliff: (*Notices Nevaeh watching the children dance.*) Nevaeh, do you and your dad like to dance at home?

Nevaeh: (*Nods.*) Oh yeah, we dance and sing a lot! But we don't have this music. It's kind of weird.

Mr. Cliff: Oh, this music is different from what your family listens to at home. Would you like to try dancing to this music today? Maybe your dad could send me some music your family plays, and you can share that with your classmates tomorrow.

Nevaeh: (*Nods.*)

Mr. Cliff: Isabella, would you like to show Nevaeh how you dance to this music?

As Nevaeh hesitantly enters the dancing space, Isabella approaches her and offers Nevaeh her hand. The girls dance together holding hands. As more children gather in the open area, they use the scarves, ribbons, and percussion instruments that are available. Some children choose to dance in a twisting line, using scarves to connect each of the dancers. Other children choose to sit together in a group playing the instruments. This allows Mr. Cliff to engage in further conversation with the children regarding the music, dancing, and instruments they have in their homes and communities.

Mr. Cliff demonstrates intentionality as a culturally responsive teacher as he reinforces Keith's home language, that of the Siksika (Blackfoot) Nation, by echoing his words. The teacher also uses familiar elements like music to help Keith address his feelings and then reengage in the learning space. By incorporating the family's values, traditions, culture, and language, Mr. Cliff both enhances learning and builds trust.

Relationship Skills

Building friendships and collaborating with others can lead to joyful shared experiences between children that strengthen their social bonds. Of the key knowledge and skills in the area of relationship skills, child-guided experiences may be particularly important for

- Building relationships

Adult-guided experiences may be especially significant for

- Engaging in cooperative play

CHILD-GUIDED experiences are especially important for learnings such as:

Relationship Skills **Building relationships**

Relationships facilitate other types of learning and are rewarding in their own right. Relationship skill development depends on other social and emotional skills, such as self-regulation and self-awareness, and continues to evolve as children grow in those areas.

Infants as young as 6 months have a beginning understanding of friendship (Liberman, Kinzler, & Woodward 2021), and these skills continue to grow into the preschool years, when children are able to take turns, support their peers, and problem-solve as a group (Barros Blanco et al. 2022).

Teaching strategies. Adults play a vital role in encouraging and supporting young children as they navigate the complex terrain of relationships. Accepting overtures from others as well as reaching out can be risky for preschoolers. They need to know they are socially and emotionally safe and that their autonomy will be respected as they interact with others. This can be especially true for multilingual learners and children with developmental delays or disabilities that affect social interaction. To help children establish relationships with others, try these ideas:

- Be genuine and authentic in your interactions with children. Children sense when adults are disinterested, impatient, or mechanical during conversations. If you talk to children with warmth and respect, they will learn to converse in kind with others. Children from some cultures and language backgrounds may have ways of showing emotions or responding to adult questions that are different from yours. Spend time with children and show interest in what they are doing without putting pressure on them to respond.
- When possible, maintain a stable group of children and adults so relationships can grow over time. Create clusters in which one adult and a small group of children (no more than 10, if possible) stay together for several weeks or months to share meals or snacks and small group activities. Stable groups allow children to get to know the personalities and interests of their peers and the adult. They can also help preschoolers feel safe and secure, which further encourages them to reach out to others.
- Support children's friendships. Encourage and support budding relationships by first simply acknowledging them ("Emelia, I saw you and Sam playing store in the house area"). Then, keep these children together if you re-form small groups.

- Provide opportunities for children to interact with less familiar people, too. For example, ask two children to help with a task ("Daniel and Abby, can you help me carry the scarves outside?"). Providing opportunities to interact allows children to discover peers they might then choose to form relationships with. However, avoid asking multilingual learners to serve as interpreters for children who are not as fluent in English—this sets a new purpose for their relationship and is often not appropriate for their language development.

ADULT-GUIDED experiences are especially important for learnings such as:

Relationship Skills | **Engaging in cooperative play**

Cooperation is acting together toward a common goal. In early childhood, it includes sharing toys, space, friends, conversations, resources, skills, and ideas. By 3 to 4 years old, children are generally able to work together to collaboratively solve a problem (Barros Blanco et al. 2022).

Teaching strategies. Young children learn to play with others by watching and imitating, as well as by trial and error. As social beings, children are intrinsically motivated to interact. Yet, teachers perform a vital function in helping children elaborate their roles in interactive play. Here are some strategies to try:

- Promote interaction through your use of space and materials in the classroom. Do not arbitrarily limit the number of children who can play at one time in an area because it models exclusionary behavior. Whenever possible, provide enough of the same type of materials so that children can freely interact with the materials and each other. If space or supplies are limited (for example, the classroom has only one beanbag chair or only two tablets), problem-solve with the children to decide how to accommodate everyone who wants to use them. (See "Engaging in Conflict Resolution" on pages 86–88 for individual and group problem-solving ideas.)
- Model cooperative play, showing how to take turns, share, and communicate effectively. Get down on the children's level, imitate their use of materials, and follow their ideas and play leads. Help children learn to express their thoughts and feelings clearly and listen actively to others.
- Acknowledge and encourage children's efforts at engaging in cooperative play and demonstrating positive social skills.
- Set up situations for children to work together to accomplish a goal, such as this teacher did:

  Ms. Patricia shows David and Marco, both 5, a card game in which they will practice cooperation and further develop their number sense. She explains the need for a "caller" who distributes the cards and directs the other players when to flip over their top card. When Anna walks over and watches, the teacher asks her to join the game. After another round, Ms. Patricia excuses herself, and the players vote for Anna to become the caller.

> Before long, Marco throws his cards on the floor, frustrated that Anna is telling him what to do. Ms. Patricia reminds the group about their vote, and they continue playing. When another child later joins in and the same problem arises, this time Marco explains that one person needs to be the caller (MacDonald 2018, 33).

- After play activities, discuss with children what they enjoyed about working together and any challenges they faced. This will help them learn from the experience.
- If a child or group of children need support to work together in a group activity, suggest specific roles or tasks. Respect their decision to act on your decision or to try something else.

Responsible Decision Making

Although it takes many years to learn all the skills needed to make good choices about one's behavior and interacting with others and the environment, with adult support and modeling and plenty of practice, young children can gain and apply these skills. Making thoughtful choices and seeing positive outcomes can inspire a sense of pride and joy, reinforcing the value of responsible behavior. Teachers play a crucial role in helping young children make responsible decisions through modeling, asking open-ended questions, and prompting thinking about how a choice might impact themselves or those around them. In particular, children need guidance to learn to use problem-solving strategies when they have social conflicts. NCPMI (2023) provides useful tools for teachers to show children how to use the problem-solving process.

Of the key knowledge and skills in the area of responsible decision making, child-guided experiences may be important for the following:

- Evaluating the consequences of one's actions

Adult-guided experiences may be particularly important for the following:

- Engaging in conflict resolution
- Developing a framework for moral behavior

CHILD-GUIDED experiences are especially important for learnings such as:

Responsible Decision Making | **Evaluating the consequences of one's actions**

Preschool-age children are typically goal oriented, focused on their own needs, and tend to act intuitively ("I want that truck, so I'll grab it"). Although they can often see the consequences of their actions on others, they may need adult guidance to think through the possible consequences and learn how to choose a response that is less hurtful to others in the future (Gartrell 2023).

Teaching strategies. Setting and reinforcing group guidelines or rules can facilitate children's understanding of consequences. To further support children in evaluating their choices and their effects, try the following strategies:

- In some situations, let children discover the consequences of their actions, provided no one is being hurt or endangered. They will adjust their own behavior accordingly, especially if they are rejected by their peers. Here's an example recorded by a preschool teacher:

  > Zack brings his new fire truck to school and announces that no one is allowed to touch it. When he brings the truck over to where Omar and Maggie are playing with toy cars and ramps, they tell him he cannot join their game. This continues for two days. On the third day, Zack puts his truck on the ramp and says to Maggie, "You can push it if you want." She does and then gives it to Omar. Maggie asks Zack, "Do you want to play racing cars with us?" Zack says yes and joins their play, letting his friends take turns with his truck.

  This teacher didn't jump in to give social directions, offer opinions or interpretations, or solve problems for the children. If the teacher had insisted Maggie and Omar let Zack play with them, Zack might not have figured out how to alter his behavior to achieve his social goal of inclusion. Teachers also can point out the beneficial consequences of cooperative behavior to encourage children to continue or increase it. However, the focus should be on how the behavior makes the child feel rather than on how it pleases the adult. For example, you could say, "You're having fun racing your cars together" rather than "It makes me happy to see you sharing."

- Introduce children to NCPMI's Solutions Kit (2020) (see "One Approach to Conflict Resolution"). When a problem arises, discuss the various solutions and what consequences each might have. Or use this technique in role-playing situations, such as with puppets, which can remove the emotions from the situation. This helps children to focus on the skill.