Guidance Matters

Dan Gartrell

In this issue, Dan Gartrell renews *Young Children's* Guidance Matters column with a two-part series on helping children who have serious conflicts. Guidance Matters appears in the March, July, and November issues of *Young Children*.

Children Who Have Serious Conflicts

Part 1: Reactive Aggression

During the first week of a Head Start program in September, Jamal, almost 5 years old, punched another child in the stomach. An assistant looked after the hurt child. Charlane, the teacher, approached Jamal, saying, "There is no hurting children in this class." She marched him to a time-out chair where Jamal sat with his head down. After about 10 minutes, the teacher explained how serious it was to hit another child and told Jamal to use his words next time. She then had him return to work time. Jamal hung back, not joining the other children. The following Monday Jamal again punched a child in the stomach. As the teacher walked toward him, Jamal stood up and walked to the chair muttering, "Goin' to the chair 'cause I'm no good."

Wincing when she heard this, Charlane got down on Jamal's level and put her arm around him. After a minute she whispered, "Jamal, everyone in this class is a good kid. But I can't let you hurt other kids and I can't let them hurt you." She stayed with Jamal, and then they read a book together.

Later that day, the teacher asked the home visitor about Jamal. The home visitor had found out that just before the program began, Jamal's mother had been sent to mandatory drug treatment. Jamal and his sisters were split among different relatives. Over the weekend, Mom had visited the children in a central location. After she returned to treatment, the children were again split up.

Charlane went out of her way to spend quality time with Jamal during the next few weeks. She noticed that he had problems transitioning during the opening group activity, so she began spending 10 minutes alone with him each day when he first arrived. At first, the two assistants were not pleased that Charlane was taking this time. They thought she should help in the classroom. But Charlane had the backing of the center supervisor, and after a few days everyone saw a change in Jamal's morning behavior. Over time, the two assistants too had daily contact talks with Jamal.

One day in December, I entered the classroom as Charlane was speaking quietly to Jamal: "You didn't hit or kick. You came and told me, 'I am mad.' You did it, guy. Why don't you go into the restroom and spit in the sink as long as you want. Then we will talk." (Charlane later told me that spitting in the sink was a temporary way for Jamal to work through his anger without hurting anyone.) The boy went into the restroom and a minute later walked to the water fountain. While he was getting a drink, the teacher, who had disinfectant handy, wiped out the sink. Teacher and child then had a guidance talk during which Charlane quietly and informally followed the steps of social problem solving. Charlane helped Jamal rejoin a child playing with blocks. The two played and then cleaned up.

It is not surprising that Charlane reacts to Jamal's first conflict the way she does. She judges the conflict as misbehavior, feels that he may not be a good child, and—not knowing what else to do—disciplines him through temporary expulsion on a time-out chair. There is a centuries-old moral attitude that people are either good or bad. This attitude leads some teachers to punish a child who causes conflicts, because they think that the child, even if young, should know better (Greenberg 1988). The teachers do so out of the belief that punishment will somehow shame the child into being good.

This misbehavior-punishment attitude is problematic. It is a *technician*

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Thanks to teachers Nellie Cameron and Pat Sanford for contributing to the composite case study involving "Jamal." The names of teachers and children have been changed.

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reaction—an automatic response to a situation in which a teacher uses a traditional approach without reflecting on the usefulness of the approach. Noted educators and psychologists of the last 100 years—ranging from Montessori and Piaget to Maslow and Erikson—have found this technician reaction to conflicts fundamentally unhealthy. Current research on brain development reflects the foresightedness of these respected authorities: when conflicts occur, teachers should teach, not punish (Gartrell 2010).

In the early years, the child's brain has *plasticity* (the ready ability to build neuron networks in response to experience). During this time, the young child is just beginning to form the neuronal architecture in the thinking centers of the brain that allow for *executive functioning*. Executive functions include the child's abilities to manage impulses, engage in memory activity and learning, and interact effectively with others.

According to research summaries by Gunnar, Herrera, and Hostinar (2009) and Lubit (2006), high stress during a child's early life is detrimental to the development of healthy executive functioning. Stress causes a chemical reaction that short-circuits the thinking centers and hyperstimulates the *amygdala* and related parts of the brain that regulate the fight-or-flight reaction.

When the amygdala is hyperstimulated by stress, a child tends to regard situations as threatening and often acts aggressively in self-defense. Punishing the child to stop this *reactive aggression* keeps the child's stress levels high and makes healthy executive functioning more difficult to learn. Without adult guidance, this disruptive cycle can affect the child into adulthood, degrading learning and behavior along the way (Gunnar, Herrera, & Hostinar 2009).

The child beyond the aggression

In my view, Jamal was showing reactive aggression. When he punched the other children, his brain told him he was protecting himself. At first, his teacher saw him as a bad child who was misbehaving. She reacted as a technician. To Charlane's credit, with the second conflict she recognized that her technician reaction had not worked. In this moment, she changed from a technician to a *guidance professional*, becoming open to understanding and responding to Jamal more constructively.

When aggressive conflicts occur, the reaction of the technician is to run out of patience and punish. Working as

Punishment to stop this reactive aggression keeps the child's stress levels high and makes healthy executive functioning more difficult to learn.

Dan Gartrell will participate in an online Q&A in July on the topic of guidance and behaviors that challenge children and adults. Check www.naeyc.org/onlineevents for the dates of this Q&A.

a guidance professional, Charlane became open to understanding what was really going on with Jamal (Weber 1987). This attitude change gives her more tools to work with than just temporary expulsion.

First, Charlane realized that to help Jamal, she had to build a relationship with him. She decided to spend quality time with Jamal outside of the conflicts he was having. Regular morning contact talks were an important part of her approach (Gartrell 2010). *Contact talks* between a teacher and child constitute quality times that allow the parties to learn more about each other and build trust. Charlane encouraged other classroom staff to have these talks, and explained that the talks don't have to be long, but they do need to happen.

Second, Charlane found out more about Jamal's life and family. In talking with the home visitor, Charlane learned about Mom's drug treatment and the separation of the children with relatives. Charlane and the staff reached out to the family, including a sister the mother was close to, and worked hard to strengthen relations when the mother returned home.

Third, Charlane worked with Jamal in a firm but friendly way to manage his reactive aggression. The teacher accepted slow progress. It took three months for Jamal to become aware of his strong feelings and come to her for help when he was feeling them. Jamal built trust in his teacher as a result of their relationship. His home situation improved too. Over time his stress level went down and he was better able to learn.

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Restoring calm

We now know that because of the sensitivity of brain development in young children, post-traumatic stress reactions can be caused by less severe trauma than previously thought (Gunnar, Herrera, & Hostinar 2009; Lowenthal 1999). An example from the 1990s is a preschooler who learned that his brother had been wounded in what the child called the "Gulf Coast War." The child began to have panic attacks whenever the family drove to a nearby town. After talking with the child, his mom and teacher figured out that the trips took the family by a golf course. The child heard this as "gulf coast."

With young children, it is helpful to think of post-traumatic stress reactions in terms of degrees. A child dealing with post-traumatic stress may exhibit, at varying levels of intensity, behaviors such as the inability to stay focused, frequent emotional outbursts, or the rejection of relationship overtures (Lowenthal 1999). Unlike the situation above, sometimes it is difficult to find out exactly what is going on with a child experiencing frequent conflicts. But proactive understanding and active support are crucial to reduce the detrimental effects on brain development of high stress in the child's life. Teachers begin by viewing a child who shows frequent reactive aggression as a likely victim of difficult circumstances rather than a bully.

Teachers should always start an intervention for handling reactive aggression by restoring calm. Perform a quick triage—separate children and check for injuries—then calm everyone down, including yourself. Use deep breathing or give the child time and space—a cooling down time. Once calm is restored, conduct a guidance talk and follow up by learning more about the child and the situation.

Charlane's two interventions illustrate the difference between a time-out—removing a child as a punishment for something he has done—and a cooling down time, after which a follow-up guidance talk can begin to solve the problem. It is appropriate guidance to have a child sit on a chair to cool down, but only when the teacher is an active partner in the calming process and follows up with a quiet talk.

Teachers are only human: they cannot like every child equally. But they can figure out how to build and maintain a positive relationship with each child.

Conclusion

Marlys, a 20-year veteran early childhood teacher, recounted a meeting she once had had with Cheryl, a young adult who had been in her class years before. Cheryl greeted her former teacher with a hug and shared that she was an early childhood major because of this teacher. Marlys shed a tear and thought, "This is the reason I am a preschool teacher." After Cheryl left, the veteran teacher thought to herself, "That kid?!" Cheryl had driven Marlys bonkers the whole year the child had been in her classroom. But Cheryl never knew it.

Teachers are only human: they cannot like every child equally. But they can figure out how to build and maintain a positive relationship with each child, even during conflicts. This step may be what leads to positive outcomes for a child who otherwise might tumble into a cycle of stress, reactive aggression, punishment, and more stress. No one would wish such a future on any child, and educators can help to steer another course.

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