



GUIDANCE MATTERS

Dan Gartrell

“He Did It on Purpose!”

ON THIS DAY IN A CHILD CARE CENTER, the lead teacher is absent as the three-year-old group has come in from the playground. A child is feeling sick, so the assistant teacher is tending to her in the quiet area. This leaves the new student teacher, Rhonda, to get the children into a large group activity by herself.

As the children enter the room, most sit down in the group meeting area. Raffi, a quiet “younger three,” sits in the circle near the door. Wade, almost four, approaches the group, then lies down and sidles along the floor toward Raffi. Wade kicks at Raffi, who turns around and protests, “Stop!”

Rhonda, busy getting the group ready for a story, doesn’t seem to notice the conflict. Wade continues pushing his foot hard into Raffi’s back. Holding his back, Raffi begins to cry. Rhonda leads Raffi to the other side of the circle, finds him a place to sit, and returns to reading the story.

When Wade notices Rhonda move Raffi while ignoring him, he again crawls around behind Raffi. Again Wade pushes his foot into Raffi’s back. Looking exasperated, Rhonda starts to get up to deal with the situation.

But seeing what is happening, Anne, an experienced student teacher with another group, comes over, comforts Raffi, and takes Wade away to the nearby dramatic play area. Wade scoots under a table and will not come out. Anne does not make Wade come to her, but sits on the floor near the table, apparently listening to the story. After a few minutes, Wade crawls out and sits on Anne’s lap. The two listen to the rest of the story and watch the group activities. As the class transitions to center time, the assistant teacher rejoins the group. Rhonda looks relieved.

Dan Gartrell, EdD, is director of the Child Development Training Program and professor of early childhood and elementary 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 your guidance anecdotes and other comments to dgartrell@bemidjistate.edu. Thanks to Rhonda Jackson and Anne Peterson for sharing their student teaching experiences. They and their supervisor learned a lot from the experience and discussing it together. Children’s names in all anecdotes are changed.

Illustration by Patrick Cavanagh.

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Discussion

What do teachers do when children cause conflicts on purpose? Rhonda probably ignored Wade’s intentional act the first time, and simply moved Raffi the second time, because she did not want to overreact to the situation and risk losing control of the group. Especially in group situations, the decision to intervene in conflicts or to ignore them is a common and difficult dilemma.

For this reason, preventing conflicts (rather than having to react to them) is always the teacher’s priority. In early childhood education, it is helpful to remember that young children and large groups are not a natural match! Children manage in large groups more easily as they grow older. So, especially in group situations, we should not underestimate the importance of teaching in teams. If available, the assistant teacher might have helped Wade join the circle, preventing the conflict. Even after an incident happens, a second adult is invaluable. Rhonda later expressed appreciation to Anne for assisting her.

Rhonda's reaction to Wade's behavior was to let the situation go and hope for the best. In contrast, some teachers automatically shift into "discipline mode" when a child intentionally causes a conflict. The problem with this reaction is that it influences teachers to jump from judging the behavior to judging the child (Gartrell 2004). Back in 1988 Polly Greenberg criticized the practice of labeling kids as good or bad and enforcing "me against you discipline" (punishment) to increase "good behavior" (Greenberg 1988). This line of reasoning presumes that children, even young children, know how to behave, but they choose to be "bad." Even today, teachers who take this view consider children such as Wade to be willful, defiant, oppositional, or challenging and in need of discipline to shame them away from bad behavior.

Research now tells us that due to still-developing brains and limited social experience, most young children are just beginning to learn how to behave (Albert 2003). The effect of punishment on a child like Wade (especially when repeated) is that instead of being shamed into being "good," he is shamed into feeling he is bad (Dreikurs, Grunwald, & Pepper [1982] 1998; Gartrell 2004). This psychological dynamic immediately causes the child's stress levels to go up and feelings of isolation to arise. The child needs affirmation from the teacher but perceives that the teacher regards him as unworthy. Mistakenly, the child acts out to get the human connection he needs, sometimes against the child who "caused" him to get in trouble in the first place (Dreikurs, Grunwald, & Pepper [1982] 1998; Albert 2003).

By punishing the instigator, teachers may think that they are fixing the problem. In reality, they are probably reinforcing bullying tendencies in the disciplined child and a victim identity in the child who was bullied. Too often the automatic discipline reaction makes future classroom dynamics even worse (Albert 2003; Gartrell 2004).

Dreikurs' contribution

Psychologist Rudolf Dreikurs contributed much to our understanding of how to respond to children's behavior (1968; Dreikurs, Grunwald, & Pepper [1982] 1998). Dreikurs wrote that teachers help a child learn productive behaviors only when they, in firm and friendly ways, guide the child toward finding social acceptance. Dreikurs, along with Ginott (1972), and others who followed them, argue that frustration in achieving the life goal of social acceptance is the real reason why children cause conflicts (Albert 2003; Gartrell 2004).

Guiding children in finding social acceptance is one of the most important parts of the early childhood teacher's job. The second student teacher in the anecdote, Anne, really helped Wade. After comforting Raffi, she quietly left with Wade and then let him sit on her lap—the right actions for that child in that situation. Anne helped Wade regain social acceptance.

Later, when Wade is calm and the time is right, a teacher who knows Wade well might have a guidance talk with him. A guidance talk means teaching and learning about

- what happened (in the situation that required teacher intervention);
- how the other child felt;
- what the child can think of to help the other child feel better (better than forcing the child to say "I'm sorry");
- what the child can do differently next time.

An alternative guidance intervention is conflict mediation, which a teacher would undertake with Raffi and Wade together. (See “Guidance Matters,” March 2006, in *Beyond the Journal*, for a discussion of this equally important guidance technique. Go to <http://journal.naeyc.org/btj/200603/GuidanceBTJ.pdf>.)

In the guidance perspective, children learn from conflicts only when they have productive relationships with the teacher who intervenes. *The relationship comes first*. Teachers build productive relationships through shared quality time outside of conflict situations. Frequent acknowledgment of the child’s efforts and achievements is key. We know we are building a relationship when a child comes to us in the tough times. Wade came out from under the table and sat on Anne’s lap. Anne let him.

Guidance requires teachers to be firm—but firm and friendly, not firm and harsh. There are definite consequences when a child causes a conflict, for the teacher as well as the child. The consequence for the teacher is teaching—by first calming everyone down (and remembering these young children are just beginning to learn difficult life skills). The consequence for the child is learning how to express strong emotions in nonhurtful ways, how to get along with others, and how to feel capable of learning important life skills.

The children in our classrooms are just beginning a very complex, lifelong learning process. They, like all of us, make mistakes—errors in judgment in their behaviors. Guidance means teaching children what they have not yet learned. Teaching—not punishment—is the *logical consequence* (Dreikurs’ term) when a child causes conflicts.

To increase your knowledge

Get a historical take on working with children’s behavior. Locate a book or an article by either Rudolf Dreikurs or Haim Ginott (who famously said, “To reach a child’s mind, a teacher must capture his or her heart”). What do these esteemed psychologists have to say that applies to working with children today?

A step you can take

With other staff, select a child who is having frequent conflicts. Develop a plan for helping the child to feel more accepted in the group. Perhaps involve the child in more small group activities or take turns spending quality time with the child. Actively follow the plan for one to two weeks. Discuss the following questions with your colleagues: How has your thinking changed about the child? How do you think your way of relating to the child has changed? Why do you think there have or have not been changes in the child’s behavior? What might be some ways to continue helping the child to fit in with the group?

References

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