Beginnings

Building Self-Esteem: Training Teachers of Infants and Toddlers

by Margie Carter

Last year I gave a new assignment to my community college early childhood education students, many of whom were already working in child care jobs. Interview ten people who don't know much about your job and ask them what they think a child care worker does. You might guess the responses they got.

"Oh, you get to play with kids all day."

"You make sure they don't run out in the street and have accidents and such."

"You have to feed them and toilet them and make sure they stay out of trouble."

"You keep them busy all day so they don't miss their moms."

"Do you babysit at night, too, when their parents go out?"

Student reactions to these kinds of comments ranged from shrugged shoulders and lowered eyes to obvious irritation and indignation. In the face of general public lack of awareness and undervaluing of child care work, most providers struggle with a sense of themselves as professionals. This is especially poignant for those who work with infants and toddlers. The multiple demands and responsibilities of caring for these age groups are as emotionally and physically draining as any job can be. And, when you spend the bulk of your day rocking, cooing, cuddling, soothing owies, wiping noses, changing diapers, warming bottles, mopping, and picking up, it seems more like housekeeping than the teaching profession. Very few see work with this age group as a career, and most directors report the turnover rate with toddler teachers is triple that of their other staff. All the teaching nuances embedded in toddler rooms are sometimes as buried in the memory of an exhausted caregiver as they are invisible to the untrained eye. "I'm not a *real* teacher," one caregiver told me. "I just work with toddlers."

Understanding and Valuing Our Work

I have mixed feelings when it comes to the nomenclature for work in early childhood settings. Is it best to call ourselves child caregivers, providers, specialists, or teachers? Emphasizing that we are professionals implies that we want to distinguish, if not distance, ourselves from the images of motherhood or worker. Doesn't this reinforce the notion that those roles don't involve skill or value worthy of significant compensation? There are complex issues of institutionalized gender and class bias woven into efforts to have our work viewed and compensated for the value, skill, and knowledge it offers.

Whatever terms we choose to identify our work, the point is to identify that it centers around a practice reflecting a core body of knowledge, and it requires tremendous skill, complex decision making, continual self-development, and education. This is a far cry from how most infant and toddler caregivers would describe their work. In training toddler teachers, I want to foster a self-image and professional identity around the knowledge and skills that are part of their job. And I want to encourage them to speak up for the resources and recognition they need.

Beginnings

• Strategy — My job by any other name

A group of colleagues and I once brainstormed a list of job titles that could be related to some aspect of child care work. We came up with over 40! Since then I've used this as a training strategy in a couple of different ways. Sometimes I just repeat the exercise my colleagues and I did. "Think of an aspect of your job and give it a title as if it were to be listed in the classified ad section of the newspaper." Coming up with job titles not only gets the creative juices flowing, but provides a good look at how much knowledge and skill is involved in our work. There is almost always an animated, thoughtful discussion, not to mention gales of laughter with this activity. With some groups I've just handed out cards with job titles and asked them to name what work they do that falls under these.

Understanding and Valuing Toddler Behaviors

Toddlers are one of the most difficult age groups to work with. As Jim Greenman puts it, "Neither infants nor preschoolers, toddlers are furiously becoming: increasingly mobile, autonomous, social, thoughtful creatures with language and insatiable urges to test and experiment . . . these restless mobile characters have a drive to take apart the existing order and rearrange it, by force if necessary, to suit their own whimsically logical view of the universe" (Greenman, 1988). Anne Stonehouse further reminds us that, "The speed and eagerness with which new skills are accomplished, new understandings digested and used, new knowledge sought and applied by toddlers sets a very high standard and is exhilarating though exhausting to share" (Stonehouse, 1990).

Toddler teachers certainly know *what it feels like* to be with this age group, but many are unaware of the tremendous developmental significance toddler crazy-making behaviors represent. Central to the focus of my staff training is heightening awareness of why this toddler thrust for autonomy is so important. I want teachers to recognize this in the behaviors they see in the classroom, to value and find multiple ways to support these efforts toward independence.

• Strategy — Chart and promote toddler autonomy

Teachers often ask me how to get toddlers to *stop* doing certain behaviors. Understanding that these are the very behaviors we should be providing for is one of the primary differences between a child development specialist or professional and a babysitter. Together we analyze these difficult behaviors to see how they relate to the development of autonomy. I stress the relationship between the development of self-help, self-esteem, initiative, and the ongoing stages of human social and emotional growth. Posting a large paper and marker on a wall in their room, I ask them to begin charting examples of toddler efforts towards autonomy. Opposite each description they write, I suggest they write examples of ways in which they did or could further support this specific effort. This not only enhances their knowledge and skill development as teachers, but demonstrates to parents and other visitors to their room the complex process of observing and planning that caregivers are engaged in.

Helping Others Understand

When educators, parents, and the media talk about getting kids ready for school, they may emphasize the preschool curriculum. Personally, I believe that the toddler curriculum, whether it be the diaper changing, toilet training, motor, language, or social development aspects of building autonomy, is more critical to school and human success than anyone ever acknowledges. I've found that as toddler teachers begin to recognize and become confident in describing what they see and do in the context of human development, they gain greater self-respect and find their voice in advocating for professional recognition and compensation.

References

Greenman, Jim. **Caring Spaces, Learning Places: Children's Environments That Work**. Redmond, WA: Exchange Press, 1988.

Stonehouse, Anne. **Trusting Toddlers**. St. Paul, MN: Redleaf Press, 1990.

Margie Carter is an early childhood education college instructor, consultant, and advocate. She has made two videos related to the ideas in this article, ***Time With Toddlers*** *and* ***Worthy Work, Worthless Wages****, both available through Redleaf Press. Currently Margie is working on another video about the National Worthy Wage to be released at the November 1993 NAEYC conference.*