

“Remember you have to share” - How do teachers grow children’s social competence?

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“Remember you have to share”, “Use your words” and “We don’t hit around here” - are we really helping children when these practiced phrases spill forth smoothly from our lips as we rush on to the next group of children? I think our intentions are sound - to support children to work things out, think for themselves and become independently self-regulated. Yet I think we can do better.

It's spring and I wonder how much time and effort might be going into producing daffodils, fluffy lambs and tissue blossoms? What about the real stuff? What about the issues that affect children such as fairness, friendships, rights and rules? How much time is spent on ensuring social competence and social literacy is foregrounded and embedded into everyday conversations and happenings? It's easy to plan an art activity around making daffodils. It's not so easy to engage in deep discussions about what really matters. When a child is feeling hurt and upset brushing over issues with predetermined phrases like “We are all friends here” won't do it.

We might think we have ‘dealt with it’ but underlying will still be the hurt and the impact this has. Some children will be learning ‘It is ok for me to hurt others’, some children will be learning ‘An adult won’t help me’, and some children will be learning, ‘We only have to be nice while a teacher is in the room’. More worrying still is that children will learn that the culture of this place allows one person to hurt another - physically or emotionally.

It’s about relationships

Vivian Gussin Paley has written several books exploring the issues raised in her classrooms. She says any classroom (centre) ”should develop into a close-knit community of people who care deeply about each other.” (Paley, 1995)

“What examples do we have of discussions about rights, responsibilities, and fairness being documented and revisited? If this is a gap, why is this, and how might we contribute more of these?”²(p28)

Carr, M., Lee, W. & Jones, C. (2009). *Kiri tua o te pae, Book 11. The Strands of Te Whāriki: Belonging*. Prepared for the Ministry of Education. Wellington: Learning Media.



Siperstein & Favazza discuss ‘placing children at promise’; to do this we must recognise a child’s wider community.

“Clearly, more sustained, reciprocal partnerships between home and school are needed, recognizing that experiences from one environment affect experiences in the other, and recognizing that implicit within the school environment is the presence of a child’s family and the family’s culture.” (2008: 330)

If we care deeply about everyone in our community, strengthening relationships will be a priority. Meaningful conversations with our families will be naturally interwoven through our day. We will be genuinely interested in families’ aspirations for their children and families will be involved in all levels of centre life.

It starts with teachers

Guy Claxton (2006: 1) reminds us that children learn through imbibing the habits of those around us,

“Some challenges are easier to navigate than others, but what do you do with the tricky questions? How do you respond appropriately to the deeper issues that inevitably rise to the surface in any social group? What would you do in the face of cruelty, rejection or other forms of injustice? What do you do with the issues that a bandaid, a wink and a smile could not even begin to resolve?”^(p26)

MacLachlan, J. (2006). No, it’s not okay: Drawing a line in the sand. In A. Fleet, C. Patterson & J. Robertson(Eds.), *Insights. Behind early childhood pedagogical documentation* (pp. 25-36). New South Wales: Pademelon.

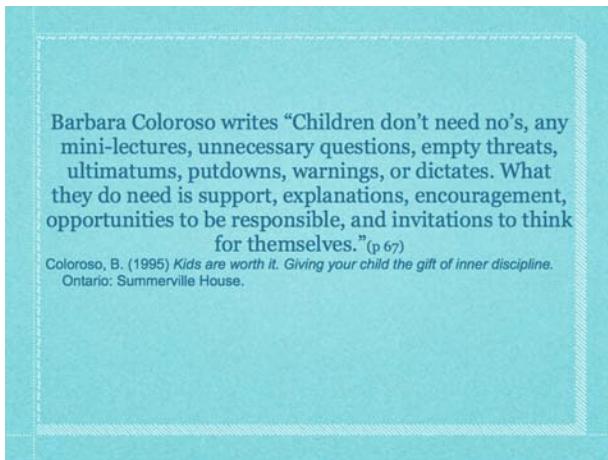
"Without any instruction from us their brains start moulding themselves to the social world around them."

So what we say and how we say it, what we do and how we go about doing it will be closely scrutinised. We are the social models; our way of being and doing will give strong messages to children about how to interact and how to treat one another. We must be at our 'learning best' within our learning community.

'Use your words'

Sometimes, in the heat of the moment when the battle for that toy reaches its peak, I think words might be the last thing a child can put their attention to. Using their words might indeed be a great strategy, but it does rely on having words on hand, and useful words at that. Some words that children might like to use just might not be on the list of approved words for this centre!!!

Put yourself into a child's shoes for a moment. When you are hot under the collar about something what strategies do you use to work through the heat of the moment? Do you have some tried and tested strategies and do these work every time? We expect a lot of children, and yet we may not be providing the optimum learning conditions for social competency to grow.



Wouldn't we love to know that our children will try and do the right thing and make the right choices no matter what? That they will have had lots of practice at naming their feelings and listening to the view of others and standing up for their points of view? Are we hoping that when these children are 16 they have the strength of character not to get into a car with their best friend who is drunk? That somewhere they have had the opportunity to practice self-regulation and this has become embedded in their set of responses?

Our role is so very complex as an early childhood teacher. Paying attention to the social side of learning

sometimes slips out of focus and will continue to do so if we have a narrow set of outcomes in our 'Planning Cycle' and if we tick 'well being' off when children can hang their bag up and go to the toilet by themselves. We are misinforming families when we tell them that their children are ready for school when they can write their name, count to 20 and sit on the mat without fidgeting. We also do children an injustice by ignoring the complexity of their social learning and the enormous effort needed, to make friends, work in a group and participate fully in a community.

Lets think about school for a moment. How can we help children participate and thrive in this environment that might be very different from their early childhood context? What are some of the things that might have been helpful when you started school?

I would have liked to have felt more confident at asking questions and letting the teacher know when I didn't understand what was expected. I would have really liked a set of strategies to help me get through tricky situations; when someone took my sandwiches, pushed me off my chair and made fun of my curly red hair. I would have liked to know how to make friends in a new school. I did know how to write my name, read the alphabet, recognise numbers and hang up my bag. Yet I wasn't very well prepared to participate in what school had to offer. I think there are lots of kids who were like me heading to school - socially illiterate.

When we put social competence into our front frame, when we focus on all aspects of living and working together in a community, social competence will grow. When children see us welcoming families, really welcoming, with cups of tea, smiles and warm greetings, they will learn to do this too. When children see us stop and gently and calmly talk with children about their feelings and the feelings of their friends, then this is what they will learn to do. When teachers never, ever, grab a child and lead them in the direction they 'need' to go, children will understand what treating each other with dignity looks like. When teachers notice children and other adults being kind and thanking them with love and joy in their hearts, children will do this too. When teachers always act on unfairness, unkindness, bullying and rejection, children will learn to do this too. It is up to us. The part we play is crucial. We are part of the community that raises the child. Our role is to set the scene for what happens in this place. Hopefully it is a place where children can practice and make mistakes, where they can try out some strategies for getting through tricky situations. Hopefully teachers encourage discussion about the real world and the hard stuff that goes on. Hopefully children can explore their feelings and express their ideas freely. Hopefully 'what is fair here' gets more attention than the making of daffodils.

**And wouldn't it be a fabulous place if the only rule
was 'being kind'.**

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