

# *A Manner of Speaking*

One of the things I enjoy most about my job is the opportunity to visit early childhood programs. Roger and I have had the pleasure of touring many centers across the country; but what I enjoy much more than a tour is submerging myself for a few hours in the life of a center. I like to be there with no direct responsibility (although I come up with all sorts of viable reasons for being there) — just the license to enjoy.

Do you give yourself opportunities to do just that? To hunker down in the middle of a group of four year olds and enjoy what's happening? For my birthday I gave myself a morning in a nearby program — my pretext was taking photographs for the magazine. (You are welcome to borrow this pretext any time you want. It enables you to interact with the children about what you are doing, gives you an excuse for being there, allows you to distance yourself behind the camera when you want to be forgotten, and provides you with vivid reminders of what really was happening that day.)

Here are some of the things I took away with me from that morning:

Alex, a three year old new to the program, couldn't speak English. He was having a difficult time. As I watched, he attached himself both emotionally and physically to his teacher, Laura, who skillfully made him her priority. But she didn't separate from the rest of the group; she and Alex were a unit on the edges of things, weaving in and out as he was able. Laura was also instrumental in giving Alex's parents the strength to leave him, and then reassuring them over the phone.

Janine had been working with blocks for quite a while, but left her construction to go outdoors. When she returned to the classroom, she was off to other endeavors; no one touched her blocks. I asked two other children if they would be interested in tackling a block roadway. (I needed photographs of block-building!) They looked at me with horror, "That's Janine's!" "But she's not interested in it anymore," I

tried to sound persuasive. "It's still hers!" and they left me for other challenges.

I was introducing my presence to a small group and was asking names, doing fine until I encountered a challenger. "Guess," he pronounced. Of course, my mind went blank and I stumbled through a few common names. So he decided to give me a clue: "It starts with rrrr," he offered. "Well, is your name Ralph? Rudolph? Rodney? Raymond?" "Yes, you're right!" My reward was his jubilant smile.

Felix had the audacity to touch Janine's blocks and Sam, unable to deal with his outrage, punched him. Felix needed comforting and Sam needed some time to sort out his feelings. Felix was given a fascinating small toy to hold and play with as the teacher held him and gently helped Sam sort out his feelings and think about his response.

The children filed in from outdoors, hung up their coats, and quickly dispersed around the room. Anna began punching a heart design over a carpet square. Zack and Eric returned to their roadway construction project. Emily began sorting beans into a divided tray. Rachel was gluing tissue paper. Suddenly, she jumped up, "Oh, I need more glue." Off she went to get it. And so it continued for a long time, with each child engaged in an activity, finding the supplies and resources he or she needed, putting things away as the project was finished, and deciding what to do next. Meanwhile, the teachers moved from child to group and back, asking questions, suggesting new paths, satisfying needs.

Images to take away — images of caring, of loving and understanding and listening. Images of children spending their day in confident industry. Images of child care that is working for these children, these teachers, these families. Give yourself the gift of such a morning to enjoy what is happening in your program — it doesn't even have to be your birthday.

Bonnie Neugebauer, May 1991