

seeing children's eagerness for relationships

by Deb Curtis

The photo 'Rescuing Hug' (www.52best.com/hug.asp) made famous on the Internet a few years ago had a huge impact on the way I see children's relationships with each other. This inspiring story describes the plight of premature twins struggling to live in separate incubators. When a nurse put them together, they began to thrive. The image of these fragile babies with arms wrapped around each other is astounding and celebrates the intuitive desire of human beings to reach out and support one another from the day we are born. Yet often the emphasis in our work with children is their inability to get along with each other. We learn as many skills and techniques as we can to manage children's behavior, focusing on their conflicts, continually reminding them of the rules, and regulating their behavior with time-out.

Imagine, instead, seeing children as already possessing the gifts for developing relationships and our role being to

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help them express this. I try to carry the image of the twins with me in my work to remind me of children's huge capacity for offering support and comfort and accepting and benefiting from the gifts given by others. Rather than seeing their struggles with each other as negative, I have come to see that even children's challenging behaviors reveal that they are eager to connect and genuinely fascinated with one another's words, ideas, and actions.

I've come to the powerful realization that if I believe children have the capacity and desire for deep connections then I support and coach them to live into their best selves. But transforming my view of children's challenging behaviors as they struggle to connect is no easy task, especially with the realities of negotiating daily life with large groups of young children. The following stories reflect the ongoing practice I use to see children's eagerness for relationships.

Notice and marvel at children's positive interactions with each other

I took this tender photo the first day that Oona transitioned from the toddler room into the two-year-old room. The questionable practice of moving children to a new room with new caregivers every year

understandably left the usually confident Oona a bit tentative and fragile. I was stunned when Tommy intuitively knew what was needed. He joined Oona at the window and I heard this conversation as they shared their two-year-old perspectives and began to cultivate a friendship.

Tommy: "I'm 2 and a half."

Oona: "I'm two."

Tommy: "You want to play at my house?"

He tenderly put a hand on her shoulder.

Oona: "My mommy says you can come to my house, too." They sat leaning close together at the window for a long while, silently watching children play in the yard.

What a gift Tommy gave to Oona. His gentle physical gestures offered her reassurance and comfort during her first moments in this unfamiliar place.

Tommy's words and the underlying meaning of them were immediately



understood by Oona. He emboldened her with the shared power of being two years old, and his offer of friendship invited her into the security of each other's family life.

Because I make sure to notice moments like this over and over again in my work with even the youngest children, I have come to believe that all children have the capacity for empathy and kindness and are eager to play a role in helping others. I carry this belief with me as I support children to negotiate their conflicts as the following story suggests.

Coach children to offer their ideas and competence



Taking care of babies was the most popular play theme among my group of one year olds. The children's play centered on imitating the caregiving tasks they experienced; rocking babies, putting

the bottles into the dolls' mouths, and pushing them in the stroller. One morning during playtime, T'Kai was playing with some babies, when Wynsome came over and grabbed one of his dolls. He complained loudly as she ran away and sat in the rocking chair with the doll.

Earlier in the week I had noticed that Wynsome had discovered the colorful crocheted squares and was using them to carefully cover the babies to create a cozy bed. Rather than focusing on Wynsome's disruptive behavior of taking the doll away from T'Kai, I decided to offer her a way to show her competence. I suggested that Wynsome show T'Kai her idea of making a bed for the babies and she immediately took up my offer.



PHOTOGRAPH BY THE AUTHOR

She eagerly gave T'Kai a doll and some blankets and a bottle, and showed him how to make a bed for the baby. T'Kai was a bit surprised that Wynsome gave him the doll because he was so used to defending his territory. He happily accepted her coaching, making his own bed for the baby.



Later, when I studied the photos I took of Wynsome during this baby play, I was stunned by the realization of the power I have over how children come to see themselves and their abilities in the

world. If I focus on Wynsome's struggle to connect, it can lead to feelings of shame where she feels and acts like a 'bad girl.' Instead I want to offer Wynsome and other children the opportunity to make a contribution which, in turn, builds their confidence and sense of belonging. This was a powerful moment for Wynsome as she was able to see the possibilities for herself as a competent, caring person.

Use documentation to show children their positive social interactions

I noticed that the bed-making play that Wynsome demonstrated immediately expanded the children's script for baby play. I began to make books with detailed photos of children's ideas and activities throughout the classroom. Studying these books had an impact on the children's play, as they tried out what they saw each other doing in the books, working coop-

eratively and with more complexity. If this was true for expanding the children's play, I reasoned that specifically showing them their positive social interactions could grow their abilities to connect. I decided to make homemade books with detailed photos of children's positive interactions so they could see their own and each others' ideas and competencies.

I was inspired by one of the children's favorite books called *I Can Share* by Karen Katz (2004). Each page depicts a particular social struggle, such as: "That's my bike, you can't ride on my bike." Followed by a page which says: "But maybe you can get on the back and I'll take you for a ride." The children became enthralled, wide-eyed, and attentive whenever I read this book. This led me to the idea of documenting their struggles and successes with relationships and making a book using this same format.

The children loved the book I made about them, even more than the commercial version, and wanted me to read it over and over. The words and photos in our book acknowledged the powerful, conflicting feelings the children had in these moments of relating to each other, while offering concrete images of their important, new friendships. Studying these books together reinforced what the children already knew about working together and reminded them how to use these positive behaviors more with each other.

I continue the practice of always looking for children's positive social behaviors to document and make visible to them and to me. I observe children working together throughout the room and document their activities through note taking and asking myself these questions:

- What specific things do children do and say that indicate they are connecting with each other and building relationships?



- How do they use objects or materials in their play to communicate their ideas?
- What challenges or conflicts occur?
- What do the children do and say to resolve their differences?

I make these observation notes and photos into homemade books with titles such as "We know how to work together." I include specific photos and details of what the children say and do that reflects what they know about working together. I regularly read these books with the children, inviting them to add more ideas over time.

What I've come to understand is that the most important work I do to see a child in positive ways is within me. I must continually work to transform my own view of children's behaviors, see their points of view, and strive to uncover how what I am seeing reveals the children's deep desire, eagerness, and capacity for relationships. There is no more important or rewarding work than this.

Reference

Katz, K. (2004). *I can share*. New York: Grosset & Dunlap.

