Building an Encouraging Classroom

- How does managing transitions reduce mistaken behavior?
- What part do large-group activities play in the encouraging classroom?
- How do routines help to build an encouraging classroom?
- What exactly is an encouraging classroom anyway?

A hallmark of “encouraging” classrooms is that they accommodate the entire range of developmental responses that any group of children will show. A teacher builds an encouraging classroom by ensuring that all children and their families feel affirmed and supported in the classroom. As Dan Gartrell puts it, “An encouraging classroom is a place where children want to be when they are sick as opposed to not wanting to be there when they are well.” A major challenge for teachers is how to maintain an encouraging classroom when “mistaken” or challenging behavior happens. This issue of the Early Childhood Newsletter discusses how to build encouraging classrooms in order to reduce mistaken behavior while still holding developmentally appropriate expectations, using friendly communication, and teaching democratic life skills. Based on Dan Gartrell’s work in “A Guidance Approach for the Encouraging Classroom,” this entire issue will explore how trust and acceptance will be at the foundation of everything the teacher does.

"No one has yet fully realized the wealth of sympathy, kindness and generosity hidden in the soul of a child. The effort of every true educator should be to unlock that treasure."

Emma Goldman, Author

Inside this issue:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>School Anxiety</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning Centers</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Naptimes</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Large Group Times</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transitions</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Calendar and Weather</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Young children who are unhappy at school cannot easily work through their anxiety using words. In some children, school anxiety shows up in mistaken behaviors like inattentiveness, frequent frustration, defiance, and/or irritability. In others, it shows itself in physical conditions. The cause of this anxiety can be more pervasive, for example, feeling disliked by the teacher.

The encouraging classroom is a place where children want to be even when they’re sick! The encouraging classroom begins with the teacher. She guides children to a good start even, and especially, when children make mistakes in their social-emotional learning, when they show ‘mistaken’ behavior. The teacher in the encouraging classroom will actively teach the child to express and meet her needs in acceptable, non-hurting ways. Unlike teachers who use traditional punitive discipline, in an encouraging approach, teachers do not threaten the child with non-participation in an activity or time-outs. Instead, they “motivate” better behavior. Instead they build a positive relationship to ensure the child’s acceptance in the class and provide freedom, within limits, to allow the child to learn and grow. This teacher gives the child positive reasons to resolve problems peaceably.

Learning centers encourage social learning. They allow for ongoing interactions that allow for the practice and development of democratic life skills. They are used because they assist teachers to guide children in learning those social skills they need for the rest of their lives and place children in situations where meaningful cognitive learning can take place. Some things to consider as you create your own encouraging classroom centers.

- Be certain that there are no ‘runways’ so that children need to walk around one center to get to another.
- Build centers around the interests of your children.
- Provide enough time and activity choices.
The Encouraging Classroom and Napping

Children have different rest needs and show differing behaviors when adjusting to naptime. Adults help children to nap when they create a relaxing mood and setting.

Two considerations when addressing happy naptimes are 1) most children need to be physically tired, and not just mentally drained, in order to nap easily. If your program tires them physically by providing an active program, you will not only help with whole-child development, but also assist them to make the most of their periods of rest and relaxation. 2) changing family dynamics now mean that more children are coming to classrooms with occasional or chronic sleep deprivation. Sleep disruptions can result in mistaken behaviors. If you suspect that this is the case, work actively with the child’s family to address his/her need for quality sleep in the home.

The Encouraging Classroom and Large-group Times

Teachers whose goal is to create an encouraging classroom have a different focus for class meetings. Typically this time is for dealing with life in the classroom. This time allows for children and teachers to solve problems that arise, orient children to what will happen today, etc. Guidelines for this time can include the following:

- Anyone can talk
- We take turns talking and listen carefully
- Be kind
- Meetings are to solve problems, not create them
- Support each child in expressing himself
- Maintain a positive and caring approach
- Privately remedy any personal situations that arise
- Build a sense of classroom community in which each and every child feels included.

Many teachers share leadership of large group times with the children as the year goes on. Each time they gather, children are given an opportunity to learn and practice democratic life skills.

The Encouraging Classroom and Transitions

The encouraging teacher uses alternative strategies that get children to their next activity without undercutting self-esteem. Here are just a few basic strategies to consider.

1. Make up and sing a song with the larger group that names children as they arrive at their new activity. Include latecomers when they arrive.
2. Model enthusiasm for cleaning up. For example, “I need some strong kids over here who can carry lots of blocks.” Participate in clean up yourself.
3. Give a notice five minutes before transition.
4. Give generous encouragement to the group who are conscientious about cleaning up. Ignore or use private, matter-of-fact comments to children who are slow to participate.
5. Sing a clean-up song with the children.
6. With enthusiasm, start the next activity before all have arrived.
7. Preschoolers just do not wait well. Use “buffer” activities to keep children occupied during wait times.
8. Lines and preschoolers are not a natural match. In many preschools, formal lines are not used. Chance-based, quick transitions, such as “Everyone whose first name begins with ‘L,’ may quietly line up.”
The Encouraging Classroom, the Calendar and the Weather

Many of you like this time of day because of the concepts they seemingly reinforce and the social tradition it continues. But for young children, this time of day too easily becomes a ritual rather than a learning experience.

A common practice at calendar time is for children to sing a song identifying days and months. Teachers need to recognize that mainly rote knowledge is being gained. Weather concepts are also more abstract. When the “weather watcher” looks outside and sees one small cloud and announces that the day is “cloudy,” well, you get the picture.

Here are some alternatives to the ritual of calendar and weather. In your morning class meeting, ask four or five questions that encourage children to think about time and weather in ways that are more personal to them. For example:

- Who remembers what you had for dinner last night?
- It is windy today. Who saw the wind push something?
- Who can share what you will do after you leave school today?
- Was it hot or cold outside this morning? How could you tell?
- Who can remember three things you saw on the way to school this morning?

If you have any questions about early childhood mental health issues or would like more information about the consultation process, contact Ivy Reynolds at the number and extension below or email her at ireynolds@cscinc.org.

1-800-528-7222, ext. 2328
610-437-6000, ext. 2328

To make a referral, please fax the signed and completed
1) Request for ECMH Services along with
2) the Parent Facility Agreement
to Diane Milia at 610-432-5700.

You can find those forms on the Community Services for Children, Inc. website under the ‘Resources and Reference Library’ of the Northeast Regional Key section. Click on ‘Early Childhood Mental Health.’

www.cscinc.org

ECMH ‘Warmline’

The Early Childhood Mental Health ‘Warmline’ is accessible for staff to call-in and discuss concerns or ask questions of one of the Consultants. Held the last Wednesday each month from 1:00pm to 2:00pm. Call 1-800-528-7222, ext. 2349

Don’t forget to check out the new webinars posted on the Community Services for Children website!

- Aggression in Young Children
- Attachment
- You Can’t Come to My Birthday Party!