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Developing a Mentor/Mentee Relationship

by Jamie Bonczyk and Mary Wonderlick

Jamie:

My friend Danielle once told me, “To have longevity in the Early Childhood field, you need to teach from your overflow.” When I booked my first professional development trip to NAEYC I was running on fumes. The year before I had packed up my worldly belongings and moved to Chicago from Minneapolis to attend graduate school. Not only was I attending classes full-time in the evening, I was also teaching in a new city with a particularly challenging set of circumstances. Nine of the 20 children I was working with were receiving services either from the school district, a private therapist, or a mental health consultant. I was struggling to balance my life and I was contemplating leaving the field. I was hoping the conference would inspire me, help me remember my truth, and charge my battery. Lucky for me, Mary was there and, in time, she would help me do all those things for myself.

Mary:

When I began teaching, I was met with indifference and ignored by the very people I’d assumed would be my colleagues and mentors. That was just so hurtful. I’d spent my life wishing to be a teacher; I’d had such excellent teachers

for much of my childhood. I vowed that I’d never allow someone to be made to feel the way I’d felt, figuratively stationing myself at the front entrance at each school to which I was assigned so as to catch people, to welcome them, and to offer what support I could. Fellowship is often just what is needed. In my teaching, I encountered Virginia. We worked next door to each other for about 10 years and every day I learned something from her, both directly as pearls of wisdom, and indirectly because I am a watcher.

I’m an Early Childhood special educator. Our school system invited me to become a city-wide teacher to support inclusion of youngsters in regular education settings. Then a colleague who directed a city-wide program of Preschool for All in community-based programs asked that I transfer to her department to give her teachers similar support. My work has taken me to so very many places, sites, and classrooms — from tiny private schools to storefront- and family-based child care settings.

Realtors say the determining factor in selling is “Location. Location. Location.” I say the determining factor in working together is “Relationships. Relationships. Relationships.” Most of us are willing to listen, to consider, and

even possibly make changes when it comes from a friend. From others, suggestions raise our hackles and cause us to put up a wall and say to ourselves, “You couldn’t possibly know enough about my classroom to say that.” When I became a city-wide teacher, I was determined to make friends with every teacher I



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Jamie Bonczyk, MA, is the Director of Health and Nutrition at PICA Head Start in the greater Minneapolis area. She has held the roles of Assistant Teacher, Teacher, Assistant Director, Program

Monitor, Adjunct Instructor, Master Trainer and mother to a child in center-based care. In 2013, Jamie was a Katie Williams Childcare Advocates Ready to Emerge (CARE) Fellow. She presents locally and nationally on a variety of topics that impact child and staff wellness in Early Childhood settings. For self-care, Jamie is a student of Improv Theater. She brings all perspectives to her work with children and families.



Mary N. Wonderlick, M.A. Learning Disabilities, is a retired Early Childhood Special Educator, ECSE/EC professional development provider, and consultant. Experiences include self-contained and inclusive settings. Co-facilitator of

NAEYC At-Risk & Special Needs Interest Forum. Member of NAEYC/DEC work group (2009) creating the Joint Position Statement on Inclusion. Provides professional development on a variety of topics related to diverse learning styles and needs and challenging behavior, including ADHD and sensory processing, and CHADD’s T2T. An author of the brochure Finding an Appropriate Preschool for your child with special needs, available from ERIC, and articles for both Attention and ADDitude magazines, and NAEYC online.

encountered so that they'd care to listen and to try what I offered.

Jamie:

The first time I met Mary, I was tired, working at the brink of my capacity, and in need of support. I found her at the NAEYC At-Risk and Special Needs Interest Forum booth and tried to ask for advice. She let me vent for a few minutes and then she started assessing my situation by asking me a series of questions. Mary told me she also lived and worked in Chicago. She offered to come in and do observations of my environment and my teaching practice. I went on the defense. I was an award-winning teacher. I knew what I was doing. It wasn't me; it was the circumstances that were the problem! I left the table with her card and the certainty that I had already done everything she suggested.

Mary:

If only our first meeting had been smooth and pleasant. An exceedingly angry person approached our Interest Forum table. I greeted her with a pleasant welcome and a hello. No engagement. Her name badge showed she was also from Chicago. I tried the hometown approach. More resistance. When pleasantries did not work to begin communication, I brought my own fire. Essentially, I said, "Stop. You came to our table for a reason. We are trying to learn what you want or need and how we can help you. If you cannot respond, we

At my age,
in this still
hierarchical time,
people often ask me
if I'm 'passing the
torch.' I explain that
I'm keeping my torch,
thank you very much,
and I'm using it to
light the torches of
others.

Gloria Steinem

cannot help." Although she remained rigid with resistance, our conversation began, though was still a battle. I was able to persuade this visitor that it was to her benefit to share what was going on with her. The more I knew, the better the odds that I could be helpful. *Voila!* Her site fell under the purview of my work department. Not only could we arrange to talk whenever we wanted, I could legitimately visit for support and suggestions. I am confident that I offered no suggestions at the time — only encouragement to allow me into her professional life in the hopes of being able to help and support her.

Jamie:

I returned from NAEYC feeling recharged. However, I knew to sustain the feeling I was going to need to take Mary up on her offer. I begrudgingly

reached out to her a few weeks after returning from the conference. She kept her word. She had one condition; after her observation, I was to leave my room so she could give me feedback. Before we began, Mary offered me snacks and carbonated mint water. She asked me questions about myself, not about my teaching, and calmed my instinct to dispute all the important things she was about to point out to me about my teaching.

Mary:

Our friendship and work together began. For the work part, I always started by asking, "What is it that would be helpful to you?" or "What is it that you need?" It didn't matter what I thought the priority might be; it only mattered what someone says they want or need.

Jamie:

Mary's approach allowed me to reflect on what I already knew deep inside that I needed to do. I needed to work on myself. The timing was nearly serendipitous. It was around this time that I needed to choose my research project for graduate school. I had been through a 10-week Anti-Bias Education workshop series and had written a paper on Louise Derman-Sparks. I decided to dig deeper into the work and I documented the progress of my children and myself over the next few months. By the end of my time in that program, we all grew to understand and appreciate each other more than I ever could have expected. I went on to present my classroom documentation and research at the NAEYC conference in Washington, DC. Over dinner the night before my presentation, Mary gave my co-presenter Danielle and me NAEYC pins to wear on our lapels. I still have the golden reminder of the work we did together to improve my ability to teach young children.



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Over the last eight years, Mary and I have had some of the most influential conversations of my life. Not because she was telling me all the right books to read or people to know, although she has shared her resources. She made a huge impact on my desire to be a professional by being a professional whom I could connect with. We knew we had the field in common; but on a more personal level, we connected over food. We have eaten amazing meals together and when we eat, we talk about what we are excited about. I have introduced her to my friends and my husband. Mary Wonderlick is my friend, my colleague, and my mentor.

Mary:

Jamie Bonczyk is a treasured friend. She is among the few who, if my husband and I had had children, would be what we would have chosen. She has grown beyond where I had grown. That is the real goal of teaching and relationships (both parental and professional): to have one be able to go further than you could and/or could have dreamed. In an e-mail Jamie once said to me, "I do think that by sharing we can highlight the need for people in the field to connect and contribute. It might give people the courage to take a risk and embrace asking for or offering help." We have shared. We implore you to take the risks. Be available. Don't waste time being judgmental. Just be supportive.

From a letter of recommendation Mary wrote for me in 2009:

"It is apparent that Jamie's professional passion will push her to leadership in our early childhood community and, for that, I am delighted. Every community survives only because of committed and passionate members. Jamie is seeking experiences and information so that she can be a knowledgeable contributor."