

Safety Issues

by Amelia Gambetti

My experience as an educator is based on my work with the Reggio Emilia Municipal infant-toddler centers and preschools. Reggio is an experience, it is a philosophy, it is a way of thinking. It is an approach that is based on many elements and principles. One of the most important principles is that children have a great capacity for communicating with and about themselves and their world; we call this principle the *hundred languages of children*. A critical understanding of the hundred languages of children is that children require the presence in their classrooms of different materials that enable them to express themselves by using and exploring these materials with different tools and techniques.

When we walk through the environment of our centers, the presence of these materials provokes a strong impact. They have become languages to tell the stories of the many experiences that teachers, children, and parents carry out in their daily life. When we have visitors to our centers from Italy and abroad, one of the most common questions is about safety.

The presence of all these materials that are accessible to the children creates an unsettled feeling that makes people ask,

“But then, do children get hurt because of all these materials and tools?” They are already beginning to say to themselves, “We couldn’t have these materials in our classrooms. We couldn’t do what you do because of safety issues.”

The experience of the municipal infant-toddler centers and preschools of Reggio Emilia is 39 years old. Since the beginning, the presence of materials has been an important element for all of us in Reggio, because we

strongly believe that the materials help us to begin to use more languages, instead of only the verbal language. For example, clay, tempera, wire, chicken wire, papers, pieces of wood, natural materials, pieces of glass, beads, plastic, recycled materials, and many other items can be used by children and teachers to express new ideas in connection with ongoing projects.

For all these years of experience we do not have a history of injuries caused by the use of materials. Part of the reason for this may be in the way materials are gathered, stored, and

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used. All the materials we collect have a history behind them. The collection is also done in collaboration with the families. There can be bags that become transitional containers and they go back and forth from home to school and school to home in order to bring in different kinds of materials. Teachers, parents, and children work together to create lists of materials that they will collect as part of long-term projects.

There are times to organize areas in the centres where the materials are gathered and times to talk about them, to touch them, to analyze them, to define their different properties, to sort them. They will be divided into different containers, boxes, and jars that will go mostly on bookshelves, but also in the block area, housekeeping corner, dress-up area, or ateliers and “mini-ateliers” — they will always be available to be reached. The materials become the focus of different stories, because they have different stories behind them, because they also come from children’s different homes.

All this work can also be done in small groups composed of children, teachers, and parents. I think that in this way the materials acquire their own identity and their own space in the life of a centre and in the awareness of their presence for the children and for the adults. Does the awareness bring respect? When the materials are a strong presence in a classroom, how many other elements emerge? What about maintenance and cleaning up time?

Quite recently I was part of a conference and we were talking together sharing experiences. At a certain point the conversation focused on the environment, materials, maintenance, cleaning up time, and so on. One educator shared that she liked to have an articulate environment full of presences, but she had unsettled feelings about keeping it organized. She said that for four or five

weeks she worked with her children in order to establish some regulations but that she didn’t succeed. She was quite discouraged. I remember that I said, “Did you do it only for four or five weeks? I remember that when I was a teacher, I did it for four or five months and then I started to achieve some positive results.”

The aspect of time is really essential, because children need time to feel involved from the beginning in a long-term project that sees them at the center of important actions. Children know that the stories they tell about the materials are listened to and they produce knowledge. They feel that they are protagonists of the action. Maybe they also learn that they could have control of many other actions if they learn how to listen to situations, to become responsible for them, and are careful observers of whatever involves them.

The adults are close to the children in this project, and they also learn by observing and listening. Together we invest in creating an atmosphere of reciprocal trust, of respect in creating rhythms and harmonies that help to gradually involve all the children in a classroom who feel they want to be part of these learning processes. We are still talking of many materials that, at the beginning of a school year, can become part of a project to collect and organize them — projects that can begin at the beginning of September, can end at the end of December, or maybe it doesn’t have an end. It can be a long-term project that helps us to build a permanent attitude of discovery and research, in this specific case, oriented towards materials.

But can this attitude be related only to these materials or can it become a more generalized attitude towards many other situations that we experience?

When we collect information to analyze these ideas to understand the origin of them, to give them an identity, and to offer our experience in order to build others, curiosities and interests emerge. Our protagonism, the way in which we build knowledge as individual and group learners, new awarenesses, the respect for us and for others, to feel to be thinking subjects . . . what has this to do with our active participation in every kind of action in our life? I am still talking about children and adults, but I am also talking about human beings in general.

When we manipulate different kinds of materials and tools, is there the risk of getting hurt? Certainly there is, but is it by avoiding them that we will never get hurt? Talking about life in general, is it by avoiding risks that we avoid problems? Can educators control children so that they do not get hurt? Can they exercise such control and still help children to become more aware of their own actions so that children learn to control themselves and their friends? Can adults and children, collaborating together, become partners in learning about problems, solutions, maybe lessons of life? Are the adults the ones who have to allow children to take risks necessary for learning, by continuing to keep in their hands the guidance of the situation or can this be changed?

No matter what we do, risks will be always in front of us. We, as educators, can learn along with the children, that risks are part of our life and that together we can face them and not be scared of them. Maybe by doing so, we can reinforce the construction of our identities and of our personalities. Risks, difficulties, problems and their solutions, challenges, our reactions to negative and positive situations are part of ourselves from the beginning of our lives — no matter if we recognize it or not.

I believe in the importance to give credit to children; to give credit to human beings. We all are capable of seeing the weakest and the strongest part of ourselves. We are capable of expressing our opinions, recognizing our mistakes, and using both as a resource rather than a frustration to solve problems, to overcome difficulties, and to welcome risks. The more we become aware of this complexity, the more we learn about the difficult job of living a life.

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