

# What's Love Got to Do with It?

by Anne Stonehouse

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Enjoyment of and pleasure in the behavior and development of young children are critical ingredients in being able to work effectively with them. Indeed, almost all applicants for positions working with children will find the occasion to say at some point in the interview, "I just love children." However, it is worth looking more closely at what people mean when they say that, and to reflect on whether or not it is appropriate.

If you think about it, "love" is a funny word to use. Love involves a complex set of behaviors and feelings, and is directed to specific people. We would hope that people, when they say they "love children," really mean that they enjoy working with them. Bruno Bettelheim wrote that "love is not enough." When it comes to attributes of people who work with children, I would go further and say "love is not appropriate." How would we feel about a surgeon who asserts that she "just loves cutting people open!"?

Sometimes, unfortunately, when people say that they love children, there is evidence that they actually mean something else. Sometimes they mean "I enjoy having power over people smaller, weaker, more vulnerable than I am." These are people who like younger children better than older ones, and who will often say that they like babies because they are so dependent. Red flag!

Think seriously about someone who likes children for their weaknesses rather than their strengths, who may be lacking power in other arenas in their lives, and who may seek a situation where it is clear they can have control. These people may have difficulty with toddlers' assertive-ness, with negotiating and arriving

at face saving compromises, with letting children initiate and have some control over their own experience.

Sometimes they mean "I need people to need me, to love me." These are people who look to their jobs to have their own personal needs met, and they may see children in early childhood programs as a kind of captive audience. They may have difficulty with children who reject them, children who defy them, children who are independent and assertive.

Okay, you may be saying, don't push the point too far. When people say they love children, what they really mean most of the time is that they enjoy them, they derive pleasure from being with them, helping them, and watching them grow. Surely there's nothing wrong with that, is there?

My answer to that question is "may-be, maybe not." It depends on what it is that gives pleasure and enjoyment. It depends on the presence or absence of elements of smug amusement, a patronizing superior stance, in what gives adults pleasure in young children. It depends on whether you laugh *at* them (even when they don't hear you or see you) more than you laugh *with* them.

It depends ultimately on the presence of that critical element, to quote Aretha Franklin, R-E-S-P-E-C-T. Respect involves recognition of their struggles, their persistence, their willingness to take a risk, recognition that in their most fundamental being, in terms of their humanness, they are more like us than they are different to us.

Enjoyment of children without respect for them as people is evidenced in:

- ✓ Handing a young child around to adults who want the chance to hold a child without taking notice of the cues the child is giving about willingness to be held.
- ✓ Dressing them in “amusing” clothing, little imitations of haute couture or shirts with funny (to adults) slogans.
- ✓ Pressuring them to “perform” for adults, whether it is reciting the alphabet, singing a song, or doing something for the adult’s amusement.
- ✓ Putting them in situations where they will be unpleasantly surprised (for example, giving them a lemon slice to chew on in order to see the reaction).

Most people who work in early childhood programs would never do such things, you may say.

Yet there is something more insidious and much more common that worries me, and I write it running the risk that you will decide that I am to early childhood programs what Scrooge is to Christmas — that is, someone who is trying to take all the fun out of it, who, if she had her way, would turn working with young children into a deadly serious business.

How often do we, when watching a video or observing children, chuckle

in amusement at incidents that, if they involved adults, would invoke empathetic feelings of sadness, shared pain, or embarrassment on behalf of the person in the situation. I refer to incidents such as the following:

- ✓ A baby is pulling another baby’s hair with great vigor.
- ✓ Two toddlers are struggling fiercely over a toy truck.
- ✓ A young child concentrating on the story being told falls off the chair she is sitting on.

There are other situations where a young child is concentrating, doing something that is “serious business” for them, and the reaction is often amusement, chuckles, or “aaaaahs” of endearment. For example:

- ✓ A baby places a baseball cap much too big for her on her head and looks around as if to say “I did it.”
- ✓ A toddler concentrating for all he is worth to get a spoon with two peas balanced precariously in it up to his mouth, and just as he gets the spoon up to his mouth, mouth open ready to receive them, they fall off.
- ✓ A three year old in the home corner putting a doll to bed collects every piece of cloth in the playroom and covers the doll head to toe completely.

The pleasure when respect is an ingredient is no less, but is grounded in understanding the meaning of

what is happening from the child’s perspective. It is grounded in an appreciation of the child as a human being.

When it comes to working well with children, respect must be informed by understanding — understanding of children’s development, children’s needs, the individuality of each child, the way the world looks to a child, what childhood is all about. The more understanding there is, the greater the pleasure, the greater the delightful mystery of children.

Respect informed by understanding allows no place for seeing children as objects for our amusement, as “cute,” as less than human. Respect informed by understanding leads to empowerment of children, even babies and toddlers, a stance on the part of the adult that says “I trust myself and you enough to let you set the agenda. You lead and I will follow.”

When is amusement appropriate in response to children? Is it ever? The qualities and behaviors of children that give us pleasure shape our interactions with them and give them powerful messages about themselves and their worth.

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