

Using Creativity to Handle Behaviors

By Kim Adams

Every day in early childhood centers, opportunities abound for teachers to be creative. The obvious use of creative energy is planning curriculum and setting up projects – as well as the not so obvious creativity in helping young children navigate this socially complex environment.

Let's face it, we are confronted daily with multiple instances of conflict, "boundary" violation, upset children, and frustrated adults. There are as many ways of dealing with these kinds of issues as there are issues themselves. I propose the use of the following simple techniques in conjunction with a spirit of creativity to make the most of these opportunities for learning.

1. Acknowledge that the uncomfortable situation is really a chance to learn something valuable. At times it takes a large amount of creativity to recognize the benefits of a situation that is frustrating, painful or unsafe (for the children as well as for the adults)

***Example:** Several children are riding tricycles on the cement area. A few other children are interested in doing some outside art work. The teacher brings out a large bucket of colored chalk and sits down with the kids to draw on the cement. The kids on*

the tricycles navigate for the most part around the chalk drawings but eventually and probably inevitably one of the tricycle wheels runs over a child's finger. The teacher tells the child on the tricycle to be more careful and ride around the kids drawing (while she comforts the child with the hurt finger). Drawing and riding resume and again a tricycle runs into a child. Teacher again tells the riders to be more careful and warns them that they will have to stop riding if anyone else gets hurt. Of course it is only a matter of time before the incident to occur, at which point a frustrated teacher removes children from the tricycles and says "I told you to be more careful".

The above example illustrates a situation that could have had a more desirable outcome. Standing back and taking a good look is the first step in learning from our mistakes. Teacher set up a situation ripe for conflict to occur (bringing chalk into an area already in use without setting up clear guidelines for the children), children had their space violated and were not encouraged to speak up ("Roni did you want to talk Jose about what just happened?"), no alternatives were suggested by teacher or requested from children (see technique 5), and ultimately a learning opportunity was lost for the children as well as the teacher.

2. Set up environments that encourage learning and exploration while providing choices that allow the children to feel a sense of power or control. Think creatively about how

you arrange a classroom that invites children to be appropriate.

Example: *If you don't want kids to run inside, try to avoid creating a raceway in your classroom by strategically placing shelves, tables, etc. If you see that children are fighting over the use of the one tape dispenser in the room, provide more tape dispensers (and maybe different types of tape or adhesives.) If you want the children to spend time looking at books, make that area as attractive as possible (provide interesting books that are in good condition, use pillows, soft blankets, and curtain partitions for creating solitary quiet space). If you want children to learn to be independent, take the time to coach them through difficult tasks (cleaning up their own lunches, putting on their own shoes, making their own cot at naptime, etc.) rather than (in the interest of time) doing these things for them. This list could go on and on.*

When the environment does the work of traffic flow, keeping the children's interests, and minimizing conflict, the teacher can be freed up to interact in more subtle and perhaps more profound ways with the children.

3. Set up realistic boundaries. It is important to understand the children with whom you are working. The only way a teacher can set up realistic "rules" or boundaries is if he or she knows what developmentally may be expected of the children in his or her care.

Example: *A two year old boy is sitting at a table with Playdough. The teacher gives him a lump of green dough on a tray. The child cries and pushes the tray on the floor. The teacher has a choice how he/she will respond... It is unrealistic for a toddler to "use his words" to ask for what he wants. He may not have the words to use. In this case, it is the care-giver's job to anticipate the child's needs and offer suggestions. Perhaps the*

child does not want to play with playdough, perhaps the tactile stimulation is unpleasant for him, perhaps he doesn't want the dough on the tray, or perhaps he just wants a different color (even toddlers have an aesthetic sense). In any case, the caregiver can choose to be frustrated and not respond to the child's needs, or he/she can choose to be creative offering a variety of solutions, while communicating with the child. Maybe something like: "I want the dough to stay on the table, and off of the floor." "Did you want to play with the dough?" "Would you like the red or the green?" "If you throw the dough on the floor again, you will be telling me that you choose not to play with the dough."

The teacher in the above example wants to set up the rule that throwing playdough on the floor is not acceptable. This is a realistic boundary. The child wants to communicate to the teacher his wishes and lacks the verbal ability to do so. It becomes the teacher's job to offer creative alternatives to reach an understanding with the child (just because he lacks verbal skills, does not mean that the child is not able to communicate).

4. Respond rather than react. In the above example we can see that creative thinking and problem solving can help to alleviate frustration for all. When a person is involved in creative problem solving (utilizing the prefrontal cortex region of the brain), he or she can avoid getting stuck in an emotional reaction. If teachers can think about alternatives and respond to situations rather than reacting emotionally or impulsively, the environment for learning from these types of situations harmonizes. Conversely, if the adult reacts emotionally, the child may feed on this negative attention as well as be shaped by it. (If we don't want our children to hit, we should not spank them. If we don't want our children to shout at someone who violates their boundary, we should not shout at our children when they "break our rules". If we want our children to become creative problem solvers we should offer creative solutions. If we

want our children to handle conflict lovingly, we should respond with love.)

5. Enlist the children in the solution. Children are creative problem solvers! When conflict arises, ask the children for their ideas.

Example: *Let's take the tricycle example from above. If the teacher had said to the child whose finger was run over something like; "Oh, that must have hurt a lot" (validate feelings), "Did you want to say something to Jose about what happened with the tricycle?" (give the child power to say what happened), "What do you think we could do to avoid having this happen again? (ask both/all children)", the kids will most likely come up with a solution and the teacher can help them to come to a consensus. It is important that all the children understand the new agreement, so be sure to restate it. "We all agree that the chalk drawing will happen in this corner and we will draw a line around the area so the kids on the tricycles can see where they should and should not ride. If you agree to keep to the new area raise your elbow (hand, stand on one foot, etc.)"*

6. Role play. Kids love to act things out. In fact a large percentage of children's play is just that. It makes perfect sense to use this natural enthusiasm to "rehearse" gentle and appropriate language, conflict resolution, or trying out the new rules.

Example: *Miranda is playing with a new plastic dinosaur. Avi wants to play with the same toy, and grabs it from Miranda. Miranda cries and attempts to grab back toy which leads to both children in tears and unhappy. In many settings the teacher would step in and solve the problem by taking the toy, giving it to Miranda (Avi should not grab), or giving it to Avi (Miranda should learn to share) or some other "totalitarian" solution. The suggestion for the teacher here is to solicit ideas from the children and then*

have them act it out. Have Avi pretend to grab the toy and cue Miranda to tell him to "stop grabbing my toy". Try having Avi not stop and have Miranda practice going to the teacher for help. Then have Avi stop (listening to Miranda's words). It is also important to have Avi try asking for a turn with the toy rather than grabbing it. The children may come up with an even different solution (maybe they will act out playing with the toy together, maybe they want a timer set and will practice stopping and taking turns when the bell rings, maybe they might ask the teacher to bring more plastic dinosaurs), the teacher's job is to be open to the kids' input.

7. Board stories. Improvisational story telling illustrated on a dry erase board; with a beginning in mind, but without a specific end in mind. This allows for flexibility, kids involvement in the outcome (through sharing *their* ideas), digressions, and expandability in the story. The storyteller speaks into the listening (understanding the audience's interests, differing levels of understanding, and attention spans). Storyteller provides a structure for the story to emerge.

Board stories are excellent conduits for processing undesirable behaviors. If the heroine in the story grabs the other characters' important items (or "toys" in a real life setting) and she suffers natural consequences (like others in the story not being willing to help her when she is in need), the real life issues of toy grabbing are being addressed at a subtle, even subconscious level. This happens without naming specific children (the real life toy grabbers) and is a less accusatory way of addressing problem behaviors with the whole group.

8. Give children “scripts” for success. Role playing and board stories provide “scripts” for the children to refer to in real life conflict. Creating rules or a manner of etiquette that allows for order and an emotionally safe environment is vital to any social setting (no matter what the age or cultural make-up of the people). Sometimes it is important to actually give kids the words to help them to be able to communicate their needs in a powerful yet sensitive way.

Example 1: *When we have Avi (in the above example) ask Miranda if he can use the toy, we can prompt him to repeat the phrase “Can I have the dinosaur when you are done?” This simple phrase is very powerful because the child with the toy is being asked for it in a mutually agreeable way... when she is done Miranda will give the toy to Avi. Miranda can finish her play and Avi will get a turn. (It is crucial that the teacher make sure that Avi gets his turn. This script will only work if the children trust its validity)*

Example 2: *Encourage empathy by helping children see how others feel. Name feelings (happy, sad, joyful, silly, melancholy, hopeful, excited, anxious, etc.). Very young children are able to empathize. “Empathy, the key emotion supporting a sense of right and wrong, emerges early, and it seems, naturally. Babies cry in response to the wails of other babies, “and not just because it’s a sound that upsets them,” “They cry more in response to human cries than to other aversive sounds. Somehow, there’s a built-in capacity to respond to the needs of others.” - Carolyn Zahn-Waxler of the National Institute of Mental Health.*

Example 3: *A child’s space/body/work is violated by another child. Give the children the protocol... (a) Talk to the person who is hurting you directly, “Stop hitting me, I don’t like it when you hit me.” (b) If the child does not respond, ask a teacher for help, “Kim (teacher), Katie is not listening to my words.” (c) Teacher and child go help both children to hear each other. “What did you want to say to Katie about that?” and “Katie did you want to say anything to Jasmine?” This protocol, if followed, allows children a reference for handling conflict now and in the future (the child has the power to affect the change.)*

The above strategies hopefully illustrate creative alternatives for working with young children in their most important curricula, their personal development. Working within guidelines, yet allowing for emergent solutions is a healthy model for handling the challenges life will bring.

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