
Changing the Way We Communicate

Who Owns This Problem Anyway?

by Jane Harris

The director slumped in her chair, tired after stepping in to take over a threes class. She gave one deep sigh, hoping to muster the energy to face the pile of paper work on her desk, answer three phone calls (one from a prospective client, one from an irate parent, and one from a vendor), and prepare for the in-service she was scheduled to give on discipline. She took another breath and prepared to plunge ahead. Then, in popped a teacher.

"Ms. Director," she said, "you just gotta do something about the way Mary slurps her food during lunch."

Tattling or playing nanny-nanny-boo-boo is as difficult to deal with in adults as it is in children. Because we are swamped with other matters that demand our time and attention, we may deal with our staff in a way that encourages or enables inappropriate behavior. Too often, when faced by the complaint about Mary's food slurping, we will accept the problem that the teacher is trying to dump on us. Burdened by more pressing tasks, we will offer some sort of band-aid solution or mutter some excuse like "Oh, you know how she is."

Those of us who started out as classroom teachers are usually very good at helping children learn to solve their own problems. I wish I had an extra 15 minute break for each time I've heard a teacher calmly redirect a tattling child back to the situation, or watched a teacher carefully guide children through the process of learning to solve their own problems. With children in a classroom, we work very hard to

empower them to be *self-disciplined* and to learn the tools to be interpersonal problem solvers. We use phrases like "Tell Kim how you feel" and "Tell Paul that it makes you sad when he says he doesn't like you."

Our staff deserve similar encouragement. When an adult comes to us with a problem, we need to take a few seconds and ask ourselves some important questions: "Is this a problem that really concerns me?" "Does this problem directly affect me or the center as a whole?" When the problem is two people in conflict, our initial response is often that we must somehow intervene. Especially in the case of feuding staff members, the result can be tension in the classroom and perhaps in the center as a whole. But adults, like the

I Message

An I message has three parts — an event, a feeling, a consequence.

*I feel . . . ,
when . . . ,
because*

It is important not to blame or name call. State the feeling, the event, and the possible outcome without preaching or overstating.

LISTENING (in capital letters!)

Communication is both talking and listening. We need to teach caregivers to listen to the feeling of what others are saying.

In reflective or active listening, we need to reflect back what we think we hear. Keep it tentative, reflect feelings, communicate that you are listening by sending both verbal and non-verbal clues.

children we teach, need to be able to communicate with others. As directors, we need to empower those who work for us to solve their own problems.

How to Turn a Problem Maker into a Problem Solver

Here are 10 rules for encouraging appropriate behavior in adults:

1. Empower, don't enable. When we *enable* someone, we validate the inappropriate action. A hasty answer may send the message that tattling is okay, or that we have taken sides. By *empowering* someone, we give them both the tools and the freedom to take charge of their own situation.

2. Teach the tools of empowerment. Spend time in an in-service practicing appropriate ways to communicate. Hand out the formula for an *I message*, practice *active listening*, teach the problem-solving process.

3. Learn to help people understand feelings. Use reflective or active listening when dealing with the adult. Learn to reflect the feelings of the caregiver without taking sides. A simple phrase like "It sounds like you get very upset when Mary slurps her food" communicates an understanding of how the staff member feels but

leaves ownership of the problem with the caregiver.

4. Stick with the problem, not the person. It is not the person that we have the problem with, it is the behavior. In the case of tattling, we do not necessarily dislike the person, we dislike the tattling. It is not Mary that is disliked, it is the slurping.

5. Avoid sweeping statements. Statements such as "You always . . ." immediately put people on the defensive. Deal with the current problem or situation. This does not mean that personal records are not kept and behavior documented, or that if a caregiver breaks the rules they are not confronted. It only means sticking to the issue at hand.

6. Encourage problem solving. Brainstorming and problem-solving techniques really do give people a feeling of having some power over their own situation. In the beginning, the director or a neutral person may need to be involved in the process of problem solving. A simple form that outlines the steps in brainstorming or problem solving often will help problem-solving groups stay on task.

7. Recognize successes along the way. If you see attempts at communicating, mention that you noticed it. A simple "I really like the way that you handled that" will encourage

caregivers to continue using appropriate techniques.

8. Let people know that you believe in their abilities to communicate effectively and to be problem solvers. In order for our staff to communicate effectively, we need to set the example. We need to use creative ways to convey our belief in their ability and to encourage them. Perhaps the most difficult part of this is to give someone tools and then stand back and let them use them without interference.

9. Do the unexpected. Ask yourself what needs are being met by your usual response. Do we give attention to the complainer? Do we reward the tattler? Do we problem solve for the person who acts inadequate? Once we are aware of what the person gets out of this kind of behavior, we can meet that need in other ways. The mere refusal to get involved in something that does not concern you will get someone's attention.

10. Do not take sides. In the case of tattling, as in many other situa-

Exploring Alternatives

- Define the problem.
- Brainstorm solutions.
- Evaluate solutions.
- Pick a solution and implement it.
- Decide on a date and time to evaluate the solution and decide if it is working.

tions, we usually do not know all the background or how the situation got out of hand. As in conflicts among children, both sides believe they are right or there wouldn't be a conflict. In the case of tattling, often one person does not even realize there is a problem. By encouraging a tattler to go back and talk to the other person, we are validating their feelings and giving them the space to be responsible and to take care of the problem.

Be patient, change does not happen overnight. I am reminded of a story of the mother of six children who prayed "Lord, give me patience . . . and I want it right now!"

We are basically asking our staff members to change the way they communicate. We can teach the skills, but, as with any new skills, it takes practice to make them a comfortable part of our life. What we are striving to do is to teach and encourage people to be responsible for their own behavior. That is truly empowerment.

Jane Harris is an instructor and consultant for the Arlington Heights Park District. She is also co-owner of Harris Associates, providing communications assistance for early childhood programs and other small businesses.