"I'm bery, bery cwoss!" Understanding Children's Anger

by Marie D. Hammer

Crash!! Tinkle tinkle! Gasp — everyone stopped still. The plate glass door to the kindergarten was in a million pieces all over the floor, in the middle of this was a small wooden ladder that the children used with their outdoor block buildings. Brendan stood nearby, glaring at me. "I'm bery, bery cwoss!" he shouted, then dissolved into tears.

All too often, the adult reaction is to the actual display of anger such as this, and a perceived need for discipline in response to this act of vandalism, without considering the underlying cause of the anger or the need to help the child to cope with these feelings in more socially acceptable ways. Brendan had reached the end of his patience, his single mother had gone out bowling the previous evening and he had stayed at a neighbor's home, where he "had to sleep on the couch with only one warm blanket." To add further insult, his mum had used the money in his piggy bank to finance her outing. Brendan was not pleased.

As adults we may smile wryly at this story and we may even identify with the feelings expressed. (I would be angry, too, if someone took money from me without my consent to go out bowling.) Yet adults are often dismissive of these negative feelings in children; we try to cajole children back into a good mood, dismissing their sense of anger, frustration, or sadness as unimportant, not sufficiently serious to warrant the intensity of emotion. In other words, we apply adult standards to the validation of children's feelings. We need to be clear that this is a child we are talking about; and, right at the moment the child's feelings are just as real and serious to them as any adult catastrophe might feel to us.

Alternatively we seek to punish children, sending them away from the situation, "Go to your room until you can play nicely." This gives children the message that they are not allowed to feel angry or upset, that these feelings are unacceptable. Indeed, I believe that adults view children through rose colored glasses. We see childhood as the happiest time of life, without cares and worries and with the freedom to play; therefore, we expect children to be happy and smiling playfully at all times — or maybe our hopes cloud our perceptions.

So, what is the alternative to punishment? Can we let go of the need to be all powerful and address the situation with alternative outlets for the emotions? Sand trays offer excellent opportunities for children to build their own world and control the interactions between characters. Much of this play is solitary in nature but it is vital to ensure that a supportive adult is present to 'reflectively listen' to the play as it progresses and to provide the words and emotional terminology the child needs. Adopting the principles of "scaffolding" the play experiences and ensuring that there is adequate time to play without the intrusion of extraneous routines is also a vital component of these play experiences.

Objectives should be set to guide the children through play experiences that confront the troubling issues and allow the children to explore a range of problem solving strategies. These issues can range from simple confrontations with other family members to the complexities of abuse and dealing with the experience of trauma which also require specialist intervention.

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The Importance of Social Competence

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Early childhood educators have long maintained the importance of enhancing children's development to facilitate the child's passing through the education systems and participating "as a member of society." In particular the development of social competence is identified as a necessary component for school success. This notion of social competence 'enables the child to recognise and become a part of the "culture of literacy" '(Saunders & Green, 1993). Nevertheless, the appropriate expression of emotions in a way that is not harmful to others is a key component of the socializing process.

Despite such grandiose claims there appears to be no universally agreed definition of social competence. However, social competence of children is significantly influenced by such dimensions of home environment as parenting practices, parental values, and cultural background. Influences outside the home such as preschool and child care settings can either enhance or inhibit this area of child development (Saunders & Green, 1993).

The Role of Play

"Play is the child's natural medium of self-expression."
— Axline, 1969

The role of play, in particular pretense play, is noted by researchers as a contributor to the provision of a basic understanding of social rituals, drama, and other "collective symbolic activities." Observations of such play, by researchers, have become more detailed and are generating a number of theories that speculate the significance of play behaviors for providing better understanding of child development in the early childhood years (Fein 1981).

Opportunities for children to play out life's experiences allow them to replay their feelings and to analyze these so that they can come to understand and make sense of what is happening to them. Early childhood professionals, as a means of enabling children to practice and understand adult roles and relationships, have traditionally provided dramatic play through home corners, etc. However, the usual dress-ups, dolls, and tea sets can be intimidating for children with frightening or negative emotional experiences to deal with. A far safer option is to provide a small tray with doll house furniture and small figures that are representative of the child's immediate family. These could include grandparents, siblings, significant family friends, etc. depending on the child's circumstances. The play space should be in a quiet area that affords some privacy from the hustle and bustle of the main playroom area. The child is then able to engage in re-enactment of troubling situations at arm's length, without needing to be the main player — a situation that can be too threatening or scary. The child's need for some privacy must also be protected as well as protecting other children in the group from observing situations that they may find strange or disturbing.

A study of social participation in children's play behavior, conducted by Roper and Hinde (1978) determined that social participation in play behavior should not be described along one dimension. Rather that the "parallel to group dimension" which reflects how children play on their own can be seen as a significant component of play and that self play does not necessarily mean that a child is lacking in social ability. They conclude that the use of a dimension of "social participation" is in fact misleading in the analysis of play and involves too great a distortion of children's individual differences (Roper & Hinde, 1978). The notion of social climate and the child's social context is highlighted as important preparation for the developmental transition to peer competence (Waters & Sroufe, 1983).

It is within these contexts that play, as children's natural medium of self-expression, becomes all-important. Early childhood professionals have become a little glib about the importance of play and perhaps less conscious of the utilization of play as a means of assisting children to express their emotions both on the positive and negative end of the emotional spectrum.

Play materials that encourage solitary play and self-expression such as drawing, painting, finger painting, and clay modeling or pounding are valuable means for children to describe their feelings in pictures rather than words as well as affording them quiet times for reflection. Such activities have a calming and therapeutic effect that is very beneficial for the child who is feeling angry or frustrated.

Understanding Emotions

Research from as early as Darwin has looked at the development of emotions, suggesting a view that certain emotional capacities are innate (Bowlby, 1969, 1973). Not only do infants appear to be able to experience emotion but they are capable of the muscle movements necessary for encoding and expressing different emotional states (Oster, in O'Hagen, 1993). As children develop, their early emotional capabilities will be influenced by parents as well as social and cultural factors. A primary function of emotions and the accompanying expressive behavior is communication. That is, emotional development in early childhood is greatly dependent upon the quality and frequency of responses from the child's caregivers (O'Hagen, 1993).

Miller (1996), reminds us that anger is one of the most difficult emotions in children for adults to deal with. She suggests that adults find anger as frightening as it is for the angry child and for their peers. The role of early childhood professionals is to find ways for children to recognize and express what is a natural feeling from time to time. This expression must be appropriate to the setting and should help children to move through their anger to a more productive emotion.

The use of puppets can provide children with a non-threatening and safe target for their anger. The adult, as the puppeteer, can reflectively listen to the child and perhaps make suggestions for resolution of the anger by prompting with questions such as "What could be different?", "What do you need to change to help you feel better?". In these situations we must also be mindful of the child's own developmental level and acknowledge that young children cannot easily put themselves in others shoes, "I don't care how Jimmy feels, I need the red bucket and I wanted it first!" Therefore, the adult's guidance should not be an attempt to think about how Jimmy feels, but rather an exercise of guiding children to reach a peaceful solution for themselves.

Play as an avenue of emotional expression can be seen as a window that brings children's emotional acting out behavior out of the solitude and into a place where it can be unpacked, looked at, and understood. The provision of play opportunities can and should be incorporated into early childhood programs by virtue of the true implementation of individualized programming for children.

The adaptability of young children makes the early childhood years the ideal time to use their natural play activity as a forum to understand all human emotions and to develop the social mechanisms to express and deal with their emotion. Early childhood educators are obliged to provide these opportunities and to model the understanding and expression of these very real feelings in a safe and supportive environment.

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Using Beginnings Workshop to Train Teachers by Kay Albrecht

"I'm bery, bery, cwoss!": Explore the range of responses to anger that are considered developmentally and culturally appropriate as well as those that are not. Once you have a good list of both, open up the discussion to identify the responses that are compatible with your center's philosophy of guidance and discipline.

You are not in trouble!: Hammer suggests that teachers offer alternatives instead of punishment to children who are displaying intense emotions like anger. Using the example of sand trays (see p. 38) as a starting point, identify additional alternatives that might work. Then, pair up the alternatives with examples from teachers' experiences — creating a new set of response skills to try out in the classroom.

Miniature Play: Offering dramatic play props in miniature is suggested as a safe strategy for children who are experiencing intense emotions that seem too hard to express in traditional dramatic play settings. Brainstorm a list of possibilities with teachers and create a collection of miniature play boxes to bring out when emotions are intense.

"Listen to me — I'm angry": Although the primary function of emotions is to communicate with caregivers, Hammer reminds us that dealing with anger is hard for teachers. Discuss reframing anger, viewing it as communication. Then, take real examples of children's expressions of anger in the classroom and search for each child's communication intent. Practice in reflection about anger may lead teachers to consider alternatives.