

Charlie, David, and the Garden Hose

How a skilled director coached a new teacher in problem solving

by Peggy Daly Pizzo

Monday:

Yolanda enters the classroom to observe. She watches as Charlie and David both dash to the sand area and simultaneously grab the garden hose.

Yolanda leaves the classroom deciding to get together briefly with Brenda and Teaching Assistant Cho Hee at the end of each school day. From past experience she knows she will:

- listen carefully to Brenda as she describes her perspective on the situation and her frustrations (Bruno, 2008).
- suggest specific research-based approaches for Brenda to try (e.g. telling each boy that he needs to develop ‘a plan’ for sharing).
- encourage Teaching Assistant Cho Hee to recommend strategies that



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have helped in the past with similar children and situations.

- provide more information about the boys’ home backgrounds.
- suggest ways of enhancing family engagement.

That evening Yolanda suggests that both teachers reflect on why learning to share is so hard for children. Drawing on a master’s level course that she is taking, Yolanda shares with Brenda some of the newest research on self-regulation and executive function — which is highly related to learning to share. As Brenda enthusiastically joins in, Yolanda listens deeply (see sidebar on next page).

Tuesday:

At Monday evening’s meeting with Brenda and Cho Hee, Yolanda commits herself to observing the 45-minute morning outdoor playtime to both observe and help supervise the other 18 children. Once the children have gone home, she plans to meet with Brenda and Cho Hee for about 20 minutes.

Later, in her meeting with Yolanda and Cho Hee, Brenda expresses her frustra-

tion that Charlie and David were unable to come up with a plan for sharing today. Yolanda:

- listens and affirms that Brenda’s frustration is ‘only natural.’
- praises Brenda for holding firm to the need for the boys to develop a plan, explaining that this will help them in this disagreement over sharing. It will also help when conflict arises over sharing other things in the classroom.
- notes Brenda’s success at setting up a meeting with both Charlie and David’s parents — and offers to personally introduce Brenda to the parents, since she has known them for over a year. (Both boys participated in this preschool last year, but the garden hose was just installed at the beginning of September.)
- encourages Brenda to take a nonjudgmental approach in her discussion with the parents by starting with all of the things that she can commend in the boy’s behavior or motivations, and then ask the parents what they observe in the boys’ play with siblings and/or neighborhood children.

- suggests that Brenda lay out her idea of the need for the boys to come up with a plan for sharing — and to mention that over time this plan might be used by the boys at home and in the neighborhood as well.
- stresses that Brenda can describe this approach as her own — or as one that she and Brenda have developed together, since Yolanda already has good relationships with the parents.

Wednesday:

Yolanda nods happily as Brenda describes her positive meeting with Mr. and Mrs. Johnson, Charlie's parents, and Ms. O'Hara, David's mother (recently divorced). Brenda optimistically details the agreements they have all made. Yolanda praises Brenda for her efforts.

Later in the director's office, after another hard day with the two boys, Brenda expresses deep discouragement that they have not yet developed a workable plan. "It must be something I am doing wrong" she says. Yolanda:

- says some comforting words and phrases to Brenda.
- diplomatically reminds Brenda (who would have learned about child development research in her B.A. program) that young children are just developing the reasoning or cortical parts of their brain. Needed for problem solving, this part of the brain develops slowly over time and with the efforts at early reasoning that Brenda is encouraging in Charlie and David (Center on the Developing Child, 2011). (See Sidebar 2.)
- suggests that Brenda either email or telephone the boys' parents tonight to report their progress and to enlist the parents' continuing support.

Self-Regulation and Executive Function

Self-regulation and executive function are built on a strong teacher-child relationship and are the key elements of a guidance approach in preschool education. They are skills related to:

- **working memory:** "holding information in mind while mentally working with or updating it."
- **inhibitory control:** "the ability to resist a strong inclination to do one thing and instead to do what is most appropriate or needed. Instead of reacting with what is on the mind at that moment, the child has to stop or inhibit that inclination and enact something else."
- **cognitive flexibility:** "being able to flexibly switch perspectives or the focus of attention, adjusting to changed demands or priorities" (Curriculum, "Tools of the Mind").

In order to fully develop self-regulation and executive function, the child has to be able to focus attention well enough to hear what the teacher is saying to him or her in the midst of emotionally aroused conflict over a desired object (Bodrova & Leong 2007).

- reinforces Brenda's approach in asking the boys to develop an idea or a plan for sharing, and smiles collegially as Brenda mentions Charlie's advocacy for 'a hundred turns.'
- gently reassures Brenda that the boys eventually will both decide on a plan and on a fair number for 'turns.' This decision making helps to strengthen their reasoning abilities and positive pathways between the emotion-centered and the reasoning-centers of the brain (see Sidebar 2) .

Thursday:

Yolanda stops by the classroom early and watches approvingly as Brenda thanks Cho Hee for her co-teaching (with Yolanda) the rest of the class during outdoor playtime, while Brenda works with Charlie and David. Yolanda discusses the boys' actions later

that day with a more confident Brenda. Brenda looks gratefully at Yolanda and says, "We are making progress. I can feel it. David told me "Teacher, I think that Charlie and I will have a good plan tomorrow." Yolanda:

- congratulates Brenda on the progress made and inquires about the parents' continuing support. Brenda reports that the parents expressed their support and willingness to talk with their sons about this issue.
- reinforces that while progress is definitely happening, it still takes a lot of time for some children to learn how to share. Charlie may have a harder time because he has an older brother who takes his toys. On the other hand, David may be feeling some anger and increased aggression because his parents have recently had an especially bitter divorce. Also,

Brain Research and the Problem of Sharing Among Preschoolers

What does brain research tell us about Charlie and David's difficulties in sharing the garden hose?

The very young child's brain is responsive first to emotional feelings and impulses. The reasoning part of the young child's brain begins to slowly develop over the first six or seven years of life. Emotion-laden struggles over sharing are strongly influenced by the emotional arousal of a part of the brain called the amygdala. Impulsive behavior and demands that "I want it and I want it now" emerge from the emotion-centered areas of the brain in which the amygdala is situated. The reasoning centers of the brain, which help children see the fairness of the other child's needs and goals and help children 'think through' a solution to sharing are developed during the preschool years (ages 3 to 5 and beyond). The emotion-centered and the reasoning-centered areas of the brain are not initially strongly connected. Pathways must be continually built and rebuilt between the emotion-centered areas of the brain to the still developing cortex or reasoning part of the brain (Bodrova & Leong, 2007).

David is an only child and does not need to share his toys with siblings at home (Brazelton & Sparrow, 2007).

Friday:

Yolanda smiles encouragingly at Brenda as she passes by her office on the way to the classroom and Brenda smiles back.

Later that day, Yolanda shares tea, coffee, fruit, and cookies with the teachers. "It took a whole week," says Brenda, "to help the boys learn to share . . . and I don't think they are going to remember it when they come back in on Monday. Sympathetically Cho Hee and Yolanda shake their heads. "No," says Yolanda, "they may not remember it. But as you keep insisting that they develop a plan, they will start to remember that they already developed a plan that worked, even if briefly. Then they will gradually try out making different plans with you." "The important thing," says Cho Hee, "is that they are learning to *think*: How should I solve this problem? I have this problem with my friend. How can this work?" "Yes," says Yolanda "as you build on those reasoning, planning, and problem-solving skills in the coming weeks, they will start to remember more and more that they can develop a plan together. They will enjoy that they can be fair with one another.

So, we will all still have to work at this with Charlie and David and their parents. But soon the boys will be able to start making simple rules for themselves about the garden hose while you stand by. I know this can take time, so I have arranged my schedule next week to be in the play yard for the 45 minutes that children are outside. I know they will eventually 'get it.'" Cho Hee nods. "Yes, this approach has worked before." They both look warmly at Brenda and say, "Congratulations! You have really helped the boys begin to problem solve instead of resorting to violence. I think it would be a great idea to tell the parents about the boys' progress tonight and to ask them to congratulate their children on finding a way to share the garden hose. Be sure to ask the parents for any feedback they have for you," smiles Yolanda. Brenda thanks Cho Hee and Yolanda saying, "I could never have gotten through this week without the support and good guidance that you have given me."

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