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Being Real for Children

by Margie Carter

"All teachers might ask, 'What do most of my pupils really believe I take seriously and care deeply about?'" — Lilian Katz, ***The Hundred Languages of Children***

This is rarely a question posed by teacher educators and child care directors. Instead, the emphasis is on learning child guidance techniques, planning curriculum projects, health and safety, and the like. These things are, of course, important, but where is the teacher as a person in all of our regulations and standards? Remember as a child when you first encountered a teacher outside the context of school — say in the grocery store, at a restaurant or movie? Weren't you amazed that they actually walked and talked in other settings?

To me, the definition of "best practices" has to include the teacher being real for children. Children desperately need meaningful, not perfunctory, relationships. Their world is full of stress, danger, and commercialism. They have little time to cultivate friendships or to engage in imaginative work at their own pace. Instead of real role models, children have media created super-heroes and celebrities.

This is a stark contrast with our Italian counterparts who are receiving so much interest from early childhood educators. The appeal of their programs is not just the stunning environments and projects for children, but in the relationships between the children and adults. In reflecting further about her impressions of the Reggio Emilia schools, Katz says, "The children's roles in the relationships were more as apprentices than as the targets of instruction or objects of praise."

Children need adults around them who provide examples of how to make friendships, handle mistakes, use a variety of tools, and pursue one's passions. What are we doing to encourage our teachers to bring their real selves to their work with children? I worry that some of our messages and professional standards may suggest to caregivers that it's best if they show up as a cardboard rendition of themselves.

✔ Strategy: Recall your own childhood

Try beginning staff meetings or workshops with some quiet moments to tap into memory banks. Ask teachers to think back to their own childhoods to recall an adult outside their family who treated them with respect. What did that relationship look like? Were there special times together? Did he or she teach you something? Were there occasions when this adult genuinely asked for your help with an idea, project, or situation? How did you know you were valued in this person's life?

Listen for the themes in these childhood memories. Talk about the clues they provide as to what we need to be doing with children in our programs.

✔ Strategy: How do you make friends with a child?

Another staff meeting idea involves suspending our roles as teachers for a moment to consider how to go about developing authentic friendships with children. When we are primarily focused on our responsibilities in caregiving and the things we want to teach, we can lose sight

of what is involved in cultivating a relationship, initially and over time.

Have each staff person think of a good friend in her or his life. Make a list of the elements of the friendship: How do you spend your time together? What kinds of things do you talk about? How do you go about helping each other? When there are disagreements, how are they handled?

Now consider a specific child with whom you would like to have a friendship. How might you translate these elements into your attitude and behavior with her or him? There are some things, of course, that are not for children's ears or concerns, but consider the ways you could really show them more of who you are as a person. Discuss some specific ideas together and the support you need in the work environment to act on them.

Take another moment to consider a child that is honestly of less interest to you. Is it possible that sharing some aspect of yourself with this child might shift your relationship?

Finally, discuss what children bring to a friendship. What do you get from them that really nurtures you and helps you grow?

✔ Strategy: Find yourself in stories and pictures

Teachers do well to put ourselves in children's shoes as often as possible. Doing this not only affords us more empathy with them but it reawakens some sleeping stories that children can benefit from hearing.

Devote a workshop to having teachers find their stories in pictures or anecdotal observations of difficult moments with children in your program. Explore examples of a child being rejected by a friend, having a temper tantrum, breaking or losing something. Ask teachers, "Where do you see yourself in this child? Do you have an example in your life?"

Finding our own experiences in those difficult moments of children creates understanding and helps us avoid knee-jerk reactions that may be less than helpful. It also alerts us to another opportunity to share ourselves with children. "I know what that feels like. One time I . . . ." When these are stories of empathy, not moralizing, children will get a sense of a person with a history, with emotions and values to learn from.

✔ Strategy: Share yourself in stories and pictures

As professionals, it is sometimes appropriate to separate our emotions from our interactions with children because we want to avoid behaving thoughtlessly. Our image of professional behavior may also suggest that we leave our personal lives at home, focusing only on the children when we are at work.

While there is some validity to this perspective, let's remember that children need to see what we really care about; what peaks our curiosity, our laugher, our tears. When teachers bring photos and scrapbooks of their lives — as young ones, teenagers, and adults — children get a sense of a person beyond the confines of a classroom. They see a model for growth and development, for pursing friendships and special interests, family life, and ways of relaxing, having fun and celebrating special moments. They learn what we value enough to document in our history.

Our child care programs tend to be focused more on sanitation than sensual delights. Children witness more frustration and anger than they do eagerness and pride. One of the greatest gifts we can give them, along with ourselves, is the cultivation of genuine dreams and passion in our lives. If children only see stressed out, conforming, or submissive-to-the-status-quo adults, how will they learn to hunger for knowledge, cultivate self-discipline, and challenge injustice?

One of the early issues of *Beginnings* magazine (Spring 1986) was focused on "Being Teachers." In the introduction, Dennie Wolf explains, "We have dedicated this issue to reexamining, maybe even uprooting, that narrow and simple view of teachers. In its place we want to plant quite a different image — one of a person whose work in the classroom is an important outgrowth of a large, rich, complex, questioning, and active life. A life that hardly begins or ends in the entry way among the cubbies, boots, and jackets."

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