

A Manner of Speaking by Bonnie Neugebauer

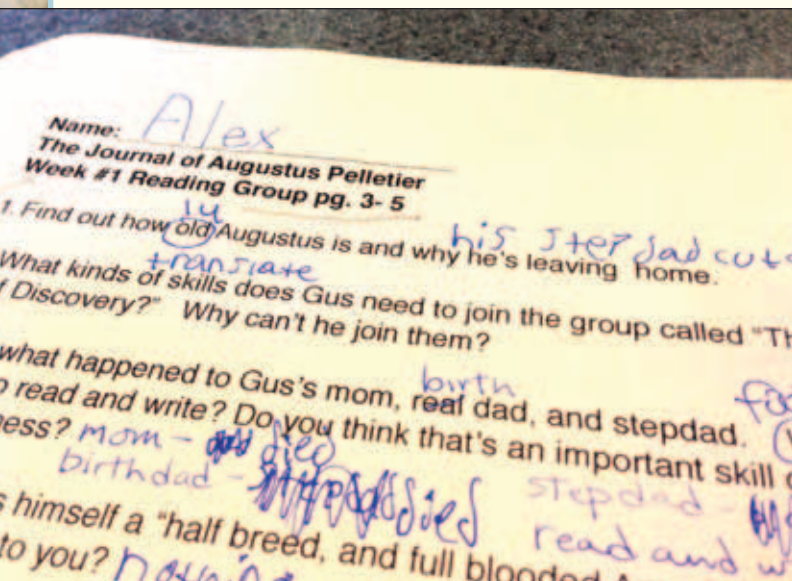
Listening to children, creating space to honor the voices of children, has become one of the core values of a quality early childhood program. Programs invest teacher training and planning time to build teachers' skills in documentation. Displays of thoughtful reflections and beautiful focused photography turn the walls of programs into story walls, recounting the work of children and adults. Walls speak in the voices of the children.

The motivation to include children is so powerful that whenever we gather to talk ABOUT children, there will be someone in the group who will remind us to think WITH children; and we will be challenged to seek out the ideas and opinions of children in all things that impact them.

Children have important things to say. They can provoke us to notice, to think, to see in new ways. Really being with children makes us stronger teachers and better (and more interesting) human beings — and it makes life exciting and ever changing.

But with our intentions to ask good questions, and to listen to children's voices, comes a deep responsibility to respect what children say and to respond.

Kirsten Haugen sent me this photograph and story about a child named Alex. Alex tends to be rather defiant and headstrong, so it's probably challenging to really listen to him sometimes. And he's adopted, which you need to know for the story. Last week he corrected the wording on a worksheet question, changing 'real dad' to 'birth dad.' He had something very important to say about families, based on his own experience. Unfortunately, the teacher wouldn't affirm his contribution.



PHOTOGRAPH BY KIRSTEN HAUGEN

and explore them, not about right and wrong, better or worse . . . it's about dialogue, conversation. And it's less about children or adults and more about human beings who enjoy and respect each other and enter into connections to see where ideas take us.

It sounds good and true to honor children's voices — and it is. But we must be careful not to fool ourselves into thinking that listening is enough. It's only the beginning.