

Relationships in Child Care Settings

Becoming Fully Human (or What Matters Most)

by Lilli-ann Buffin

A familiar car pulls up the driveway. Barely at a stop, the vehicle's rear passenger door flies open. Out pops a familiar little blond head. He is at the door in a nanosecond greeting me, arms unloading his important "fings," eyes searching the surroundings for both change and familiar faces. The other children pounce on this little visitor. They immediately begin chasing, giggling, and wrestling. Periodically they stop, folding over in hysterical laughter. Their joy at being together jets out from every pore in their bodies.

These children spent three years together in my family child care program. Now they are reunited for a sleepover. Age and gender seem to be of no consequence. Shared memories, their love for this place, and their love for one another bring them back together right where they left off.

We run out for some snacks and a movie. With no prompting, their hands reach out to one another as their feet hit the sidewalk. They walk hand in hand into and throughout the store. Every

step of the way I fight back tears. I really love these children, and I know they love me. But now, at this moment, I am touched deeply by their love for one another.

My mind opens its enormous scrapbook of memories. I recall the night one of these children, three years old at the time, was taken to the emergency room following a motor vehicle accident. An only child, she is asked by the emergency room personnel if she has any brothers or sisters. "Oh, yes," she answers, and she names my children.

I look at the little blond-haired fellow last to arrive for this sleepover. I recall the many times that, when asked for his full name, he incorporated my last name into his own.

A few weeks after the sleepover, we catch up with another old friend for an evening of bowling. The children are filled with excitement. They can't keep from touching each other in silly and fond gestures. They compare how much they have grown and changed, and quickly compare notes about schools and teachers. I enjoy this encounter enormously as I recall two of these children together as preschoolers in a child care program six years ago.

I remember their first crush — it was on one another. The little girl was three and a half when this beautiful boy gave her his scarab medallion. Later that evening, she said, "I think I've met the boy I'm going to marry." And she named this boy. Some years later, this same little boy asked me, "Lilli, if something happens to my mom, can I come and live with you?"

As we drive to the bowling alley, I notice that, inevitably, when these children get together they begin to ask each other, "Do you remember . . . ?" and to me, "Lilli, whatever happened to . . . ?" They still wonder about old friends and companions from child care. While they revel in their love for one another and

Lilli-ann Buffin, MSW, is the owner of New Developments Family Enrichment Services in Wooster, Ohio. She develops programs for and about children and families. Lilli has worked as a child and family therapist, child care director, and educator.



the potent sense of self that emerges when in the company of their familiar peers, they carry special memories and fondness for other children they no longer see.

So often the lists of what to look for in quality child care include issues of safety, cleanliness, materials, and technology. When it comes to relationships, the focus often is on staff-child ratios. Perhaps every list should ask, "Is the love of the staff for the children and the love of the children for their peers readily apparent?"

The decade of the brain gave us a tremendous amount of information and new insights into how young children learn and develop. Much of the popular focus and application of this research has been on the development of academic skills. The importance of relationships has gotten lost in the shuffle as we try to anticipate every critical moment in learning in order to make our children more "successful."

For some time, I have pondered the issues of intelligence and success. What kind of person would we have, I've wondered, if we could make every neural connection and leap through every window of opportunity at precisely the right moment? A number of months ago, I attended a lecture given by Dr. Oliver Sacks, the author of *Awakenings*. The subject of his talk was autism. Referring to those individuals with autism who have an uncanny ability to compute numbers, remember dates, or draw in exquisite detail from memory, Dr. Sacks described autism as "a kind of pure intelligence." When I heard this, I felt a window had been suddenly thrown open in my own head. A kind of pure intelligence!

And yet what is the most apparent characteristic of children with autism? A painful lack of ability to relate to others. Is this what we inadvertently will create if we are not careful?

In *Discipline with Dignity*, Richard Curwin observes that:

The world is scrambling to build an information superhighway. Information access is the currency of the new age. . . . And yet information has never reduced man's inhumanity to man. Knowledge has not stopped bigotry, racism, hatred, crime, or violence. Neither has intelligence, technology, nor wealth. . . .

Technology might create better security systems, but it can't stop an irrational man with a gun who shoots at students from a distant hill. We need a humane highway to guide us and to teach us how to get along with one another. The curriculum of the future will either be a merger of the technological and the human, or we will come to a rapid dead end.

Recently, I interviewed John Upp on this very issue. John is the coordinator of the school-age program at our community's largest child care center. John grew up in this child care center and feels it had a "huge impact" on his life. John attended the center's programs from the time he was two or three years of age until he was 12 years old. He loved coming to the center and feels it gave him lots of opportunity for socialization. John considered the center "home." He describes strong attachments to some of his teachers, stating, "They were always there for me."

John graduated from Ohio State University in child and family studies and worked in several early childhood centers. I asked him, "Given your educational and professional experience, and your personal experience as a young boy growing up in a child care center,

what matters most?" John answered without hesitation: "The educational portion is stressed too much. Parents feel pushed. Attachment and socialization are most important. A person can learn to read at any age . . . to add at any age, but a person learns to love at an early age."

As John and I talked, a stream of preschoolers walked by on their way to the nap room. Each child in this large group stopped at John's knee for a hug or a brief word. The love exchanged between them was rich and apparent. As the door closed behind the last of the children, John confided that it is both touching and difficult when some of the children call him dad. He truly understands that these children need much from him beyond lessons in how to read or add.

Children learn best in a positively charged emotional context. They learn best from and with people they love. First, because they want to please someone they care about and, second, because they want to model and imitate the people they admire. When children believe in us, they believe that what we are trying to teach them must be good and important. Children are willing to take learning risks in the company of people they trust. Our children will risk error and even failure if they are secure in the belief that we are for them and not against them. Through these exchanges, they learn the subtleties of non-verbal behavior and the important nuances of relationships.

With high divorce rates, a mobile society, and the fast pace of change in our world, children experience many losses in their young lives. And yet what remains true about our becoming fully human is the ability to form attachments and feel a sense of belonging. Newborn infants learn to feel safe and secure in the world through the consistency and familiarity of a comforting care provider. They come to

trust themselves and their ability to cope with their urges and discomforts in the context of secure relationships. Babies are wired to recognize the sound of their mother's voice and to respond to the human face, just as they are programmed to learn.

Even concepts we consider purely rational and objective are learned first in an emotional context. For example, children learn about quantity when they feel pleased and ask for more. They learn about time in the context of anticipation, excitement, or dread about what comes next.

Our children need experience in relationships with others to learn tolerance and forgiveness, belonging and independence, mastery and generosity. These are the elements, beyond factual knowledge and information, that give life its meaning and value.

Children need their relationships with other children to gain a better sense of self-identity. They need a history to share with people they love who were there when memorable events occurred. With children growing up in child care centers, many of their important physical, mental, social, and emotional milestones occur in the company of people their families really do not know.

Children need their contact with the adults and children who shared those moments with them. Because the memories of young children are often formed and retained based on what they are told about events, and through the retelling of their stories, being with those special others who can share those memories helps children to know themselves.

Children are full of possibilities and unself-conscious around people they love. Sometimes they speak to me of the future. The children share with me their plans and assure me that they will bring their babies to me. I am honored to be a part of that picture. I hope that I will be there, still in regular contact with each of them. However, if we lose touch as the years pass, and the children no longer recall my name or recognize me in the supermarket, I still will know that I had a part in shaping their future, in shaping the environment in which each child came to know love and meaning. The time and love we shared together will be locked into the fibers of who they have become.

I can imagine myself older, watching their babies grow up. Perhaps these new "babies" will run through the sprinkler on a hot summer day as their parents so loved to do, and afterward, we will sit on the porch and connect to our history. We will sort through the boxes full of photos, the memories saved and savored, and I will say to this new generation of children, "See how they loved one another."