

— Chapter 2 —

Attuned and Responsive Relationships

We return to our friend Lucien, who has spent many days now borrowing clothes from the extra clothes bin labeled “girls” and who plays every day with Emma, pretending to be sisters. Emma and some of the other children have started using “she” and “her” to refer to Lucien even outside of dramatic play, which Teacher Heather has noticed and jotted down. She wants to make sure to bring it up with her co-teacher, Meg, at their check-in on Monday so they can figure out the best way to support Lucien.

However, that Friday, while Teacher Meg is helping children settle into lunchtime, she overhears a conversation happening at one of the tables. Emma is talking to the group at her table about the contents of everyone’s lunchbox. When she gets to Lucien’s, Emma says, “Lucien also has grapes, but she has more than me. And hers are green, but mine are purple.” Teacher Meg asks Emma to repeat what she said. Emma looks startled, and shrugs. “Did you call Lucien ‘she’?” Emma looks at Lucien and back at Teacher Meg. She nods. “Why are you saying ‘she’? Does Lucien want you to call him ‘she’?” Both children say nothing and appear to be uncomfortable with the question. Other children have quieted and are listening to Teacher Meg.

“Lucien, do you want to be a girl? Should I let people know that you are a girl?” Lucien looks down, shrugs, and mutters, “I don’t know. Yeah?”

Teacher Meg raises her eyebrows in surprise. She was not aware of the sister play, and had not heard the children using she/her pronouns for Lucien before. Wanting to support Lucien, she turns to the class, and announces, “Everyone, Lucien wants to be a girl. Does everyone understand that for now, Lucien is a girl?” The children nod their heads.

Lucien is very quiet for the remainder of lunch, and later builds in the magnet tiles area with Emma. They do not play sisters that day.

Both Heather and Meg care for Lucien and want to be supportive, but Meg missed the opportunity to really attune to Lucien's emotional state and needs. What Meg did in this example is called "outing someone" (see box), and outing a transgender child without their consent and agency over when and how and to whom they come out can be extremely dangerous—both internally for the child and in the potential for social backlash and bullying or violence. By not attuning to Lucien, Meg created a very painful experience for her, even though Meg had good intentions.

Outing

"Outing" someone is based on the phrase "coming out" (or "coming out of the closet"), which is when someone tells others about their gender identity or sexual orientation. Since these two identity categories are not inherited or necessarily also held by any family members, and since our society assumes every child to be cisgender and heterosexual until proven otherwise, the act of coming out is typically required if a child who is not one or both of those things wants others to know their true identities. While we hope the work you do towards gender justice will eliminate some of the stigma and pressure that makes coming out such a stressful time for individuals, we know the world is not yet at a place where revealing one's transgender identity is a simple and carefree decision process. Whether a child comes out, and to whom, is a very personal and individual decision. Outing a transgender or gender expansive child without their consent and explicit control (over when, how, and to whom) is a dangerous and effectively violent act, even when done with the best of intentions. We will discuss strategies for when and how to talk to children about whether they would like to come out, but we want to emphasize the child's agency as being central to this process.

Caring responsive adult-child relationships and attunement, are foundations of gender inclusive classrooms striving to create gender justice for all children. It is the central responsibility of all early learning professionals to develop attuned relationships with all children and their families in their care. You might be wondering: What is attunement? And how does it relate to building strong relationships with children so they feel a sense of belonging and safety as well as feeling supported to live as their authentic gender selves? Let's explore answers to each of these questions below.

What do we mean by attunement?

The most important foundation of a high-quality inclusive early childhood program is for children to be able to interact with a caring, responsive, and self-regulated adult who attunes to them. Attunement is defined as the process of an adult focusing so intently on what a child is communicating that the child comes to believe that what they think and feel matters: they “feel felt” by the adult (Levine & Kline, 2007). The adult’s genuine interest in the child acknowledges and validates the child’s presence and helps the child to feel a sense of visibility, safety, and belonging. If an adult is curious about the child’s thoughts, perceptions, and authentic feelings, then the child will come to value and trust their thoughts and feelings as well.

Tuning in to a child to understand what they are thinking, feeling, and communicating is central to attunement. When we “tune in” or attune to a child, we show genuine interest in understanding what the child’s emotional state and/or behavior is communicating (Stern, 1985). Attunement begins when we focus in on a child’s emotional state, carefully observe a child’s verbal and nonverbal expressions, bodily movements, and gestures (or lack thereof), and ask ourselves questions about what they see: “What story is this child communicating to me about how they feel and/or about what they need in order to feel a sense of safety, belonging, and/or agency?” When we are attuned to children we respond to children’s communication with interest, curiosity, and a sincere desire to understand what they are communicating. Attuned adults are able to express empathy for children’s perspectives and desires and make choices that strengthen the child’s feeling of trust in our presence.

The experience of attunement begins in infancy through what is described as a **serve-and-return relationship** between a child and their adult caregiver(s) (see: <https://developingchild.harvard.edu/science/key-concepts/serve-and-return/>). Attunement can be thought of as a dance. Infants are continually communicating to adult caregivers how they feel and what they need—the “serve” (e.g., crying, cooing, showing interest by looking at something, turning their head away when overstimulated). Attuned adults “return” the serve by responding to young children using words or gestures (e.g., eye contact, tone of voice, picking them up, facial expressions, focusing their attention, handing them objects). By repeating serve-and-return cycles continually and daily, young children learn critical lessons about whether adults listen to and care for them. Children learn whether they can trust their caregivers to be available and attuned—

providing support, encouragement, and a sense of belonging and safety in moments of need and as they interact with their environment.



“Adult Meets Child Where They Are”: Beginning at birth, when adult caregivers take the time to attune to a child’s needs, strengths, and experience with the world around them, a safe environment is created in which to explore, learn, and express their authentic selves. Credit line: Jonathan Julian.

Attuned interactions are the foundation for building self-esteem and a strong sense of self for the child. When serve-and-return patterns are positive and support children’s healthy development, young children learn that they are loved and cared for, will be protected by their caregivers, and that they are important members of their family and community. These messages support children to develop a positive sense of themselves, which is essential for their ability to form trusting and healthy relationships with others. When we do not listen carefully to what children are communicating about what they want and need, or when we respond in ways that create a sense of fear and stress for children, we create an environment that lacks safety and the ingredients for trust to form. This might look like a child showing distress and an adult responding with an angry tone of voice, a harsh touch, or by ignoring the child and their attempt to communicate about what they need to feel safe and loved. Children in these environments learn very early that their needs will not be met by their caregivers, and that what they think, believe, and want do not matter. This not only harms their emerging sense of themselves, but also leaves a vulnerable child feeling that they have no control over their environment, that they are unable to trust adults to take care of them, and that the world they are living in is an

unsafe, unpredictable, and threatening place. This sense of hopelessness can disrupt a child's healthy brain development and negatively impact their ability to form healthy relationships with others.

Perhaps most of your interactions with children follow the basic pattern of attunement, but you are not able to acknowledge and "return" a child's "serves" in certain areas that trouble you or where you have little experience and awareness—such as exploring gender identity and expression. The "serve" may be subtle, or unrecognizable, if you are coming from a gender binary mindset. The child may still grow to trust you, but chances are this trust will come at the expense of hiding a part of themselves from you. See the section "What happens when adults don't listen to children" later in this chapter for a discussion of what happens when we do not listen to what children are telling us about themselves and their genders.

Emotionally attuned interactions with young children begin with observation and following a child's lead

Ashline has just turned one. She is crawling towards the Tonka truck in her family childcare setting. Talia, her caregiver, comes over with a cat puppet and engages Ashline's attention. "Meow, meow, I'm hungry! Can you feed me please?" She animates the puppet, and Ashline stops playing with the truck to pay attention to the puppet dancing around in front of her.

In this instance, Talia is probably not consciously aware that she has redirected Ashline, a (presumed) girl in her care, away from what she was expressing interest in—gross motor play with a truck—towards an object and activity that the caregiver has selected: dramatic play with a puppet. Perhaps Talia's unconscious associations between boys and trucks, and girls and dolls¹² have made it difficult for her to see what is actually happening. Regardless of the reason, Talia is not attuned to Ashline.

To attune to a child, early childhood teachers will carefully observe what the child is communicating. Teachers will respond in ways that reinforce to the child that their presence, needs, and desires are acknowledged and important to the adults caring for them. An attuned interaction with Ashline would start with observing what she is communicating about her interests and then following her lead. What would this look like for Talia? Talia could carefully observe

Ashline and notice that she is interested in playing with the trucks. Talia could then communicate to Ashline that she is “in tune” with her interests by commenting on what she sees Ashline doing: “Oh, Ashline, you see the big blue truck! You’re pulling yourself up on the truck. Oh, it moved! That was surprising!”

By commenting on Ashline’s play, Talia sends a message to Ashline that acknowledges her presence in the group and reinforces that her choices and actions are valued by the adults caring for her. By tuning in to focus on Ashline’s interests and initiative, Talia teaches Ashline that she can trust her caregivers to be responsive to her needs and desires. These messages create a healthy foundation for Ashline’s developing sense of self.

When we attune to children, we support them to be narrators of their own experiences. In addition to following a child’s lead, attunement involves what Bronwyn Davies (2014) calls emergent listening. In most of the conversations throughout our day, we “listen in order to fit what we hear into what we already know” (p. 21). We do not expect, and often therefore we do not allow, our underlying worldviews and central beliefs about “the way things are” to be shattered and rearranged in our day-to-day interactions. Davies calls this “listening as usual.” Emergent listening, on the other hand, “means opening up the ongoing possibility of coming to see life, and one’s relation to it, in new and surprising ways” (p. 21). To Davies, true listening—emergent listening—is about “being open to being affected” by what one hears, rather than simply responding. The concept of emergent listening is deeply inspired by and built on work by Carla Rinaldi (2012), president of the Reggio Emilia Foundation, on the importance of listening for mutual learning to occur.

This type of listening requires us to trust children as capable of narrating their own experiences. Through gestures, play, artwork, verbalizations, and children’s “hundred languages” (Edwards, Gandini, & Forman, 2011), children communicate their perspectives, concerns, desires, solutions, and understandings of who they are and what they experience in the world around them. This requires us to maintain open hearts and open minds. Trusting children will undoubtedly challenge many assumptions that we have about who we assume or imagine children are. Attuning to young children asks adults to start by listening mindfully to children and remaining open to what they tell us, especially

if their stories challenge our beliefs and taken-for-granted assumptions. When we remain open to changing our minds after tuning in to a child, and open to whatever we learn as a result, we communicate a powerful message to children that they will be acknowledged and supported by their caregivers as they explore and make discoveries about who they are and how they belong in their families and communities.

Davies validates that “Emergent listening is demanding. It means not confining oneself to opinion, or to what one has always believed or wanted. It involves the suspension of judgment, letting go of the status quo” (2014, p. 28), which in our case may mean letting go of a firm grip on the gender binary to hold a child’s hand as they lead us into the gender unknown.

What does it look like to express love over respect for a child?

Dan is the father of Zed, a four-year-old child—presumed boy—who loves wearing dresses and jewelry in the costume corner at school, and has begun to ask for similar clothing at home. Dan expresses his concern about this behavior during a parent–teacher conference. “I love my son,” Dan states simply. “This dress up might be okay here, but I don’t want him to get teased next year when he goes to kindergarten. I know how children are,” he adds. Dan asks teachers to discourage Zed’s dress wearing. When teachers question the fairness of denying materials to one child, he suggests they remove all the dresses from the costume corner. The teachers agree. In the following weeks, Zed, along with other children in the class, continue to fashion dresses out of large scarves.

While most parents, like Dan, care deeply about their children, this instinct does not always lead them to provide the type of supportive environment a child needs. If a child’s authentic gender is not understood or accepted in a parent’s or teacher’s worldview, the adult may act in ways they believe are protecting the child, but are actually causing greater harm as they steer their child down a path of shame and hiding. **Caring about children is not enough.**

David Hawkins, MD, PhD, explains the difference between love and respect: “The more magic gift is not love, but respect for others as ends in themselves, as actual and potential artisans of their own learnings and doings, of their own lives... Respect resembles love...but love without respect can blind and bind. Love is private and unbidden, whereas

respect is implicit in all moral relations with others” (Hawkins, 2011, p. 79). In other words, while our love for someone may compel us to speak or act for them, we cannot do right by them until we respect them as their own unique person with the agency to speak and act on their own. In the instance above, we can see how Dan’s love for Zed, combined with his fear of possible future violence, prevents him from fully seeing Zed in his present joy, and leads him to advocate for circumstances that stifle Zed’s exploration and growth. To truly support his son, Dan must reframe the way he is seeing Zed, from a potential victim to an “artisan of [his] own learning and doing”—that is, a child forging their own path.

Early childhood teachers should communicate messages of both love AND respect to children

Love: The feeling of deep affection for someone or something, and the way we show them that feeling.

Respect: Honoring and acknowledging another person’s actions, opinions, or ways of being in the world as valid, whether or not we agree with or understand them.

Applying this to gender means...

When a child communicates gender identities or expressions that are beyond our comfort level or understanding, we still honor what they are doing or saying, and trust that they are the expert on themself.

According to Hawkins, respecting children requires us to offer them our resources (including our time and skills, such as when we travel with a child to a TGE playgroup), contribute to their “learnings and doings,” and seek out and value their accomplishments, no matter how small they may appear (2011). Respect in this light is fundamentally about extending or helping children grow and expand—rather than constricting or putting limits on what a child is able to do. To help visualize this distinction, imagine that the child is a stream formed by snow melting on a mountain top. The stream is heading towards a cliff. An adult who loves the stream may decide to protect it by building a dam, so that it forms a pond and never reaches the cliff. But an adult who respects the stream might feed their own water into it so that it is able to flow over the cliff with

such fullness and force that it forms again at the bottom, finding shape once more.

What might a love-*with-respect* response have looked like?

If Dan is worried about future bullying, he would do better to provide Zed with a safe space in which to be himself, wear what he wants, and feel supported in his gender expression, so that if bullying occurs in the future:

- Zed will be more confident and better equipped to respond to it.
- Zed will trust Dan to provide critical support and to act as an ally, who understands and respects his son and advocates for his son's needs.
- With this trust, Zed will be more likely to open up to Dan about bullying that happens.

If Zed knows that his home is a safe place to wear dresses, he and Dan can have open conversations about bias that exists outside those walls. Dan can affirm and assure Zed that this bias is unfair and that the problem is not with Zed but with how other people think sometimes. Together they can come up with a plan that allows Zed the freedom to explore his gender expression and also the agency to decide whether or not he will sometimes wear other clothes to help keep him from experiencing that bias. This practice of navigating the world not only in one's authentic gender in spaces that are safe, but also in a more stereotypically gendered way around people who harbor strong gender biases, is similar to the concept of code switching (Auer, 1998). (See box below.)

Dan can partner with Zed's teachers to help make school another safe zone. With this approach, as opposed to the original story, Zed learns that he is loved, respected, and valued for his gender expression. He is also meaningfully involved in the decisions that affect his own life. And, since conversations are held openly with Zed, he will be much less likely to make assumptions that lead to shame than if the subject is avoided or discussed behind his back—implying that his gender expression itself is the problem rather than social bias.

Code switching

Code switching (Auer, 1998) refers to the practice of altering between two or more languages or speech patterns depending on who you are talking to or the setting you're in. It is a practice discussed at length in studies of race in America, where communities of color speak one dialect of English with each other but have learned to "talk white" around white people due to racism and racial bias.

Children have demonstrated the capacity to understand that different spoken and unspoken codes of conduct as well as speech patterns exist among different people, places, and situations. Children may face violent and hostile reactions to their gender expressions in their neighborhoods, homes/living quarters, schools, and other environments. As teachers, we should not pressure children or their families to have them embody their full gendered selves in places where they do not feel safe. Instead, we can ask children and families questions about how they feel in these different spaces and help them brainstorm strategies for getting their needs met. While it is critically important that children have at least one safe place where they feel supported to be themselves, there is still much work to be done to transform all spaces to support children's gender health. This is why it's so important that we create these spaces in our programs, and work with families to create them elsewhere!

I feel like that's a more helpful way of navigating gender with children who are experiencing really aggressively intense binary spaces. How can we at least give them check-ins and let them know that we are watching out for them, so that when situations happen they know they can bring it back to us to process it? And we can create a model of what allyship looks like, so that they know that there are other outlets rather than just rage or conformity in response to bias. -Mitali, Teacher

Parents are not the only ones who must remember to balance their love for children with an equal measure of respect. Let's look at another example.

Martin is a shy and quiet three-year-old who rarely takes social risks. But today, he is the first (presumed) boy in his class to try

on a dress from the dress-up rack at his school. The dress he picks is pink and sparkly. One of his teachers, Mary-Anne, approaches him. "Oh, Martin!" She exclaims. "Aren't you just adorable in that dress! Let me take your picture."

In this case, Mary-Anne is reacting in a positive way to Martin's gender exploration, and she would certainly characterize her response as loving. However, there are a few problems with her approach. For one thing, she is **objectifying** Martin—treating Martin as an object to be admired for his look, rather than a person with agency.

Objectification

This happens when you treat a person as if they were an object, instead of engaging with them as a thinking, feeling, "learning, doing" human being. When we treat a young child as if they are a doll for us to dress up and fuss over, we are sending them a message that their value is not in the way they think and do but in the way they look. Objectification is most commonly linked to gender bias through the widespread objectification of women and girls. Have you ever noticed yourself complimenting girls on what they are wearing or how they look ("I love your sparkly dress!"), while complimenting boys on their capacities to act ("You're so strong!")? Many studies have shown that this type of differential feedback for young children based on gender is common from adults.

Additionally, since Martin is shy and quiet and rarely takes social risks in the classroom, being the first presumed boy in the class to take a dress down off the rack was probably a pretty big decision for him. By drawing attention to Martin's choice of wearing a dress in this way, Mary-Anne demonstrates that she was not attuned to him. She runs the risk of embarrassing Martin and causing him to shut down or stop his explorative behavior and to withdraw into himself. The writers of this book have seen firsthand how children can shut down after ostensibly positive reactions to children taking gender risks—from one child who stopped wearing dresses, saying "I don't like when people call me 'cute,'" to Lucien's experience from the beginning of this chapter. Even if Martin doesn't react in a negative way to Mary-Anne's public comments, other

children who hear them might quietly choose not to explore gender expression in class because they don't want similar attention.

Even more subtly, by drawing attention to the fact that Martin is wearing a dress, **Mary-Anne is making a statement to both Martin and the class that this is exceptional behavior—out of the ordinary.** Without intending to, Mary-Anne is undermining a gender-diversity message by framing a boy wearing a dress as an exceptional occurrence rather than as part of play-as-usual. While this may not seem like a big problem, this sort of small instance reinforces a stronger social message that dictates that “Gender conformity is normal, gender transgression is not,” and leads children to view themselves as one of the “regular” people, or someone “different.”

The counter-message, which is essential for children to hear and see again and again, is that everyone is different, and our differences are what make us unique. Simultaneously, everyone shares things in common (Derman-Sparks & Olsen Edwards, 2010). A possible statement that supports a diversity rather than exceptionality approach, which Mary-Anne might use in response to questions from other children or parents is: “Many children like to wear dress-up clothes. Today Martin is trying on a dress, and Leon is trying on a construction vest.”

But what would an attuned, love-with-respect response that supports children's gender health look like, in this situation?

First, Mary-Anne need not comment on Martin's choice of dress up at all. The attuned teacher often waits for the child to make the first gesture in the dance of attunement, or cycle of serve and return. This is not the same as ignoring Martin. Avoiding a response to Martin or reacting negatively (frowning at him) would be an example of a **microaggression**, communicating a message of disapproval or discomfort with his choice—a reaction that could negatively influence his developing sense of himself and compromise his feelings of safety and belonging. Being attuned to and respecting Martin's shy demeanor, Mary-Anne could communicate her pleasure in Martin's exploration without drawing undue attention to it by making a small, positive gesture (e.g., a smile, or thumbs-up). Or Mary-Anne could make a descriptive comment to extend Martin's play, as she would for any child, “Oh, Martin. Look how the light bounces off the shiny places on your dress. It's making a pattern on the wall!” This sort of comment lets Martin know that Mary-Anne

sees and accepts his action, without treating it as out-of-the-ordinary or objectifying him and overlooking his agency.

What is a microaggression or microinvalidation?

Microaggressions are the everyday slights and insults that people in marginalized groups endure and that most members of the dominant group don't notice or take seriously. They can be "intentional or unintentional and include verbal, nonverbal or behavioral, or environmental indignities that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative connotations about a particular culture or group of people. A gender microaggression is a subtle negative attitude conveying that one's gender identity is less valuable than the dominant culture's defining identities" (Lubsen, 2012). First coined by Chester M. Pierce, MD in the 1970s, the term microaggression has grown significantly in its use, as has our understanding of the effects that microaggressions can have on their targets. Microaggressions are usually unconscious, and harm can be unintentional. Even if we have the best of intentions and are actively learning, we will still make mistakes and be responsible for microaggressions. Sometimes a microaggression is an insult that is buried in the underlying assumptions of a statement. When a child tells a boy he "throws like a girl," there is the direct and intentional insult to that boy, but there is also the microaggression towards all girls and feminine children that doing something "like a girl" is somehow shameful.

A microinvalidation is a comment or action that excludes, nullifies, or negates a person's experiences, thoughts, or feelings based on his or her membership in a marginalized group. Their impact is to make people feel invisible. They are particularly harmful forms of microaggressions because their targets are shamed and made to think that they are paranoid or oversensitive when they react negatively to the microinvalidation. An example would be an invalidation of a person's attempts to communicate their experiences. If a young child, presumed male, tells you "I'm a girl!" and your first response is, without stopping to tune in to the child, "That's great, Sean, but it's not time for playacting right now," there is a chance that you have invalidated Sean's experience by not taking the communication seriously or even plausibly. Since each instance is, by definition, very small, targets are usually told to simply brush off the harm. However, this request is

itself a microaggression—asking an individual not to have an emotional response to being hurt. Also, the cumulative effect of experiencing countless tiny wounds over time can be deep and lasting—impacting self-esteem, physical health, mental health, and more (Sue, 2010).

What are examples of microaggressions and microinvalidations related to gender?

- Misgendering someone by using pronouns or other gendered language (like sir, ma'am, dude, lady, etc.) that are not in line with how a person wants to be addressed.
- Making a subtle scowling face at a boy putting on a princess dress or stopping a child from engaging in an activity or experience due to gender: "Nail polish isn't for boys."
- Dressing a child only in skirts and dresses, then discouraging active play.
- Listening in order to categorize or respond instead of listening with a willingness to be affected when a child is communicating about their gender.
- Preventing individuals from using a gender-identified bathroom. "This is the girls' bathroom. Please go to the boys' bathroom next door."
- Insisting on categorizing people as "boys" or "girls": "Are you a boy or a girl?", "Good morning, boys and girls!"
- Making statements that assume a binary and dependent relationship between gender and anatomy and physiology, and which invalidate or negate transgender existence (e.g., "Today we're going to look at the female anatomy" and having this only include vaginas and ovaries, when many females have different anatomy).
- Drawing attention to a TGE person's anatomy and physiology without their consent.
- Using a person's old name if they have transitioned to one that better suits their gender (this is often called a "dead name" in trans communities).

- Squinting your eyes at someone or looking uncomfortably long at their body as you try to figure out their gender.

In order to make a comment about the way the light is hitting Martin's dress, Mary-Anne would have to slow down enough to notice it in the first place. She would also have to observe what Martin is doing, so that she could decide whether such a comment would help him extend the exploration of his body or distract him from something else he is engaged with. **Either way, the foundation for a teacher's response that communicates respect is paying attention to the child.** In other words, the adult who wishes to respect a child as David Hawkins describes—by valuing, supporting, and extending their doings and imaginings—must first take time to notice them. This noticing, or paying attention, is an important piece of **emergent listening and attunement.** Let's look at another example:

Hal, three, is playing by himself in a sandbox. Luke, a teacher, sits nearby. "I'm a kitten," Hal suddenly announces. Luke responds, "Hello kitty." Hal pauses, then continues: "I'm a flying kitten." The teacher replies, "Ah, a flying kitten." After another pause, Hal adds, "I'm a flying kitten named Felix." The teacher smiles. Hal is often a flying kitten named Felix. "I'm a flying kitten named Felix who's a girl. A girl kitten." Hal looks up at his teacher, a grin spreading wide across his face. Luke smiles back and comments, "I see. You're a girl kitten named Felix. How do you fly?" Hal lifts his elbows: "See my wings?"—and flies off.

Notice that in this instance, Luke did not draw special attention to Hal's gender choice—a first for this child, presumed male, who until then had played male characters. Luke also refrained from making any value judgments about Hal's ideas (i.e., he did not judge or evaluate them), beyond the encouraging gesture of the smile. This doesn't mean Luke had no thoughts about a child he perceived as male playing a girl kitten; if he did, he kept them to himself.

Notice also the pacing of this serve-and-return interaction, as it was filled with pauses. By paying attention, repeating back Hal's ideas, and giving Hal time and space to expand them, Luke was demonstrating a deep attunement with Hal. **Luke created a space in which Hal felt valued and knew that what he was saying was being truly heard.** Luke was engaged in emergent listening. He probably doesn't really think Hal is a cat with wings, but he allowed Hal's creativity to emerge and he was

listening not just to respond but to see where Hal took him and to honor that space.

We can imagine how the interchange above may have progressed differently had Luke rushed Hal, “Okay kitten, I have to go put sunscreen on Adelaide and Lamora,” or brushed him off, “That’s nice.” Carla Rinaldi notes that “the most important gift that we can give to the children in the school and in the family is time, because time makes it possible to listen and be listened to by others” (Edwards, Gandini, & Forman, 2011, p. 235). Of course, it is challenging for a teacher to create this sense of time and spaciousness when they have conflicts, injuries, and the multiple needs of a class of children to attend to. Emergent listening and deep attunement in the moment are always ideals to strive towards and a set of practices to be continually aware of and committed to strengthening. Let’s explore what this type of listening could look like between co-workers in an early childhood program committed to gender justice.

Susan is a teacher in her mid-50s. She has seen a range of gender expressions among children over the years, but has never had the language to describe it. She is uncomfortable with the idea of a child’s gender identity changing from their legal gender as designated at birth. A child in her class, Lolo, has recently asked to be called “she,” at home and at school. Lolo’s single mom supports her child’s request. At a staff meeting, Susan describes the difficulty she’s having with this transition. “It just feels wrong to call him ‘she’ when he’s always fiddling with his penis!” There is a younger, transgender teacher on Susan’s staff named Tara. Tara explains how this child’s gender identity has nothing to do with her body, and how painful it feels to any individual when their gender is not accepted by others. Susan listens.

For Susan to hear her co-worker’s words and allow them to affect her pronoun use with Lolo is no easy task. Associating genitalia with gender is something that most of us, cisgender or otherwise, do immediately and unconsciously. Even those of us who were raised to be unconstrained by gender roles have typically been taught something along the lines of: Having a vagina/vulva makes you a girl, and having a penis makes you a boy. This message is comforting to most cisgender individuals because it feels clear-cut in most cases. It is part of our illusion of certainty that holds up a mostly uncertain world. However, for many TGE individuals, it is a profoundly uncomfortable insistence, because it does not match our experience of the world. If Susan engages in a typical, surface kind of listening, she may hear this sentiment as her co-worker expresses

it, and acknowledge it, saying “I hear you are saying that it is hard for you when someone calls you by the wrong pronoun.” Yet engaging in **emergent listening requires the listener to be open to being changed or affected by what they hear or experience, possibly in a fundamental way that challenges their convictions and worldview.** It is this deeper listening that we strive for in our interactions with co-workers, family members, and children, and which we strive to cultivate between and among children in our classrooms.

If Susan is engaged in this deeper form of listening, she might hear the connection Tara has to Lolo’s experience, having likely lived it herself. She might imagine a world in which she herself felt at odds with the gender everyone around her perceived her to be, and how painful that world would feel for her. If Susan listens, not just to respond or to categorize, but to be changed by what she hears, she might start to shed her need for a binary and stable understanding of gender to make space in her heart for Lolo—just as she is.

As we practice **emergent listening**, we must be sensitive to ways that others express themselves beyond direct verbal communication. Young children (as well as adults) also communicate through gesture, vocalization, movement, eye contact—and through what Loris Malaguzzi, a main founder of the Reggio Emilia educational practice, describes as the “hundred symbolic languages” of children: drawing, sculpting, shadow play, dramatic reenactment, storytelling, finger painting, and building in the sand and mud, among many others (Edwards, Gandini, & Forman, 2011). What adults tend to consider an artistic medium, the child reveals to be, at its core, a mode of expression and communication. As teachers and caregivers, we must tune into these “hundred languages” as closely as we listen to direct verbal conversation. Let’s look at another example.

Zayla’s preschool class has been dictating stories and acting them out during group time. The girls in Zayla’s class have primarily told stories about princesses and fairies, and the boys have focused on stories about ninjas and superheroes. Zayla—a presumed girl—has written a series of stories about a knight who searches for a dragon that hides in various places (a cave, a tree, a chimney). She casts herself as the knight, who uses “he/him” pronouns. As she enacts these stories with her friends, they begin to choose her for “boy” parts in their own stories—princes, brothers, guards, and others. Zayla takes on these roles with gusto. Soon, she takes on these roles outside of story-acting time, during free play, as well.

In this case, Zayla has been listened to by her classmates. Although she has not said, "I am a boy" or anything along those lines, her story writing and acting has changed the way her peers perceive and relate to her gender. Her positive response encourages them to keep moving in that direction without explicit request from Zayla.

What happens when adults don't listen to children?

When children take in messages from all around them about gender and how boys and girls are supposed to be, feel, look, and act, and when those messages do not align with how they feel themselves to be deep inside, they start to internalize those messages as shame. According to shame and vulnerability researcher Brené Brown (2007), "shame is the intensely painful feeling or experience of believing that we are flawed and therefore unworthy of love or belonging" (p. 69). TGE children start to learn very quickly that they are not like other children who were assigned the same gender box that they were, and those differences can be viewed either as something to celebrate, or as an aspect of who they are that they feel they need to hide. We hope that one outcome of this book will be that more TGE children will be taught to celebrate their genders before they internalize all the "shoulds" and "supposed tos" as shame.

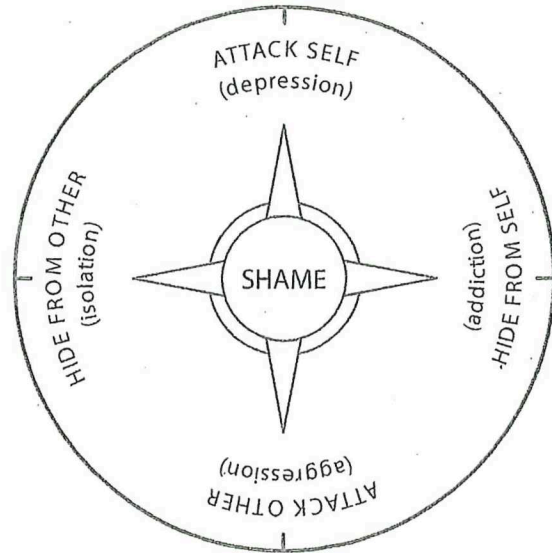
Shame (Brown, 2010; 2017)

1. We all have it.
2. Nobody wants to talk about it.
3. The less you talk about it the more you have it.

Clinicians and researchers agree that shame is the root of much suffering in society including such conditions as addiction, trauma, aggression, depression, eating disorders, and bullying. The good news is: We can decrease our internalized feelings of shame when we talk about them with others. Our shame cannot survive when we are attuned to and given empathy from others. Even if the young children we work with have already started developing shame about their genders, we can combat that force with open conversation about it. We can let them know that they are valued for who they are, including their genders.

While the word “trauma” often evokes images of big negative events in one’s life, research shows that smaller everyday traumas trigger the same neurological response. Brown believes that “many of our early shame experiences, especially with parents and caregivers, were stored in our brains as traumas” (p. 89). Shame triggers a child’s stress response system just like trauma, sending them into an automatic and involuntary fight-or-flight survival mode. Donald Nathanson (1994) further mapped shame responses in his model—the compass of shame. This research-based model describes the four main categories of behavioral responses people exhibit when they experience shame, which tie closely to the fight-or-flight model (see following Figure). These categories include avoidance, withdrawal, attacking others, and attacking the Self:

- **Avoidance (flight):** This range of responses does not simply mean avoiding others, but can mean avoiding connection, closeness, or authenticity out of fear of being rejected or shamed again. These children may even become eager for attention but rarely show their deepest selves to anyone.
- **Withdrawal (flight):** Withdrawal responses, similar to avoidance, are based in fear of what might happen if other people see too deeply inside us. These children may be seen as shy and quiet. They might fly under the radar of the adults around them, and indeed this is likely their goal.
- **Attacking Others (fight):** Shame can just as easily turn to anger as it can to fear. Children may act out and be aggressive towards the person or people who they believe caused them to feel as badly as they do. Shame is such an intensely painful and uncomfortable feeling, it is hard not to be upset with whoever you believe is responsible for your feeling that way.
- **Attacking the Self (fight):** If one internalizes that same responsibility, it can lead to self-hatred and self-disgust. If a child takes on external messaging that they are flawed in a way that is disgusting, disordered, or deficient, it is a very quick road to self-harm. As we saw with the grim statistics shared at the beginning of this book, far too many of our beautiful TGE children walk down this path. (Nathanson, 1994)



Compass of shame: A visual tool to help understand some of the impacts of shame, which closely mirror the impacts of traumatic stress. In this image, we see that the impulse to fight, flee, or freeze is a common experience and reaction to shame, just as it is to trauma.

Adapted from Nathanson (1992) and Taylor (2015).

We believe it is likely that any TGE child who has experienced gender-based shame, regardless of which point of the compass of shame they tend towards, is unlikely to continue expressing their gender openly after a point. That point may be very early in their gender development and exploration. While many teachers wait until a child announces that they are transgender to begin making changes in the way they address gender in their programs (Payne & Smith, 2014), this strategy will leave behind all the young children who are already hiding their genders because they have internalized shame. To connect back to attunement, the “first serve” in a child’s gender exploration and communication may be extremely subtle. If our return generates shame because we didn’t see it for what it was, we might not get another chance.

We cannot have attuned relationships with young children if we are not aware that they may be trying desperately to hide a central aspect of themselves from us out of fear and shame. As early childhood teachers, we need to create environments that prevent children from developing shame about who they are. Our professional responsibility to every child

is to support them to feel respected, visible, safe, and protected in our care. By creating environments that normalize gender diversity and support children to explore their genders openly, we can help to prevent gender-based shame and trauma for children in our care.

Growing up, there was a story my father would tell occasionally about how my dislike of feminine things started very early in my life. I was only two or three years old when my dad dressed me for the day in what he thought was a nice, cute denim skirt. I made it a few steps out of my room and down the hall before I realized I wasn't wearing shorts. I threw a tantrum in the hall and utterly baffled my poor dad, who had no idea what he had done wrong. Being required to wear stereotypically "girly" clothes in my childhood was always a difficult and traumatic event. I remember crying about those clothes right up until the end of high school when I discovered the other half of the department store. I hid in a bathroom stall for over an hour during a sports awards ceremony my freshman year in high school because I had worn a dress and couldn't face my friends. The feeling of wanting to crawl all the way out of my skin when I had to wear girls' clothes started very early for me and never faded. It was a terrible, visceral feeling, and I can only assume that's what I felt that day in the hallway with my dad.

In this example from a transgender adult, we see a child's serve of rejecting feminine clothes met with distress and confusion by a loving father. In this case, the "serve" may have been loud, but the father had no awareness of gender diversity to draw from in his attempts at attunement. Later in adolescence, we see shame responses of withdrawal, and the disgust related to attacking the self in response to situations in which feminine clothes were required.

How shame develops in early childhood: research with transgender and gender expansive adults thinking back to their earliest memories related to gender.

Steele (2016) completed a participant action research (PAR) study examining how four adults who identify as transgender or gender expansive described the messages they received in their early childhood years about gender identity and gender expression. In a PAR study, attention is given to who is studying and who is being studied, as well as what will be done with the findings. In many PAR studies, those

being studied—traditionally the subjects—become actively involved in dissecting the meaning and value of the data collected. For Steele's study, the four participants (including Steele) worked together to identify themes that came up, and discussed ways these findings could be used to make positive change for TGE individuals, including being used in this book.

Multiple sources of data were collected for the study including individual journal entries, focus group discussions, and individual participants' interviews with their family members about their earliest experiences related to gender. Results of the study illuminate how shame can develop among very young children when they perceive it is not safe to reveal their authentic gender self. **Feelings of shame and a perception that they needed to hide their gender identities and gender expressions from others were experiences that all four participants recalled having throughout their childhood.** And these feelings started from a very young age, for some as early as their toddler years.

Shame and hiding were the two most prominent themes in the conversations, journals, and communications with family members in Steele's study. The study participants remembered feeling a deep and urgent need to hide their internal experiences and desires to exist as a different gender than the one assigned to them, especially after experiencing being shamed for breaking gender norms. They also recalled having their attempts at communicating their authentic gender selves overlooked or dismissed out of hand as impossible or simply the result of their childhood imaginations. Sophia, a trans woman in her 60s, describes her experiences related to shame and hiding, which began in her early childhood years.

Sophia recalled playing dress up with her older sister at their grandfather's house as a young child. Her sister was adorning her with makeup, a wig, a stuffed bra, shoes, and a skirt. Sophia loved it until her sister wanted to show her off to their grandfather. Sophia remembers the look on her grandfather's face seeing her dressed as a girl. She explained, "I knew immediately that it was a mistake. I flew back up the stairs and out of those clothes, hot with shame." Without a word, Sophia's grandfather had conveyed the degree to which she had broken the social rules for a young boy, and the shame Sophia felt was swift and strong. What had been a playful exploration of gender expression for Sophia and her sister, and what had felt both fun and affirming to Sophia, quickly became something she knew she could never do again.

Sophia only remembers a few stories of this nature, where she expressed herself or presented herself as somehow other than male as a child. The message from those few experiences was strong enough that she learned to ignore and repress those feelings and desires. Sophia did not come out as transgender until she was 58, married, and with grown children. She remembers her marriage counselor suggesting that she might be transgender and her wife encouraged her to think about it. To Sophia, it was the first time in her life she had been granted permission to explore who she really was. She explained, "It felt like I had been building a dam my whole life, and once I got permission to take out a brick and see what was behind it, it just flooded over me." Until that moment, she had worked diligently to hide, dismiss, repress, and deny who she was under the fear of being seen again as she had been seen that day by her grandfather.

The message Sophia received from her grandfather's wordless reaction to her outfit is received by gender expansive children in countless interactions every day of their lives. The "rules" of gender may not be written down (though sometimes they are!), but when they are broken, it stirs something deeply ingrained in most people. These responses are not always ill-intentioned or even conscious, but they can be felt deeply by a child who experiences them.

One study of elementary school teachers and administrators found that "fear and anxiety are common educator responses to the presence of a transgender child and the disruption of the gender binary" (Payne & Smith, 2014, p. 399). In a lecture from the Black Minds Matter series discussing the experiences of Black boys in education, Dr. Luke Wood (2018) describes the type of subconscious body language a teacher might exhibit in the presence of a Black male student that conveys fear and anxiety based on stereotypes and the "smog" of bias. He claims that "you cannot teach, you cannot counsel, you cannot advise someone that you fear because it will mar all the micro-level interactions that you have with them." We believe this is similar to—while also distinct from—the type of fear, anxiety, discomfort, and even disgust experienced and expressed (verbally or nonverbally) by teachers working with TGE children as well. These (typically subconscious) feelings can be sensed by a child, and they not only limit the ability of that teacher to create a safe learning environment for that child, but also can be internalized by the child themselves. When this happens, children can learn to believe that there is something wrong with them that scares or repulses others.

Themes from Steele's (2016) PAR research study

Shame and hiding. Feelings of shame and hiding their gender expressions and gender identities started in their earliest years. These two feelings were embedded in, and woven throughout, all the experiences the transgender and gender expansive adults recalled from their early childhoods.

Bullying and ostracism. All participants described external experiences of bullying, ostracism, and many negative experiences with peers, starting as early as preschool.

Gender identities, behaviors, and expressions imposed by others. Being consistently told by others about who they are, who they couldn't be, and what they could or could not do was experienced by all participants. Impositions constraining and defining their gender identities, accepted behaviors, and gender expressions were commonly experienced. These are forms of aggression and invalidation that began at birth, or even earlier.

All of these themes suggest the critical importance that early childhood environments be focused on gender justice from the earliest days and that teachers should not wait until they recognize a gender expansive child in their classrooms to create inclusive programs and cultures—especially given the shame and hiding many transgender adults report having experienced as young children.

Yet most early childhood programs have no training for teachers on TGE children. The ones that do have trainings usually develop those trainings in response to a child already in their care being brave enough to come out as transgender or in response to the arrival of a transgender child into their program (Payne & Smith, 2014). Because teachers are waiting for children to come out as transgender in their classrooms and childcare programs, most support is **reactive** rather than **proactive**. As a result, many gender expansive children (as young as two years of age), are busy developing strategies to hide who they are inside. When they do attempt to communicate about themselves, they are more often than not being ignored or dismissed or not truly heard in an emergent listening or attuned sense of the word. We are allowing gender expansive children to hide in fear and shame when we do not provide them with the language,

safe spaces, and trust required to tell us who they are and the openness to truly listen when they do. By being reactive, we are also putting the responsibility of creating the language and the space for that type of communication onto young children who may fear for their safety—physically, emotionally, psychologically—should they ask for what they need or tell us who they are.

Creating a space where all children learn about gender diversity, explore gender in open and creative ways, and discuss gender stereotypes and bias with a critical lens is good for every child. We have all had our gender constrained in many ways throughout our lives, starting in early childhood and carrying on through adulthood. Cisgender women are critiqued for being too outspoken or too demure, too fat or too thin, for how they dress, and for choices they make about their bodies, their own children, their careers, and more. Cisgender men are ridiculed for expressing tenderness and vulnerability, for being unathletic, for being soft or girly. There are many forces that promote conformity to gender norms that impact all young children. A learning space that is both attuned to children and nurturing to gender expansiveness provides:

- safety for all children to explore who they are
- life-saving affirmation for children who are transgender and gender expansive
- a greater capacity for empathy and understanding others in children who are cisgender and fall more easily into society's accepted gender norms.

This attuned and nurturing environment requires teachers to reflect deeply on fear and anxiety they may hold about having a transgender child in their program or about having open conversations about gender expansiveness with children, parents, co-teachers, and their administration. Teachers must not only offer love to the children in their care. They must also respect those children as narrators of their own lives, and listen with an openness to being changed by what children communicate about their genders and their experiences. By raising our own awareness about the shame and hiding that TGE children experience, we can learn to see and interrupt microaggressions and invalidations before they cause shame. We can work actively to create spaces where children feel safe and supported in their gender explorations.

Self-study and classroom audit tool: relationships and interactions with children, families, and peers

Use the statements below as a guide to think about the ways you interact with children (statements 1-7), families and caregivers (statements 8-20), and other teachers and staff in your program (statements 21-25). If your response to any of these statements is "Of course I do!" we encourage you to think critically about ways you could continue to improve on that area. Nobody is perfect, and we all operate from a position of assumption and bias based on our own experiences, no matter how long we do this work! Consider how children, families, and peers might answer these statements about you as well. There is always room for growth, and recognizing this is one of the best things we can do for children!

1. I treat children with care and respect. I pay attention to what children do and say, and value their contributions to the classroom.
2. I allow children to explore genders beyond the gender binary. I don't insist on all children being a boy or a girl.
3. I affirm children's gender expressions and identities, without drawing undue attention to choices, expressions, and identities that cross social norms.
4. I approach children as equal partners in co-creating a culture of gender creativeness and exploration.
5. I believe that children are the experts on their own gender and experiences, and I respond to children accordingly. I trust children every day; even if what they said yesterday was different, what they're saying today is not wrong.
6. I allow children to set the pace on if/when they want to share their gender identity with others. I never "out" a child without their explicit consent and dialogue with the family.
7. I notice how I am treating children differently based on gender, and I make sure I actively contradict stereotypes.
8. I treat parents and family members with respect. I pay attention to what family members do and say, and value their contributions to the classroom.

Attuned and Responsive Relationships

9. I take the time to ask/learn from families about their family structures, traditions, and norms. I stay respectful and stay curious.
10. I am willing to adjust my curriculum each year in response to the needs of families.
11. I provide resources about the language I plan to use around gender at the beginning of the year, solicit feedback, and begin conversations with families who have questions, concerns, and input.
12. I approach relationships with families as partnerships in supporting the gender health and growth of their children together.
13. I resist holding the role of "expert" in how children should do or experience gender.
14. I communicate a holistic awareness of each child, remembering that gender identity is just one aspect of a child, not their whole being. When I talk with families I tell them many things about their child. I do not focus exclusively on gender.
15. I introduce families to gender diversity resources.
16. I share ongoing information about read-alouds, conversations, and conflicts that emerge in the classroom around gender, including the language I use to respond.
17. When conflicts arise, I listen to family members' opinions and feelings without judgment. I validate these feelings and attempt to uncover underlying motivations.
18. I talk about the strengths that come from children's gender expressions and identities rather than "problems" associated with them.
19. I advocate for children's gender health and well-being.
20. I utilize the support I have (school mission, NAEYC [National Association for the Education of Young Children] professional code of ethics) in enacting my professional responsibility to address gender justice with colleagues and families.
21. I instigate and encourage discussion about children's gender exploration with my co-workers.

22. I work to create a classroom culture in which teachers communicate with and understand one another about approach to gender.
23. I foster continuity and consistency in the way teachers respond to children's gender exploration.
24. I use methods of observation and documentation to reflect on children's gender exploration, taking notice of language they use to describe themselves and each other. I share and discuss my observations with my co-workers.
25. I solicit feedback and support from students, parents, and colleagues on how my gender bias shows up in the classroom, recognizing that this is an ongoing process.