



Supporting Teachers to Create a Culture of Non-Violence

by Margie Carter

Nearly every teacher in an early childhood classroom can tell you firsthand about violence in children's lives. Whether it's from watching children's play or hearing them talk about the violence they fear or witness, teachers have daily evidence of the deterioration of community and devaluing of life that defines our social fabric. The impact this has on children's behaviors easily brings teachers to the point of tears, harsh and punitive responses, or the search for a new, less stressful job.

Without a doubt, teachers have a critical role to play in countering the impact of violence on children, but they can't fulfill this role without adequate training and support. It's unfair to suggest that workshops on discipline techniques and behavior management will address the consuming stress that engulfs the lives of children and their teachers. Something far more profound is required.

In the early childhood classroom, violence prevention means a careful examination of the environment, language, and routines that make up daily life together. "Places are spaces charged with meaning," Jim Greenman reminds us. Our environments and routines must not only keep children safe but emotionally, aesthetically, and spiritually nourish them.

If, as Greenman says, "physical space regulates our experience, influencing how we think feel, and behave . . . suggesting possibilities, enabling or restraining, encouraging or demoralizing," then how we arrange space for children is certainly a cornerstone of violence prevention. Against the enormous influences of the popular culture, our task is to carve out a physical place and ways of being that nurture

an experience of belonging, recognition, and self-worth and power that is rooted in the culture of life.

Shaping a life-affirming culture in our classrooms is a central ingredient of violence prevention. This means cultivating a reverence for life and a respect for differences; learning how to handle fear, anger, and conflict; redefining concepts of power and acts of heroism; celebrating non-violence and community life with songs, laughter, cooperative work, and commemorations. If teachers are to create this for children, what then must they understand and experience in their own lives?

✓ Strategy: Explore definitions of violence

Depending on our temperament, cultural framework, and life experiences, we probably have different views on violence. Talking about these will expand our thinking and give us practice with genuine listening and being heard, a hallmark of non-violent culture. Some may associate violence with physical assault, while others include threats, verbal attacks, or environmental destruction in their definition. It may not have occurred to some that poverty, racism, and injustice are experiences of violence, but this definition accompanies a way of life for many.

A raised voice, assertive arguments, and outbursts of anger are frightening for some of us, especially when accompanied by alcohol. For others, a loud, argumentative manner is an easy way of being and interacting, not evoking fear but, rather, respect or friendly familial feelings. As teachers explore these possible differences among themselves, they learn to assess them with children. Helping children recog-



nize different ways people express feelings is critical to making a classroom feel safe. Teaching them to recognize and avoid possible danger is equally important violence prevention.

✓ **Strategy: A few of life's precious things**

If we are to fill our classrooms with a reverence for life, we must awaken the antenna of our bodies and spirits and become impassioned about things that matter to us. Our primary hope for survival and new community lies in children learning to pursue their dreams while fiercely cherishing the diversity of life.

Amidst all our efforts at efficient managing, processing, sanitizing, do we notice, provide for, and converse about things of beauty and the natural world? Are there stories, photos, simple objects of nature or art that bring us joy, tickle our fancy, or delight our senses? Most of us have become so *desensitized* by the noise, metal, and pace of our lives that we don't even notice the absence of life's treasures. Our world is being transformed out from under us. Supporting teachers to define what really matters in life and moving this to the center of their attention will have positive spill over in their work with children.

Create a special budget line item for plants, flowers, animals, textiles, lamps with soft light, and spend it each month! Clear out the clutter in the staff room and make a place relaxing for the mind, soothing for the spirit, and evoking of the senses. Take turns having staff members bring "a collection" they have for show and tell. Or ask teachers to bring a photo, poem, or object related to a life cycle theme and create a display each month. Any of these ideas can be duplicated with children, and they will when we concentrate on providing such experiences for teachers. We won't say no to drugs and the death culture until we replace them with something of far more meaning and power.

✓ **Strategy: Redefining power**

Our popular culture has defined power as having control over others, most glamorously when you demean, threaten, or terrorize another with your money, strength, or weapons. We are left trying to hold on to physical life amidst psychological assault or death. Bad as it feels to be on the receiving end, rejecting this definition of power doesn't come naturally. It takes an active practice to the contrary.

Ask teachers to remember a time when they felt powerful in their lives. Was it a power-over experi-

ence or power-with, on behalf of oneself and someone else? Most of us have internalized the culture's definition so fully that until we really have a power-with experience, we might not understand it. Still, if you dig a bit, the seeds are there in us, longing to bloom. Redefining power is central to celebrating non-violence.

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. reminds us, "The non-violent approach does not immediately change the heart of the oppressor. It first does something to the hearts and souls of those committed to it. It gives them new self-respect; it calls up resources of strength and courage that they did not know they had. Finally, it reaches the opponent and so stirs his conscience that reconciliation becomes a reality."

Teaching Young Children in Violent Times: Building a Peaceable Classroom has an example of a chart children developed, "Ways to Be Powerful in the Blue Room." Listed are things such as "help each other, make a new friend, stop a fight, do good work." For these to become real feelings of power and not just parroted words, they will need to be regular experiences for children, named and described as "powerful" by modeling adults.

One area to specifically provide for is children's need to feel physically powerful in ways other than the popular culture's message of karate chops and acts of aggression. Children are very physical beings. Both their size and situations cause them to feel powerless. We need to help them to feel powerful in their bodies with opportunities for positive feedback with physical exertion. Too often teachers (especially females who don't feel powerful in our bodies) focus on getting children to subdue, not feel strength and exhilaration in their bodies. To alert teachers to provide for children's needs for power in their bodies and lives as a whole, can we develop strategies for them as adults to explore ways to feel physically powerful and powerful in their workplace?

✓ **Strategy: Assessing organizational climate**

If we want teachers to routinely assess how children are experiencing the classroom environment, they can practice by assessing the workplace climate for the adults. When teachers play the role of meteorologist, checking out any clouds or possible storms brewing, they can act on their own behalf, as well as become more skilled in their work with children. One of the most useful tools for this is in the September 1987 issue of **Child Care Information Exchange** — "Ten



Dimensions of Organizational Climate.” The dimensions listed (things like collegiality, reward system, innovativeness) very easily translate to aspects of a non-violent culture, and posting the definitions is a quick way to use them as a common reference.

For the “weather report,” create a graph chart by listing each of these dimensions down the left side of a page and three ratings across the bottom — for instance, “dark clouds,” “partly cloudy,” and “sunny /no sign of clouds.” Ask each member of the staff to plot a rating for each of the dimensions, connect the dots, and then stand back to see what you’ve got in the way of a climate. Sometimes there are surprises, like finding yourself in the eye of the storm, and often the results are an affirmation of the good things about your organizational culture.

This activity is a good way to introduce the practice of using class graphs to build community in classrooms with children, an idea elaborated with a examples in **Teaching Young Children in Violent Times**.

✓ **Strategy: Actively problem solve with kids**

Rather than preach, moralize, or take away toys and choices for children, teachers can practice power-with problem solving in their classrooms. This sometimes poses real challenges to teacher wishes, but it’s a genuine experience in resolving conflicts where there are opposing views. A class discussion might go like this.

Teacher: *I’ve noticed we have a problem. Something is happening that doesn’t feel safe and you know we all need to feel safe here. There’s been a lot of Power Ranger play in the classroom lately, and kids have been getting hurt. (Several children nod “yes.”)*

Tanya: *I hate the Power Rangers.*

Ali: *We fight to kill the bad guys. I’m Tommy.*

Teacher: *Yes, and when there’s Power Ranger fighting, kids are getting hurt.*

Ali: *But it’s only pretend.*

Teacher: *But it doesn’t always seem like pretend when kids get hurt for real.*

Robert: *I got hurt when Ali did a karate kick.*

Teacher: *Yes, Robert, you did get hurt. We used an ice pack to help your knee feel better.*

Ali: *The Power Rangers have to fight. That’s what they have to do. (Several children nod in agreement.)*

Teacher: *So we really do have a problem. Some children want to play Power Rangers, but some people are getting hurt. So what can we do about this problem?*

Leigh: *You can only play it on the green rug. That should be a rule.*

Teacher: *Okay, there’s an idea — to have a special place where you can play — to only play Power Rangers on the green rug.*

Henry: *Can’t we do it outside, too?*

Teacher: *So you think it should be inside on the green rug and outside, too? Any other ideas about what we can do?*

Tal: *Make a high school. That’s what we do at home.*

Teacher: *Can you tell us how you do that?*

Tal: *We make where the Power Rangers eat.*

Jinan: *Yeah! Let’s make the cafeteria.*

Teacher: *I like that idea — it’s something the Power Rangers can do besides fighting. Usually all they do is fight.*

(Dialogue contributed by Diane E. Levin.)

✓ **Strategy: Back up support**

To work with children whose lives are surrounded by violence, teachers need mental health support services in their programs and close working relationships with social workers, therapists, and parent educators in community agencies. And critical to ensuring all of this support are wider advocacy and political action efforts. The injustice and neglect built into our country’s history and institutional policies, and the specific underfunding of education, children’s services, and teacher preparation and compensation cannot be allowed to continue. Support must take the form of widespread outrage and demands to curb the violence glamorized and perpetuated in the media and toys, not to mention curbing the handgun industry itself. We will not live with a commitment less than this.

*Margie Carter teaches for Pacific Oaks College Northwest, has co-authored a new book, **Training Teachers: A Harvest of Theory and Practice** (Redleaf Press), and is stubbornly passionate about issues of peace and justice.*