

# Using Powerful Interactions with Colleagues to Promote Powerful Interactions with Children

by Amy Dombro, Judy Jablon, and Charlotte Stetson

As we have worked with and learned from teachers about Powerful Interactions, we made a discovery: The most effective way to promote Powerful Interactions between teachers and children is to model Powerful Interactions in our work with teachers.

In this article we share five lessons learned and welcome you into a conversation about how Powerful Interactions can support you in creating a strengths-based approach to your work with teachers. We hope it is a conversation that you will continue with colleagues and with us.

Powerful interactions begin with you. To transform some of your everyday interactions into Powerful Interactions, take three steps:

- Be present
- Connect
- Extend

As we describe each step below, we will share what we have learned about each one.

## Be Present

This brief pause before interacting to 'quiet the static' and to think about how

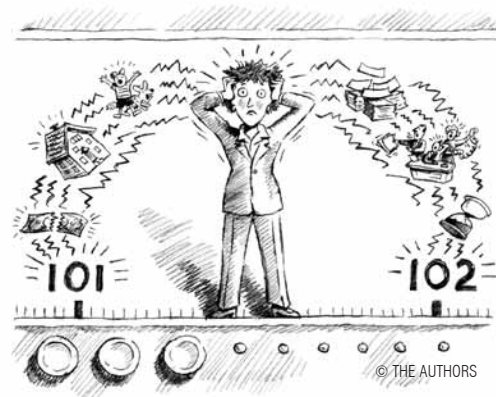
to connect with teachers will make your interaction purposeful or intentional rather than automatic.

**Lesson 1:**  
**What you decide to say and do matters. How you are models for teachers, how you want them to be with children.**

Every interaction you have with a teacher is an opportunity to show that teacher she is heard, respected, and appreciated — which is how we hope children feel, too. When you recognize — and remember — the vital role you play in the lives of teachers and the children they work with, you will become even more effective and find that your work will become even more rewarding.

**Lesson 2:**  
**Only when we 'quiet the static' can we see teachers' strengths and decide how best to support their learning**

Have you ever felt like this as you observed in a cluttered classroom that was a little out of control? Have you conducted a professional development session where you could feel the ripples of unfinished and unrelated business in the air?



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Charlotte Stetson supports teachers in implementing best practices related to teacher-child interactions, curriculum, observation, and assessment. In addition to *Powerful Interactions: How to Connect with Children to Extend Their Learning*, she has coauthored *Winning Ways to Learn*, *Observation: The Key to Responsive Teaching*, and *The Coach's Guide to The Creative Curriculum® for Preschool: A Step-by-Step Resource for Individualizing Professional Development*. With Judy Jablon, she also co-directed *The Creative Curriculum for Preschool in Action, A DVD*.

Static is the noise in your head that comes when too many people and too many things demand attention at once. It is like the crackling sound you get when you are tuned in between two radio stations or when there is interference on your cell phone that keeps you from hearing a friend say where to meet for dinner. It's not just a teacher phenomenon. Static affects us all. Static interferes with being able to think about why you do what you do. It leads to 'reacting': that feeling of dashing here and there to 'put out fires,' rather than purposefully responding. Only when you can take a breath and hold back on your judgment, can you quiet the static and begin to recognize teachers' strengths instead of the 3, 6, or 8 things you would like to change about the teacher or her classroom.

**ment it, and show it so she can see it, own it, and use it with greater intention.**

"The more people attend to the positive dimensions of the present moment, the more positive will be their intentions for future moments. Becoming mindfully aware of what adds richness, texture, depth, beauty, novelty, significance, and energy to life awakens people to life's magnificent potential" (Langer, 2009). Video clips and photos are a mirror you can use to help teachers see moments in their own teaching when they are successful. By 'successful' we mean times when teachers connect easily with children, use more language, and elicit more learning from children. "I notice . . ." statements call attention to these moments. When

you describe what you see, you help the teacher become more aware of what she is doing and why it works, so she can use it with greater intention.

### Extend

The positive, trusting connections you form with teachers help them feel safe and secure, which allows them to take on new challenges. This models the way we want teachers to extend a child's knowledge and understanding, hand-in-hand with nurturing a positive relationship with that child to create the optimal condition for teachers to teach and for children to learn (Birch & Ladd, 1997).



### Connect

When you are present, you are ready to connect or to communicate with a teacher that you see her, that you are interested in what she's doing, and that you want to spend some time with her.

**Lesson 3:**  
**Find the strength in the teacher, docu-**

To debrief our second visit to her classroom of three year olds, we showed Ms. S photos we had taken a few hours before. We photographed moments that caught her at her best. Though we could see her struggling to manage the group, we noticed she was very skilled at connecting with children. One photo showed her smiling broadly during a circle time dance and meeting another child's eyes during a lunchtime conversation. In another photo she had her arms around a child who was sad after his dad said goodbye.



PHOTOGRAPH BY THE AUTHORS

As she looked at the photos, Ms. S had tears in her eyes.

"I get so busy trying to keep things under control, I never knew I smiled like that. Or that children paid so much attention to me." "I notice children look into your eyes when you smile at them," Judy said. "Your smile is one way of guiding children's behavior."

We agreed we would focus together next time on classroom management strategies. As our conversation ended, she gave us a hug. "Will you send me copies of these photos so I can share them with my dad?" she asked. "They show me being the kind of teacher I want to be."

As we said goodbye, she gave us a hug. A connection was beginning.

On a recent visit, Ms. J told us with pride and excitement, that Ms. C, her teaching partner, now uses “I notice . . .” statements to point out things that Ms. J is doing. “It makes me feel good and try new things.

Now I plan to work on using ‘I notice . . .’ statements for her,” she said.



PHOTOGRAPH BY THE AUTHORS

#### Lesson 4:

#### Help teachers see that what they say and do matters to children.

Research shows that interactions in which teachers intentionally promote learning are far and few between (Early et al., 2005; Pianta, 2010). By extending “I notice . . .” statements to point out the why’s of teachers’ decisions and actions, you open the door for teachers to discover and accept that they make a difference.

For example, “I notice that you added a white board for children to draw blueprints, which is important because it encourages them to think ahead about what they are going to construct in the block area. It also reminds you to talk with children about what they are thinking as they pull blocks off the shelf and add them to their building.”

#### Lesson 5:

#### Keep the conversation and connection going between you and teachers and between teachers and their colleagues.

Sustaining change takes ongoing support. We have been experimenting with sending notes and photos between visits to provide ongoing support. The personal tone of the notes (whether to an individual or a group) and “I notice . . .” statements help validate teachers and at the same time reinforce practices they are beginning to intentionally practice and incorporate into their interactions with children. (A reality check: These notes take some time to write. After beginning with lengthy personal notes, we shortened our notes and sometimes sent group notes.)

To promote support within a classroom and throughout a program, we started watching videos of teachers in groups so that they could see each other in action and practice using “I notice . . .” statements to validate their colleagues. Some teachers tried new strategies after seeing them used effectively by colleagues: interactive storytelling and introducing new vocabulary words in dramatic play (recipe, ingredients, delicious) to promote children’s and language learning.

## In Closing

Using Powerful Interactions to promote Powerful Interactions can help you make a positive difference in the lives of teachers — and the children they teach — which in turn will make a positive difference in your life as a coach.

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