

# Momentum

by Kay Albrecht

## “Helping Teachers Grow: Confronting Inappropriate Teaching Behavior”

“I have told Mary again and again that she needs to get down at children’s eye level and she still doesn’t do it!” It seems so simple. You know what you want to have happen. You share that information with the person who can make it happen. And nothing happens.

Although the center director’s job has many frustrating aspects, confronting inappropriate teaching behaviors in a manner which produces change is an ongoing challenge. Many a director has been frustrated when her guidance to teachers about appropriate and inappropriate teaching skills fails to have the desired impact. Let’s take a look at a design for helping teachers grow by confronting inappropriate teaching behaviors in a way that is most likely to produce change—and, in the process, improve the teacher’s skill and the center’s program quality.

Confrontation usually has a negative connotation. In many minds, it is associated with conflict. But confrontation is different from conflict. Constructive confrontation is a way to help calibrate perceptions of one’s own strengths or limitations (in this case in teaching competence) with the perceptions of others (either supervisors, clients, or peers). When approached correctly, confrontation can be healthy, stimulating, and change-producing.

### Five Steps to Growth

Confrontation which results in growth has five steps. First—identify the behavior you want changed. Nailing down the problem by specifying which specific behavior you want a teacher to change can be difficult—but if you can’t do it, you are not ready

to confront. Second—identify and describe how you want the new behavior to look. Specifying the change you want is the goal of this step. Third—identify how the change is to be brought about. This critical third step is what causes many to flounder. Developing the plan for bringing about change and identifying who will play what role in facilitating the change is difficult. Fourth—determine how the change will be measured. Consider including specifications about time, quantity, and quality. And fifth—identify how successful change will be measured, by whom, and when.

An example to illustrate the steps:

- 1. Identify the problem.** Mary doesn’t get down on children’s eye level (an important teacher competency which facilitates positive interactions among children and teachers).
- 2. Identify and describe how the new behavior should look.** When interacting with children, Mary will bend over, stoop, get down on the floor, or sit on the hassocks which bring her down to the children’s eye level.
- 3. Describe how the change will be brought about.** Every time I pass Mary’s classroom door and think that she should be sitting, bending, or stooping to interact, I will signal Mary by pulling on my ear. The purpose of the signal is to make Mary aware of where she is in relation to children.
- 4. Determine how the change will be measured—in time, quantity, and quality.** After two weeks of signaling, I expect Mary to be bending over, stooping down, or sitting while interacting with children

### Making Constructive Confrontation Work

- Break things down into manageable components. It is ineffective to start with “You’re a bad teacher.” Pick one skill to focus on at a time, allow a reasonable time for improvement, then pick another, and so forth.
- Pick discreet skills that can be taught. For a good list of *teachable* skills, see “Self-Evaluation—Early Childhood Teacher,” (*Exchange*, April 1989). Stick to skills that are *teachable*. Avoid personality traits or personal style issues.
- Start with teaching behaviors that really matter. Skills that focus on interaction among teachers and children, curriculum, and parent-teacher interaction are some of the skills that make the most difference.
- Focus on outcomes. The process of change will happen more readily if the outcome is specified while the path for accomplishing the goal allows for flexibility, creativity, individuality, and spontaneity.

at least half the number of times I pass by her classroom. After a month, Mary should be bending over, stooping down, or sitting while interacting with children on three out of four times.

#### 5. Determine how success will be measured.

When Mary is at children’s eye level during 75% of her interactions (based on a one hour observation) or when she no longer needs signaling to sensitize her to where she is in relation to the children in her classroom (she is at eye level when interacting 75% of the times I pass her classroom), we will assume that Mary has mastered this skill.

### Prerequisites to Constructive Confrontation

In order to help teachers grow, it must be clear to everyone involved what teaching competence means. The best way to make sure everyone knows is to have a clear program philosophy statement from which a list of philosophically compatible teaching competencies or skills are identified and then used in self and supervisor evaluation.

To find out if your philosophy is clear and understandable, ask your teachers to write it down for you in their own words. Then ask them to make a list of skills that teachers who follow the philosophy must have in order to implement a quality program. The results will give you insight into the clarity of your philosophy and the ability of others to interpret what the philosophy means.

**Constructive confrontation works best when it begins early in the teacher-director relationship.** If you have a staff member who has been with you for three years and has never been given any feedback on her teaching competence, it will be much harder to get the process of change started.

**Constructive confrontation of teaching skill deficits requires that equal attention be given to skill strengths.** This does not mean beginning confrontation sessions by identifying one or two teaching skills that are a part of the teacher skill repertoire. It means regular and frequent positive feedback as skills are demonstrated. When skill strengths are recognized, the next step of working on skill deficits emerges naturally.

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