

Understanding Why the Wild Things Are: Training Teachers for Positive Discipline

by Margie Carter

Child guidance and positive discipline are perhaps the most sought after training topics in the early childhood field. As more and more children are in group care for longer and longer hours, we find disruptive behaviors increasingly common. Directors struggle to find staff with appropriate experience and education while scrambling to refer children for *special needs* screening.

In this context we are hungry for some *quick fix* techniques to stabilize our classrooms and bolster teacher self-esteem and confidence. Indeed, it is critical that early childhood staff understand the tenets of positive discipline and have a grasp of the strategies and techniques covered in this issue of **Beginnings**. With some basic child guidance and group management skills in hand, teachers can then benefit from further in-service training emphasizing human development principles.

Examining the Environment/Refining Skills and Techniques

In addition to the articles found here, there are a number of resources with clear guidelines to assist teachers with techniques for positive approaches to discipline. Ones that I consistently use are **Beginnings and Beyond** by Ann Miles Gordon and Kathryn Williams Browne, **How to Talk So Kids Will Listen** by Adele Faber, and **The Creative Curriculum** and accompanying **Guide for Supervisors and Trainers on Implementing the Creative Curriculum** by Diane Trister Dodge. These resources are invaluable for in-service training on the points

Marjorie Kostelnik covers on the verbal and physical environment necessary to provide positive guidance for children.

Teachers are particularly prone to overlooking the role of the physical environment in fostering self-discipline, instead focusing all their attention on rules, communication strategies, and consequences for misbehaviors. From colleagues Deb Curtis, Marilyn Jacobson, and Melissa Miller, I've gleaned the following training strategies to alert teachers to the impact of the environment on feelings and behaviors.

- **Strategy — Pictures to analyze.** Mount a variety of pictures featuring environments that have nothing to do with children, such as magazine photos of mountain canyons, dense forests, sparse deserts, bank lobbies, corporate boardrooms, a crowded discount store, an electronic media showroom, a busy locker room, large library, art gallery, or antique shop. Working in small groups, have teachers discuss how they would feel in the different environments and how they might behave. From there, generate a list of guidelines for environments that foster desired behaviors.

- **Strategy — Scavenger hunt.** Working in pairs, teachers are given a list of items to try to find in a classroom that isn't their own. Items listed should cover a range of things needed by children during the course of a day — a hole punch, fire truck, dust pan, green paint, puppets, pillows, gloves, large piece of cloth, masking tape, bandages, sponge, ruler, rubber band, stapler, or envelope. As the pairs return with

their items, have them swap items with another pair to put items away. This activity usually generates an animated discussion on how classroom organization of materials can facilitate or frustrate children's interests, self-initiated activities, and subsequent sense of confidence and self-esteem.

- **Strategy — Chart the dots.** For teachers consistently complaining about misbehavior and a high stress classroom, offer a package of colored sticky dots with the following suggestion. Choose a color to indicate stress and one to indicate calm feelings. For several days carry the dots around and place one in the area wherever that feeling emerges for the teacher. At the end of the week analyze where the dots are. Is there any pattern worth noting? Any changes indicated in room or material arrangement?

- **Strategy — Sort and match.** Using the Dodge books listed above, choose a section (such as routines, transitions, or room arrangements) and on a copy machine enlarge the pages with the columns *What You Should See* and *Why*. Cut the page in half vertically, and leave the *What You Should See* column intact. Take the *Why* items on the page, cut them in strips, and place them randomly on the table. Have teachers sort and match the strips so that they have a *Why* opposite each *What*. Discussion from this activity often deepens understanding and generates an interest in a closer study of this valuable resource.

Deepening Understandings of Child Development

Appropriate guidance of young children requires more than a set of techniques. Teachers need a knowledge of child development and appropriate expectations for children's behaviors. It is important to understand that irritating behaviors such as messiness, crying, and testing the rules are normal for children. Learning self-control is more difficult than memorizing colors or numbers. Would we punish or time-out a child for not knowing a color?

As important as clear limits are in positive child guidance, our staff training goal warns teachers to pay more attention to the children than the rules. Unless they carefully observe and understand the reasons for children's behaviors, teachers will be thwarted in their efforts to control behavior problems beyond a temporary solution. We want to provide a framework which promotes keen analysis rather than

Methodology for Consistent In-Service Training

- Identify own filters and agendas
- Examine the environment
- Deepen understandings of child development
- Refine skills and techniques

snap judgment or labeling, and thoughtful responses rather than knee-jerk reactions.

- **Strategy — Collective philosophical statement.** Over the course of several staff meetings have teachers work together to develop a collective statement on what they believe about how children develop independence (self-control), self-esteem, social and conflict resolution skills. Have them include a discussion of why children misbehave and, finally, what their goals are for child guidance and discipline. This collective process is invaluable as a mutual learning and investment experience. It may also result in a usable handout for promoting your program.

- **Strategy — Case studies or video clips.** A series of staff workshops can be planned around some specific written or visual examples to discuss. I have found it effective to view the same video footage several times, working with teachers to analyze it with different considerations. Drawing upon the work of four early childhood experts, I offer a brief presentation prior to viewing the tape or discussing the written scenario.

1. In their book **Beginnings and Beyond**, Gordon and Browne have a "Defining the Young Child" chapter in which they outline *word pictures* for each age group. Have teachers use these in analyzing the scenario you've developed. The goal here is to convey the understanding that certain behaviors, irritating as they may be, are part of children's

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development, rather than something to be fixed or corrected. Our task is to correct the environment and our responses to their behaviors.

2. The Gordon and Browne book also includes a summary of Dreiker's formulation of the "Goals of Misbehavior." Have teachers use these to analyze behaviors they see in the case study or video clip.

3. A very useful book for trainers in early childhood education is **Teaching Adults: An Active Learning Approach** by Elizabeth Jones. In it she describes a role playing activity on understanding teachers' use of power developed by Trook. Briefly review the three kinds of power described — *power-over*, *power-for*, and *power-with* — and then ask teachers to examine teacher behavior in a video clip or scenario you've developed. You could alternately ask a staff member to join you in a role play in which she plays a child and you play a teacher exercising one of the kinds of power, and then have a group discussion.

4. Lilian Katz has written in this magazine and extensively elsewhere on the importance of dispositions children acquire. Offer an overview of this and then ask teachers to view a video clip with an eye for understanding the dispositions that are being fostered. Katz's chapter on "The Professional Preschool Teacher" in **More Talks with Teachers** offers yet another exercise in examining what children learn from the different ways we respond to their behavior. Practice in analyzing these possibilities in written or video situations enables teachers to develop more intentional responses according to the specific learning goal they have for that child.

Identifying Own Filters and Agendas

Many teachers have the misguided goal of setting up a classroom which precludes conflict and behavior problems. Their self-esteem becomes tied to effective techniques which control or *fix* undesirable actions from children. Our training needs to impress upon teachers that our role in child guidance is developing children's independence and self-esteem, rather than teacher-dependent discipline or reward strategies.

As described in previous issues of **Beginnings**, I find it enormously helpful to involve teachers in activities and discussions which reveal unexamined values,

family of origin patterns, and cultural contexts that influence our responses to children. This is especially pertinent when it comes to dispositions and habits towards discipline. Effective staff training assists teachers in sorting out our adult versus the child's issues, to see children clearly and respond with intentionality, respect, and support. Ultimately, our goal is to get teachers to take responsibility for their own professional and human development — a career, if not life-long, task.

References and Resources

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