Let's Be Real!

by Lyn Fasoli and Janet Gonzalez-Mena

Do you ever catch yourself speaking pleasantly when you don't feel pleasant at all? Do you sometimes feel that you are acting a part, and that the real you is left at home? Are you being your version of a professional, but you don't feel professional? Perhaps you are having an authenticity crisis.

Jim Greenman (1992) talks about how children spend their childhoods in child care. It's a sobering thought, a childhood in child care.

What kinds of childhoods are we professionals creating for children? How authentic are they? How honest are the emotional exchanges children see and experience? How rich and authentic are the conversations? How close to "life on the outside" is "life on the inside" of child care? How often do real events, real objects, real people from the outside world have a real impact on the child-centered world in which children spend up to five years of their lives?

How influenced are we by the kinds of packaged environments, curricula, materials, and toys available on the market? Do we understand what happens if a child never has a chance to wander, rummage around in a shed, barn, attic, basement, or other clutter-gathering space? When we protect children from the real world, do we inadvertently discourage the very qualities we say we value in children: curiosity, inquisitiveness, initiative, risk taking, and persistence?

What about opportunities to investigate and explore what exists in the home? Old things such as broken radios, sewing machines, screwdrivers, strips of material to make into dress up, real kitchen bowls, spoons, and stuff for concoctions. Do we rely too much on pretend tool kits, toy construction kits, store-bought play dough? Toys are not the same as real things that adults use. Children deserve the chance to

Lyn Fasoli teaches early childhood education at Northern Territory University in Darwin, Australia.

Janet Gonzalez-Mena divides her time between teaching, writing, and family life. She is on the faculty at Napa Valley College in California.

learn firsthand about their culture through playing with real things that come from their culture.

The child care center is a relatively new institution still in the process of formation. We are at the precedent setting stage in developing places where childhoods do indeed happen. Unlike schools, child care centers are not encumbered by centuries of tradition. In our short history, we have acquired few impediments to creating a new institution. What kinds of tradition will we create? Can we dream a healthy vision of what can be or will we today produce baggage that those who follow us will have to carry?

We are making strides. We, as a profession, have established codes of ethics and developmentally appropriate practices to guide us in examining the experience we provide for young children in care. Ever since the groundbreaking document by the NAEYC in 1987 (Bredekamp, 1987) defined nationally agreed upon guidelines for practice (known as developmentally appropriate practices, or DAP), we have focused our attention increasingly on the issue of what is appropriate.

We continue to make strides. DAP is not a static concept. It has been expanded in the brand new edition to include more cultural sensitivity. We would like to suggest that appropriate practice must also be examined in terms of authenticity. We ask the question — is it truly appropriate if it isn't also authentic?

Authenticity is a dimension sometimes neglected in discussions of practices with young children. Thinking in terms of authenticity of experience may help identify the feelings of discontent reflected in the questions we asked in the first paragraph.

Here are some examples of teachers engaging in small samples of what we consider authentic practice.

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Three toddlers and two four year olds are sitting in front of the TV at 5:40 PM. They are the last to go and there is still 20 minutes to wait. Jean, their caregiver, looks at them and asks, "Do you want to count money?" Without hesitation, they shout, "Yes!" They know and love "counting money." Jean takes them out to the front office and asks the director if she has any money that needs counting. The director tips out the change drawer, spilling hundreds of coins onto the carpeted floor. The children settle down happily to count the money, which means making piles of coins that go together. The 20 minutes fly by.

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A seven year old is allowed to spend several hours combining parts of several old ball-point pens into a new creation of his own that is short and stubby, doesn't look like a pen, but writes like one. He shows more pride in this creation than any of the craft projects presented him in his after-school care program.

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A teacher looking for a way to lock the new trike shed discovers an abandoned box full of locks and keys, but doesn't have time to pick through and find one that works. A four year old who has a notably short attention span happens along and shows interest in the jumble in the box. He spends the rest of the morning matching keys to padlocks, and proudly presents the box of keys in locks to the teacher right before lunch.

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A tired, filthy three year old remarks while showing off a hole out in the back corner of the play yard, "That's the best thing I ever did in nursery school." His teachers tell his mother when she comes to pick him up and confirm that he worked hours digging the hole with a small adult shovel. It was his own idea. Nobody suggested it to him. The next day he filled the hole back in without being asked.

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Tom, a caregiver of three year olds, decides he will bring his motorbike to work to fix it. Why not? He used to help his dad when he was a little fellow. Soon he is surrounded by small bits of motorcycle, tools, and rags. Off to the right there is a line of small mechanics also tinkering with their tricycles.

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What is authentic to one person, place, or situation will not necessarily hold for another. However, we all seem to recognize an authentic experience when we have one. It feels right. It sounds right. When we only consider appropriateness, is there a danger that we leave out this personal check point of authenticity?

Authenticity is a useful word. Authenticity wears its association with personal value judgments on its sleeve. Appropriateness, on the other hand, depends on what some group somewhere considers to be acceptable in some general sense. Appropriateness is arrived at by consensus decision making. When we try to decide what is appropriate, invariably we refer to higher, broader, and more remote authorities than ourselves and our immediate community. We often forget to consult our own beliefs and gut

feelings and consider the requirements of the contexts we work in. It is when we trust ourselves and what we, as the local "expert," know that we access authenticity.

Here are some examples of familiar practices that cause many of us to feel that something inauthetic is happening.

Sam: It's a box I got from my Nan and my brother got one, too, but his is already broken when my dog got it.

Sarah: So, what shape would you call that box, Sam?

Sam: A box.

Sarah: But what shape is it?

Sam: A box shape?

Sarah: It's a square shape, isn't it?

Sam: Uh huh.

Sarah: Actually there are lots of square shapes on your box, aren't there? Can you show the children a square on your box?

Sam: (Holds the box aloft for the children to see.)

How authentic is it to talk about shapes when the dog ate your brother's box?

Marie is asked by another caregiver to take over in the sleep room. Marie groans inwardly. She absolutely hates patting children to sleep. It is boring. She always falls asleep herself and, besides, she's no good at it. They never go to sleep when she does it because she just doesn't believe in it. It's no good for children to be patted to sleep. It just makes them dependent on adults to get them to sleep. They should learn to do it themselves. There's no point in thinking such thoughts, though. The policy at this center is to pat, so pat she will.

Is authentic to do something you don't like, don't feel is effective, and don't want to do?

Wendy is an assistant teacher in the toddler room. She is also the mother of four. She has been assigned to supervise finger painting with chocolate pudding. She watches several children hold back, and is told to encourage them because it is important for young children to have sensory experiences. She is repulsed by the activity and wonders how this practice might conflict with what the children are being taught at home about touching food (or feces). She wonders if, at this age, they can distinguish between a sensory activity and a "no, no."

How authentic is it to carry out a practice that disgusts you — one you don't believe in?

These next examples push the issue of authenticity a bit further.

Dawn uses the saying "You capture more flies with honey than with vinegar" to guide her interactions with children and co-workers. She has a 100% positive approach to everything and can twist children around her finger with sweet talk. She manages to waylay most behavior problems by distracting offenders with new activities or promises of "surprises." Her techniques work. Are her manipulations appropriate? Are they authentic? How would you know?

On the contrary, Lilly, is gruff and stern with children. She confronts behavior head on. Nobody gets away with anything around her and she uses no sweet talk. She's always got an eye out for misbehavior and issues regular warnings when she sees something coming. As stern as she is in the face of misbehavior, that's how warm and loving she is at other times. She handles the children a lot. Some are in awe of her sternness, but melt in her warmth.

Is Lilly appropriate? Is she authentic? How would you know?

Samantha has been working with Jim for a week now. He is great with the kids, but he does get them stirred up. For instance, this morning he was horsing about with them pretending to be a lion and one of the children actually started crying. He cuddled her and got her screaming with laughter again soon after but Samantha doesn't really think this is appropriate behavior for a teacher.

Is Jim's behavior authentic? Is it appropriate? Does it have to be both?

Research in early childhood education has begun to recognize that personal as well as formal knowledge has a place in teachers' and caregivers' decision making. In studies of teachers' and caregivers' thinking about their practice, researchers highlight stories of practice that "ring true" or sound authentic (Jalongo and Isenberg,

1995). These studies emphasize the knowledge that teachers and caregivers themselves generate. Authentic, personal, and contextualized knowledge can be found in stories that teachers tell about their own practice. More formal knowledge sources tend to eliminate this kind of knowledge as being too specific and context bound.

It is the formal, principled knowledge that we find in curriculum guides, textbooks, directives from higher authorities, and indeed the NAEYC *Developmentally Appropriate Practice* document. Principled knowledge is what it sounds like — knowledge that is expressed in terms of principles or generalities and, as such, it is perceived to be context free (Mclean, 1993).

As early childhood educators, we are trained, in-serviced, and pressured by others to value principled knowledge more than the personal, practical, context-specific knowledge we generate ourselves, know on an intuitive level, and accumulate through our everyday experiences with young children. The stories of practice we tell each other and the practical knowledge embodied within them connect with what we know to be true, with what we believe.

This is not an argument to discard or denigrate principled knowledge. Both kinds of knowledge are important. But one always needs to be examined in light of the other. Some who work in child care only operate out of personal knowledge and experience and miss the broader view of principled knowledge that comes from research and formal study. They are one sided. On the other hand, some neglect to examine their principled knowledge in the light of personal feelings and experience. They fail to go beyond what they've been taught. They lack trust in their own ability to determine what is authentic for the circumstances and setting (Stonehouse, 1993).

Those who operate as professionals but fail to balance principled knowledge with personal knowledge and authenticity may have some of the feelings alluded to in the opening paragraph.

Some professionals who are also parents may operate authentically at home and feel guilty that they don't act more "professional" with their own children. How many of us yell in anger and frustration at our own children, but would never raise our voices or show anger around the children with whom we work? How many of us feel guilty at the inconsistency? (Gonzalez-Mena, 1995)

We suggest that perhaps child care teachers should balance principled knowledge with gut knowledge and aim for increased authenticity. This kind of balance may change both their teacher roles and their parent roles to some extent. That is not to say that we propose teachers and parents should act alike. Teachers, after all, must be more thoughtful, plan more for learning, not become overly attached, and be concerned about fairness to all children.

Parents, on the other hand, should accept the fact that parenting is a passionate job. Parents are, and should be, more attached, more spontaneous, more emotional, and a champion for their own child. It's not that they shouldn't be thoughtful about what they are doing, but too much analysis creates "analysis paralysis" and gets in the way of healthy parenting (Katz, 1977). Both teachers and parents should operate out of principled knowledge and personal, practical knowledge. Both parents and teachers should be authentic.

How do we know and recognize authentic experiences, objects, interactions, conversations? Where does what is developmentally appropriate fit with what is authentic? Like everything else in life, there are many diverse ideas about what constitutes authenticity in child care. If authentic is that which reflects reality, one common definition, then the question is "whose reality?" Do we know what constitutes an authentic experience for the children we work with — for their families as well? How do we find out? There are likely to be many authentic ways to work with children and they won't all look the same.

Like "quality," authenticity is a complex and elusive characteristic and best understood as occurring along a continuum. Most experience can probably be located somewhere between entirely authentic and entirely unauthentic rather than at either end of the spectrum. Perhaps thinking along these continua will help in evaluating the authenticity of an experience.

An authentic experience is one that:

- is closer to being true than false in nature;
- is the real thing more often than a replica;
- is characterized more by honesty than deception;
- is richer, wider, deeper than its synthetic counterpart;
- feels more right that wrong;
- is more evocative than evoking no feeling at all.

The key is to avoid dichotomies of right and wrong, appropriate and inappropriate, but consider that almost every situation is potentially

both. We must tap into our personal knowledge base and that of others with whom we work and live to discover the knowledge held in the variety of beliefs and views. That knowledge must work in conjunction with principled knowledge in determining what is appropriate and authentic. We can't use books or sets of guidelines alone, but must use our gut reactions as well.

We must bring our "real selves" to work with us. Consider the caregiver who is angry and frustrated about a child who continually hits other children. For the tenth time, she hustles over to intervene when Matthew and Tommy are struggling over the red-handled shovel. She arrives just in time to stop Matthew from whapping Tommy in the head with a blue-handled shovel. She squats down next to Matthew and says in a calm, even tone, "Matthew, use your words. Tell Tommy what you want." She's well trained. She hides her true feelings about the situation.

How authentic is it to speak as if you were ordering a cappuccino when, in fact, you are completely fed up? Shouldn't children perhaps know when an adult is feeling something deeply?

How bad would it be for children to see adults being natural in a child care setting? Consider this scene. The director glances up and sees the new caregiver, Miriam, talking and laughing once again with another caregiver while they're both sitting on the edge of the sand pit. Miriam is almost weeping with the hilarity of some incident. So is the other caregiver. A few children approach them and stand watching them laugh. Soon there is a circle of children all standing around the two women laughing. They have big smiles on their faces. They start giggling. In no time, the whole group is laughing.

Why shouldn't children see adults enjoying themselves, having a good laugh? At home, children are likely to see adults expressing all sorts of feelings. If they are to have a childhood in child care, shouldn't they see adults being more authentic than they are when acting in an unemotional "professional" manner?

We must not miss the opportunity we have today to expand our definitions of good quality care and education to include not only what we, as a profession, believe is appropriate, but what we, as professional individuals, know is authentic. This is not going to be an easy process. It will require much discussion, argument, and compromise as groups of early childhood professionals and parents determine what they mean by "authentic" for the children who spend their childhoods in child care. In doing this, we won't be generating new sets of guidelines for others to follow. Accommodating the principle of personal authenticity will always remain within the domain of the personal and local. Nevertheless, determining a process for distinguishing what is authentic from what is not provides a growth point for the profession.

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