



A Manner of Speaking

by Bonnie Neugebauer

Picture it this way: A hot, dusty, worn patch of dirt. Chain link fence. A few scrubby bushes. Cement steps and assorted other hazards. Several preschoolers. And me. We eased our way into the sunshine. They knew the way.

It was my first day as a substitute in this particular early childhood program — it felt good to be outdoors.

In mere minutes, arguments erupted around the playground — a dispute over the tricycle, tears, kicking up rocks and dirt, runaway and teasing games, mean faces.

I was the teacher! I needed to do something, but where to begin? I initiated a game of *Duck-Duck-Goose*. Only two children wanted to play. We tried *Follow the Leader*, *Simon Says*, *Red Light-Green Light*, and every other game I could remember. Each idea died quickly. I couldn't tease their interest, and outdoor playtime ended in frustration for everyone.

Pondering my inability to facilitate a joyful morning for these children, it eventually occurred to me to think about the environment. There were 11 children, one riding toy, a worn natural setting. Absent were shade, loose parts, equipment — in short, things to do. Children were expected to entertain themselves, but they were offered no tools with which to do so. And I think that they resisted my games (am I just trying to make myself feel better?) because they were used to doing nothing; and I couldn't find a way to break through their expectations.

We expect a great deal of children — and that is actually, usually, a good thing. But we must offer them an environment and tools that feed their abilities and curiosities.

Now I see them all the time — on airplanes, in restaurants and stores, at group gatherings

— children expected to entertain themselves in an adult setting with no props. So what happens is that an interested, creative adult conducts the entertainment with questions and observations, leading the child along. Or a frustrated adult is kept busy parroting the place rules, trying to keep the children *in line*. Or the children run amok.

I love to see a child toting a well-stocked backpack, a playground with hundreds of possibilities — *open-ended* and *loose parts* are two of my favorite early childhood concepts. Equipment based on these concepts enriches the lives and moments of children wherever they find themselves.

On playgrounds and in classrooms where there are few tears and reasoned disputes, you can see challenges and possibilities everywhere. Children are not dependent on the adults; they can imagine for themselves what to do. And the dullness of the setting and the situation do not drain them of their joyous response to living.

So we need to expect great things of children and thoughtfully provide them with tools of wonder for their explorations.

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