

# Thinking About Thinking: How Can I Get Inside Your Head?

by Janet Gonzalez-Mena

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We study about how to understand children's thinking, but do we learn how to understand each other — the people we work with and the families we serve? It's usually easier to understand people who think like we do and harder if they don't — especially if we disagree with either what they say or what they do or both. It's easy to label those people as *wrong*. Once we decide someone is wrong we're tempted to argue; or if we don't like confrontations, we might ignore that person. Neither approach will put us into the kinds of interactions that help us either *get* inside another person's head or to take a different metaphor — walk in their shoes. If we are to truly understand the people who don't think like we do, we need a different kind of interaction. We have a better chance of getting both in their heads and in their shoes if we stop judging and labeling.

As a diversity advocate, I learned a long time ago to put a brake on judgments and remind myself when I'm tempted to judge, that the chances are I just don't understand the person or their patterns of thinking and behavior. On the other hand, part of my problem may be that I am not aware of my own thinking and behavior patterns. Barbara Rogoff (2003) said it well:

We must separate *understanding of the patterns* from *judgments of their value*. "If judgments of value are necessary, as they often are, they will thereby be much better informed if they are suspended long enough to gain some understanding of the patterns involved in one's own familiar ways as well as in the sometimes surprising ways of other communities" (p. 14).

As Rogoff suggests, when trying to understand somebody else, it helps to do some self reflection to learn more about yourself. You may discover

unconscious motives, hidden feelings, not to mention the stereotypes that may be influencing you.

## Some strategies for getting inside another's head

Over the years, I have come up with three other tips of what to do when thinking about thinking and trying to understand "the other."

- Build relationships and work on trust as your first and most important step toward understanding another person. The goal is to move beyond "othering" people and work to make connections that help make "you" and "me" into "us."
- Move from arguing with people you disagree with and create a dialogue instead. The difference is that when you argue, you only try to understand them so you can win the argument. That's different from really trying to see their point of view. Rumi, the 12th century poet, has advice about how to see another's point of view. He said, "Out beyond ideas of right doing and wrong doing there lies a field. I'll meet you there."
- Practice your communication skills. Remember to listen at least twice as much as you talk. We have two ears and only one mouth, which is a good reminder that communication isn't only talking. Don't just listen passively; use "active listening" to check out if what you heard is what the other person meant. And pay attention to nonverbal communication too — both what you send and what you receive. Realize that we often pick up signals that we aren't even aware of. Some people call that intuition. Use your intuition to help you get inside another's head.

These tips apply to all kinds of situations that can arise when early care and education professionals relate to each other and work with families. Here is an example of a hypothetical situation where a director is in a cross cultural conflict with a parent. I'm using myself as the director, because this example is very real to me.

*A parent arrives in my center for the first time and tells me that her baby is toilet trained. The baby is only one year old and is not wearing diapers. The mother seems surprised that I am surprised. I explain that in our center all babies wear diapers because we never start training at least until after the second birthday, and not even then if the child doesn't show clear signs of readiness. She tells me that in her culture toilet training starts long before that and is accomplished easily. Even if I really want to believe her, it just doesn't make sense to me. In real life it took me a lot of years to even listen to someone who wanted to talk to me about what I call early toilet training.*

But let's say that this is now and I am willing to not only listen, but to follow all my own tips. Let's suppose that I get to the place where I can see this mother's point of view so clearly that I come to understand that her way is right for her and her daughter. I want to support her cultural difference, but I still have my own view, best practices, and center policy in my head.

### What do you do if you can't figure out what to do?

I can't seem to figure out a solution to this situation. I feel like I'm stuck with some kind of paradox. If she's right and I still believe I am right, then what? Three questions keep going around in my head:

- Do I throw out what I believe in and try to change my center policy? In other words, do I turn my back on my own European-American culture?
- Do I use the power card and just quote the policy and give her a choice — my way or the highway?
- Do I figure out how to offer a compromise, even though neither of us will probably be satisfied with it?

I'm thinking dualistically — that's why I can't figure it out. I don't have to stay in that mindset. I can think

more holistically, but I'm not used to thinking that way.

Bredekamp and Copple (1997) explained this tendency of mine for dualistic thinking in the second edition of *Developmentally Appropriate Practice in Early Childhood Programs*. They said, "Some critical reactions to NAEYC's (1987) position statement on developmentally appropriate practice reflect a recurring tendency in the American discourse on education: the polarizing into *either/or* choices of many questions that are more fruitfully seen as *both/and*" (p. 23).

To come up with a solution, I need to stay with the mother out in that field of Rumi's — the one that lies beyond ideas of right and wrong. When we are there we can figure out *together* what to do. Isaura Barrera, a special education professor at the University of New Mexico calls Rumi's field *third space*. To get to *third space*, according to Barrera, I have to believe that it exists. I also have to accept that there is no one version of reality, but rather multiple realities. (Mine is different from the parent's.)

I was already there when I gained access to the mother's perspective. I got inside her head by suspending judgments long enough to begin to see the patterns that she was using that weren't like the ones I was used to. I began to understand her perspective on toilet training. When I put aside ideas about determining which is the one right way, I opened my mind and learned something new that I didn't know. I not only learned about the mother's thinking, I also discovered some things about myself, when I followed my own advice about self reflection. I realized that what I believe is best practice in toileting relates to cultural patterns that were reinforced in my training and in the parenting books I read as a mother. I've also discovered I have some hang-ups about toilet training left over from what I believed was done to me as a baby.

### Synergy is another name for third space

Stephan Covey writes about what he calls *synergy* in the foreword to a book called *Crucial Conversations*, (Patterson, et al., 2002) which has excellent strategies for getting inside another's head and making it to third space. According to Covey, synergy makes for a better relationship, a better decision-making process, better

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decisions, and more commitment to actually carry out the decisions made. He talks about how synergy transforms people and relationships. He mentions what Buddhism calls the “middle way.” It’s not meeting half way by compromising, but rising above the plane and meeting at a higher level — like the apex of a triangle. In other words, the people involved in a synergistic solution have taken a creative route to coming up with new solutions that avoid the dualistic — in my way or your way, but result in something that both consider “our way.”

Another point to consider is that even if you aren’t stuck on the idea that there is just one right way, that doesn’t mean that all ways are fine.

What is a *third-space* solution to this situation with the diaperless baby coming into the center? Because this is a hypothetical example, I can’t tell you. But I can tell you what one caregiver described to me about what happened to her in real life when she was in a similar situation. She asked the mother to show her what she did. The caregiver did what the mother showed her and it worked. The baby remained diaperless, the policy remained in place (because after all the baby had already been toilet trained), and everybody was happy. The caregiver said it didn’t take more time to put this baby on the potty than it did to change diapers on the other babies.

Of course, every situation doesn’t result in a happy Hollywood ending. As Barrera and Corso (2003) say, “A third space perspective does not ‘solve the problem.’ Rather it changes the arena within which that problem is addressed by increasing the probability of respectful, responsive, and reciprocal interactions. In so doing, an optimal response to the situation becomes more likely” (p. 81). Another point to consider is that even if you aren’t stuck on the idea that there is just one right way, that doesn’t mean that all ways are fine.

A long time ago, I was involved in a workshop called “Play as Practice for Paradox.” Three of us got together to plan it. Two were play experts, Elizabeth Jones and Patricia Nourot (a dear friend of mine who died last August). The workshop was a great success, but unfortunately we never wrote up the wonderful ideas that came out of it. One of them, though, sticks in my head. It’s this: Children can teach us about how to work with paradox. They do it naturally when they play pretend. They suspend reality and explore the realm of imagination in ways that remove the limits on possibilities. Adults can do that, too.

## References

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Using Beginnings Workshop  
to Train Teachers  
by Kay Albrecht

**Getting inside someone else’s head:** Present the vignette related in this article to your faculty. Using the ideas suggested in the article, work through some possible responses from the teachers in your program. Then, talk about synergy and the third space. Try it out and see if you can find the third space in this example. Then, take some of your own dilemmas — either those presented historically or ones that are occurring now. Repeat the process until teachers can see the possibilities.