Five Ways to Achieve Quality Early Childhood Education

A veteran early childhood education specialist has some practical suggestions for principals.

Polly Greenberg

For almost 100 years—since the beginning of the child study movement and the integrally-related progressive education era, which eventually evolved respectively into developmental psychology and developmentally appropriate education—it has been understood that young children:

- Are very vulnerable emotionally and do better in affectionate, approving environments than in critical, punitive ones;
- Thrive on practicing and mastering physical skills and feats, from sitting and crawling and walking and climbing to doing tricks on the monkey bars, and that much of their self-esteem comes from physical—not academic—prowess;
- Have lots to learn about social behavior in relation to their parents, siblings, teachers, and peers, and require much adult guidance—teaching and re-teaching (again and again and again);

IN BRIEF

Principals who understand the nature and needs of young children can raise the level of their early childhood programs by emphasizing outdoor playtime and providing enthusiastic support for teachers who are warm and encouraging, who help young children resolve personal problems, and who can make learning meaningful and fun.

- Possess curious minds that process what they see, hear, smell, taste, touch,
manipulate, and do, and that their understandings—and misunderstandings—may be quite different from ours.

As principals, you are in a position to respond helpfully in pivotal ways to the nature and major needs of young children. Here are five suggestions:

1. **Value teachers who are warm and encouraging.** In the presence of others, compliment them for these attributes, in the process communicating how you believe adults should interact with young children. When opportunities arise, select teachers who are warm, encouraging people.

   Young children differ from older children and grown-ups in that they may think differently, but feel with equal or greater sensitivity. One thing they feel acutely is whether they and their family members are treated respectfully or condescendingly. Most of us are more comfortable with people of our same race, religion, and socio-economic status—and with disabilities no different from our own. But if we—principals and teachers alike—care about young children’s self-esteem, we need to be on the alert for any verbal or nonverbal signals we may send that appear to be less than friendly.

   As we all know, teachers are hugely concerned about classroom discipline. But principals can point out to them that their colleagues with the fewest discipline problems are usually those who have strong, positive relationships with children, especially those with troublesome behavior. These are teachers who talk and listen respectfully to a child when behavioral issues arise, show that they appreciate the child’s point of view, emphasize the well-being of the group, and how the child can enhance it.

   Principals can help by asking teachers to identify their most difficult and most withdrawn children, and getting to know these children personally. You are then in a position to help teachers focus on these children’s strengths.

I’m in schools a great deal and seldom do I see an equal amount of attention paid to children’s strengths as I do to their learning difficulties and unacceptable behavior. The less adequate a child is as a student or group member, the more important it is to build self-esteem by helping that child develop constructive and creative abilities.

2. **Make it a policy that all children in pre-kindergarten, kindergarten, and primary classes have generous amounts of outdoor playtime and physical fitness adventures.** If necessary, principals should advocate for this as district policy.

   Point out what research shows:

   - Exercise stimulates the brain for more effective learning;
   - Children learn a great deal, such as spatial relations and other mathematical concepts, language, and social skills as they play with others; and
   - Children are at high risk for obesity, heart disease, and other life-threatening ailments, caused in large part by lack of exercise.

   Early childhood classrooms with predominantly sit-down programs deprive little kids of the vigorous outdoor play many of them have traditionally enjoyed in their neighborhoods and in good nursery schools. This is a big concern for people opposed to putting pre-kindergarten into public schools. What school leaders at all levels need to understand is that, while literacy and other academics are extremely important in early childhood education, so is health.

3. **Expect teachers to help children problem-solve when personal difficulties arise.** Today’s pressure to focus on academics makes many early childhood teachers hesitate—or neglect—to walk children through the slow-motion, step-by-step process required in learning to use words rather than reacting to difficult situations with tears or blows, or by giving up. This is especially crucial and time-consuming with impulsive children, who find it very hard to control their behavior, though they know on a cognitive level what
they’re supposed to do. Telling them what to do yet again isn’t productive. Helping them rethink what they might have done—and can choose to do next time—works better.

The goal is to help young children learn to share, take turns, see situations from perspectives other than their own, and, while looking out for themselves, develop empathy and altruism for others. The ultimate goal is to help each child hone his or her ability to be a constructive member of the classroom community—appropriately assertive, yet thoughtful and generous. As principals, you can make it clear to teachers that taking time to educate children socially is performing as great a service for those children and their future teachers as is preparing them academically.

Social skills aren’t developed through preachy lectures and prepared lessons. Whenever feasible, effective early childhood educators should stop what they’re doing and facilitate social problem-solving on the spot. This can be followed at circle time with a brief, nonjudgmental recap of the incident, eliciting children’s ideas and concluding with their suggestions for solving this kind of problem if it happens again.

If a child has been wronged by another child, it’s also helpful to ask that child what the perpetrator could do to make amends, perhaps by giving up his or her animal crackers or turns on the slide. This gives the “bad” child a chance to become a “good guy” in the eyes of the group—an approach that has proven to be very effective.

4. Support teachers in making literacy, math, and other academic experiences meaningful and fun for children. Begin by embedding learning into hands-on projects of interest to young children, who are interested in almost everything “real,” from bugs to books, from magnets to machinery. Well-trained early childhood teachers know how to do this both by picking up on spontaneous happenings and developing them into educationally important learning experiences, and by using published learning materials. However, many new or less well-trained teachers, including elementary teachers who have moved down from upper grades, need mentoring from seasoned early childhood teachers and staff development specialists.

Many teachers have trouble integrating state, district, and professional association standards with what they believe is best for children. As principals, it is up to you to figure out ways to schedule professional development meetings on school time every week, during which pre-kindergarten, kindergarten, and primary-grade teachers can:

- Reconcile apparently conflicting requirements;
- Read and discuss early childhood professional publications and curricular materials;
- Share ways of livening lessons by using more experiential learning, humor, and less direct instruction in their teaching; and
- Create, maintain, and manage the use of interesting and educational learning centers in all subjects.

Obviously, keeping children busy and happy as they learn while working in educational areas around the classroom, each at his or her level of mastery, is also a large part of preventive discipline. Skilled teachers can help newcomers set up learning centers and show children how to use them. Children grouped socially, by literacy and math levels, or interests can be:

- Rotated through all learning centers, with opportunities to choose among them at another time in the day;
- Allowed to sign up for the center of their choice until a stated capacity for the center is reached; or
- Allowed to choose freely where and with whom they will play and work unless, for academic or social reasons, a particular child needs to be assigned to a certain center.

5. In all ways, support your early childhood teachers. Across the country, teachers yearn for more time to plan, share ideas with colleagues, and grow through stimulating professional development. They especially want more help from principals with the one, two, or three exceptionally difficult or emotionally disturbed children who dominate their attention.

In the United States, unlike a number of other countries, the younger the children that teachers work with, the less respect they get. So maybe the most important thing principals can do for them is to frequently and enthusiastically validate the importance of what they do with young children and their families. This will go a long way in establishing a happy and harmonious school community.

Polly Greenberg, the former publications director for the National Association for the Education of Young Children, has been a specialist in early childhood education for almost 50 years. Her e-mail address is pgberg@earthlink.net.

WEB RESOURCES

The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) is an excellent source of information on critical early childhood issues, with related research and links to many national organizations. [www.naeyc.org/ece/](http://www.naeyc.org/ece/)

NAESP has an excellent selection of Early Childhood articles, as well as links to other useful Web sites. [www.naesp.org/ContentLoad.do?contentId=49](http://www.naesp.org/ContentLoad.do?contentId=49)