

Speaking

by Bonnie Neugebauer

A bright yellow male American Goldfinch and a not quite so brilliant female are eating thistle seeds at the feeder outside my office window. An aggressive blue and black Stellar Jay chases them away and with wild abandon head-tosses seeds to the ground. Dark-eyed Juncos will get to those later. Next to arrive are the Purple Finches and the Black-Capped Chickadees — and with a whir, an iridescent hummingbird!

Watching birds has become quite a pleasure for me. If I'm talking to you on the phone or thinking about you — I'm probably also watching the birds. But I'm not only watching them, I'm trying to learn their names and their habits, so as I share them with Schon and Zachary, Caroline and Jonah, I can say more than, "See the bird!"

Nancy Rosenow has provoked me to think about the information we offer to children, challenging that the information we share needs to respect each child's capacity for learning. When we offer them the best of what we know, we offer a window to the complexity of life, nature, the world; we give them rich material to work with. "See the bird" is something, of course, but not that much. "That's the first European Starling I've seen at the feeder. I wonder what he will like to eat" leads to a much richer conversation. We must never underestimate what children want to know, what they can know, or how they will be able to use the information we offer to them.

The same can be said for adults. Nancy: "I think there might be something important about trusting people enough to give them new and sometimes challenging information — and then letting them decide how to act on that information." We do a great deal of sorting of information and feedback before we offer it to adults. We make assumptions about what individuals and groups of people already know, what they want to know, even what they can know, and, certainly, how they will be able to use the information. Seeing this in print, we easily perceive the arrogance and disrespect of it. Just as we must trust and respect children, we must trust and respect the adults in our contexts by giving them the best and clearest information we have to offer. We don't need to make decisions for them. We don't need to protect them. Quite often their follow-through will far exceed what we might have imagined for them.

We need to trust, share, step back. And, of course, this also means we need to know things. Our responsibility is to learn about how to be strong and effective advocates, how to provide quality caregiving, how to create rich learning environments, how to deal with expectations and standards, how to apply technological advances and global perspectives in our own work. Then we will have rich ideas to offer to others.

It also means that I need to study these birds that come to my window, refer to the reference chart nearby and learn about them, so that the information I have to share is interesting! It also means that I need to relearn (and in some cases unlearn) dinosaur names, and brush up on constellations. I've been content to see 'birds' for far too long.

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