

Seeing How Children See Us

by Deb Curtis and Lorrie Baird



Photo by our mate Erin Lee

It was a beautiful fall day and the playground was alive with the activity of children and teachers engaged in play. A teacher was watching the children in the sand box when Charlie approached her and asked a simple question: "Are you happy?" The teacher, curious and a bit surprised by the question, replied; "Yes, of course I am." Charlie responded with all the wisdom of a four year old: "Then you should tell your face that!"

Charlie reminds us in this startling moment that children have laser-like attention for everything we do and say. They are skillful social scientists, learning about themselves, relationships, and the world by carefully observing the people around them. In fact, children are primed to see us. Infants are born with the ability to see best at a distance of 8 to 14 inches,



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the perfect distance for gazing up from the arms of their mothers, fathers, and caregivers, the perfect distance to begin to build connections and relationships and learn from seeing us.

As people who are fascinated with how children see the world, we have been reflecting together about the notion of how children see us:

- Do our faces show delight or consternation?
- Do our hands soothe or scold?
- Do our voices invite singing together or command silence?
- Do our bodies overwhelm children with our size and power or wrap them up in comfort?

As keen observers, children notice the smallest details of our body language, tone of voice, and movements. Our interactions and presence have a powerful impact on how children view themselves and us. With this power comes an opportunity — as well as tremendous responsibility — for us to use it well. So, how can we study the details of what children see in us and what these details may communicate? It begins with being conscientious about how we want children to see us and taking the time to examine ourselves.

Study Yourself

To study yourself is among the most important professional development tasks you can take up. How you physically and verbally respond to children and how they see you grows from your beliefs and values, your view of children, and the role you hope to play in their lives. This makes it essential to spend time developing and revisiting core values for your work:

- To begin, brainstorm a list of what you believe children deserve when they spend their days with you.
- Next, generate a specific list of the roles you will play to support these core values.
- Share your ideas with others to help them become deeply planted in your mind.
- As you interact with children, be attentive to your actions and how you communicate the values you hope to encourage in them.

Notice Your Body

Research on body language suggests that we can't ignore the fact that our bodies — and the way we physically present ourselves to children — communicates more than the actual words we

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speak. Our size and how we position our bodies, the closeness or distance to the children, how slow or fast we move; all have an impact on the much smaller people we spend our days with. When you are with children, be mindful of your body:

- Are you towering over the children or down at their level?
- Is your body tense or relaxed?
- How fast are you moving?
- How are the children experiencing and responding to your physical presence?

Celebrate Your Hands

When you think about your hands and all the ways you use them each day in your work, it's mind boggling! How often do you hold a child's hand, wipe away a tear or runny nose, mix paint and play dough, clap along with a tune or for a child's accomplishments, demonstrate how to cut with scissors, calm with a back rub at nap time, write a note or type an observation, or wash your hands for the *millionth* time? Children notice the intimate details of our hands at work and so should we.

- Take note and take care of your hands.
- Frame a collage of close-up photos of your hands to put on the wall to remind you of their importance.
- Share hand massages with the children and your coworkers using special soap and lots of soothing lotions. Celebrate your hands together!

Make Friends with Your Face

As the saying goes "Your eyes are a window to your soul" — as are your facial expressions the windows for children to see you and, in turn, see themselves and the world. Children pick up the smallest nuances — like a twinkle in your eye or the grimace

around your mouth — and come to understand how to 'read' people and complex emotions. Stop to consider the powerful impact facial expressions have on your interpretation of an interaction. You have been reading faces and developing your own facial expressions since you were born and do it now instantaneously and unconsciously. You can work to be more conscious of what your face and eyes communicate by studying them.

- Start by recalling situations you may have had with children during the day.
- As you remember, let yourself respond with your face and eyes as you look in a mirror:
 - What does your face communicate?
 - How might the children see and understand what your eyes are saying?
- Have someone videotape you in your work with the children.
- Study your facial expressions, as well as your body language and tone of voice.
- Notice what the children's points of view might be to your presence and actions:
 - Are the children seeing you how you would like them to see you?

Children See When You See Them

One of the most powerful ways to impact how children see you is to carefully observe them and find ways to let them know you see *them*. The following ordinary moment shows the power of a teacher's conscious actions to see and be seen with three-year-old Austin.

"You want them all."

Austin's teacher is observing him working carefully to fill the metal container to the very top with a variety of wooden balls and rings. He spends a great deal of time opening and closing the transparent lid, each time looking inside when it's open and looking again through the lid when it's closed. He dumps it out and fills it again. Another child approaches and tries to take some of the balls as Austin protests loudly, scurrying to round up the balls to fill the container. Both children grab the container and pull at it. Austin holds on tighter and wins the tug of war.

His teacher calmly says; "Austin, you have been working on a careful idea of filling that container and you need all of the balls. Kai, you had a different idea, but Austin wasn't done." She says nothing else about the conflict, sharing, or taking turns and Kai easily moves on to another activity.

Austin now walks around happily holding the container, while at the



PHOTOGRAPH BY THE AUTHOR

same time protecting the materials from other children.

His teacher smiles at him and says, "You are enjoying having all of those, Austin." He trustingly brings the container over to the teacher and eagerly shows her what's inside.

She says with a smile; "It's filled to the very top! Thanks for sharing with me."

Austin smiles broadly, sits down next to the teacher, and begins to dump and fill the container again.

When it's time to clean up, Austin's teacher with a compassionate look on her face tells him, "It's going to be really sad for me to ask you to put those toys away, because you have been working so carefully with them all morning."



Austin moves away, clutching the container tightly, while the teacher and the other children clean up. After a few minutes of walking around and watching the clean up, Austin comes back to the teacher and with a smile, hands over the container. When it's time to go, Austin looks up at his teacher with a smile, takes her hand, and walks to the lunchroom.

This simple story of Austin and his teacher illustrates that children know when their teachers are truly present with them. They see when our words and bodies communicate that we are listening with our hearts and minds. When we

engage with children in this deeply respectful way, observing them closely while being continually aware of ourselves, children will come to see us as we hope to be seen and in turn we will see children as they deserve to be seen and known.