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unsmiling faces

how preschools can heal

Emde (1989) and others emphasize the role of positive affect sharing and affect exchanges within the parent–child relationship as necessary motivation for social interaction, as well as "food" for the inner sense of emotional well-being. Without these social and emotional foundations, the play and learning capacities of toddlerhood and early childhood are compromised.

THE FUNCTION OF AFFECTS: PRESCHOOL YEARS

Affect will be defined here as the outward facial and postural expression of one's feeling state. In essence, affects communicate feeling states to others and provide them with a nonverbal means of assessing our emotional needs and responding accordingly. Thus, we can recognize a not-yet-verbal toddler's fearful expression when the noisy vacuum cleaner is turned on, and we can then offer comfort and reassurance.

The work of infant researchers gives us insight into the birth and evolution of affect as a language of feeling that develops within the intimacy of the infant–parent relationship. Affect initially serves a social function within the first relationship, and later serves a similar function in the growing child's wider social milieu. Healthy affect development requires a young child to maintain a connection to her feeling state and at the same time reflect that state outwardly in pursuit of connection to others who might provide comfort, emotional affirmation, or emotional confrontation. In effect, the child's ability to express true affect prevents emotional isolation.

Consider the many ways that the healthy preschool child uses affect to engage other children. He may skip toward a playmate with an eager, smiling face and an inviting posture, holding out a canister of Legos on a nonverbal but effectively engaging play mission. The same child may later read an expression of dismay on a classmate's face as she discovers the lack of dessert in her lunch box and offers to share his own. He may begin to cry when another child inadvertently bumps a sore spot on his arm, ensuring that his peers treat him gently for the rest of the afternoon. Another child's face may redden in anger when she is pushed in the snow, alerting the teacher to the need for intervention before the angry little girl retaliates. In each of these examples, affect is the primary communicator, but verbal language will most likely be used to elaborate the affective messages and facilitate social interaction and conflict resolution.

The child who has a narrow range of affect, who projects false affect, or who is ill-attuned to the affects of others is likely to experience constant failures in social functioning. Without the ability to project and read emotional messages, a preschool child is lacking the necessary tools for successful peer interaction, whether or not he is adequately verbal. Such a child may be equally ill-

attuned to his own emotional status, resulting in his inability to predict his own affective shifts. Therefore, this child may seem to have intense emotional outbursts that come "out of the blue," as no corresponding affects serve to inform self or others of the internal emotional distress that is brewing. Teachers and peers may both feel frustrated with these children, whose emotional needs are difficult to anticipate and whose distress is difficult to manage.

Relevant Studies

Healthy preschool children display a range of affects during the course of a school day and receive a range of affective messages from others. Observant early childhood professionals can describe the interplay of affects, language symbols, and play symbols weaving intricate connections through the peer group. In addition to this kind of clinical evidence, there have been several studies inquiring into affect development in young children. The results of these studies may help to inform our thinking about what is normative for young, emotionally healthy children.

Researchers have found preschool children to be capable of accurately identifying affects of happiness, sadness, anger, and fear both in video characters and among peers in naturally occurring situations (Fabes, Eisenberg, McCormick, & Wilson, 1988; Strayer, 1989). The way that children's knowledge about affects informs their behavior has also been a subject of inquiry. Terwogt and Olthof (1989) show that children can regulate their emotional behavior before they are aware of what they are doing, or before they are able to talk about it. Strayer (1989) posits that children's feelings and knowledge about emotions in themselves and in other people evolve as they mature cognitively and socially. She points out that newborn babies share affect in the nursery, responding to the other's cry by also becoming upset. This level of empathy, borne of the infant's inability to differentiate self from other, evolves as the child individuates and becomes capable of differentiation, language, and of other mediational functions. While preschool children are able to recognize and identify a range of positive and negative affects, they seem to distance themselves from dysphoric emotions in others for fear of regression to more undifferentiated forms of empathy. The present author's work with emotionally disturbed, school-aged children who had not yet mastered self–other differentiation at age-typical levels found "epidemics of empathy" to be a regressive force in the group (Koplow, 1986).

The work of Fabes and his associates (1988) shows that preschool children understand emotional reactions in peers to be the result of social interaction within the classroom environment. Children were more accurate in attributing situational cause and effect to anger and distress reactions in peers than to happy or sad reactions in peers. This discrepancy seemed related to the

children's perception of anger and distress as reactive to external provocation or frustration, whereas antecedents for happiness and sadness were more difficult to observe and more likely to be related to inner states (Roseman, 1984).

Fabes and his associates (1988) also found preschool children able to devise effective strategies for remediation of stimuli that produce negative emotions. He found that when children were able to recognize the source of a negative emotion, they could generate strategies to address that source.

DILEMMAS FOR THE CHILD AT RISK

Research tells us that well-functioning preschool children are able to distinguish one affect from the other, perceive a cause and effect relationship between affect changes and social interaction, and generate remediational strategies to address negative affects in young peers (Fabes et al., 1988). However, we also know that young children have difficulty tolerating negative affects in themselves and others, and become defensive when they feel threatened by overidentifying with another child's potentially contagious emotional state. These findings imply certain dilemmas for at-risk children, and for the early childhood professionals who work with them. Clearly, children yield social as well as emotional gains when they are able to show a range of genuine affect, and to recognize and respond to these affects in others. Programs that invest in helping children to develop prosocial behaviors rely on the child's ability to process affective information and on the developing capacity for empathy. Yet, these goals may seem out of reach when we consider emotionally fragile children whose experiences have not supported age-appropriate levels of self–other differentiation, and are therefore vulnerable to regressed empathy states. In addition, emotionally fragile and traumatized children often express a predominance of negative affects. These negative affect states are often healthy manifestations of the internal distress felt by children whose needs for nurture or protection have been frustrated. Nonetheless, the weight of the negative affects may feel threatening to children and their teachers. The threat that negative affects will somehow "take over" may cause programs that include at-risk children to minimize opportunity for peer interaction and to give selective attention to children's happy affects. While this strategy of structuring and preventing affective events is understandable, it may deprive young children of opportunities to accomplish some essential precursors for the development of empathy and prosocial behavior. Preschools concerned about promoting affect development in their students must provide them with the following:

1. *Opportunity for connection with primary adults within a safe and stable environment.* While all preschool environments afford children with this op-

portunity to some degree, many are not conscious of the import of this program function. It is important to take into account the at-risk child's enormous need for teacher–child interaction when planning staffing patterns and classroom activities. Heightened opportunity for connection is necessary in order to promote strong attachments to classroom adults. Attachment may be "unfinished business" for at-risk preschoolers, and is an important precursor for attaining the level of self–other differentiation needed to support receptivity to one's own affect states, as well as to the affect states of others. When children enter preschool with psychosocial histories that indicate that their attachment processes were disrupted by multiple separations, maternal illness or unavailability, or traumatic family events occurring during infancy, the preschool must constitute an intimate environment where children can safely "exercise" their affect development. Therefore, contact with classroom teachers and assistants cannot be limited to task-oriented interactions where adult responses are contingent upon a child's performance. Teacher–child interactions must be open-ended, spontaneous, and genuine in order to be facilitative of emotional growth.

2. *Opportunity to receive empathic responses from adults.* This ensures that young children experience their affects as effective agents of communication, and have even negative feelings affirmed in the context of social relatedness. If children feel less isolated with their emotional distress, there will be less need to surrender to emotional loneliness by either distancing from emotions or losing control.
3. *Opportunity for dialogue concerning affects and emotionally salient experiences.* Prior to attending preschool, many children may lack a consistent partner for preverbal and then verbal dialogues that identify, refer to, and explore affect states. Engaging children in dialogues about their affects and the affects of others may be done on varying levels. An adult may approach a toddler who has just fallen with an empathic expression and the words, "Aww, boo-boo hurt?" whereas a 4-year-old waiting for her mother to come is helped by the teacher's attentive words, "You look worried about not being picked up on time!" and comforting gestures. These kinds of dialogues communicate adults' willingness to share in and contain negative as well as positive affects, producing a kind of "holding environment" described by Winnicott (1965) as an essential feature of the healing relationship. By initiating dialogue about affect and affect-related events, the adult implies her ability for tolerating and surviving the child's emotional pain. This helps him to develop his own capacities for dealing with difficult emotional experience. In addition, using language to describe affect states allows the young child to mediate emotional experiences by employing ego strengths. Instead of drowning in emotion or evading emotionally charged situations, children who have developed a reciprocal dialogue with

significant adults concerning affects will be more likely to use words, representational drawing, and symbolic play materials to elaborate affective themes, and thus to go beyond the diffuse expression of sadness, anger, fear, and happiness.

4. *Opportunity for peer interaction.* During open-ended play periods, children are encouraged to focus on and interpret naturally occurring affective events. These opportunities give children experience in reading affect messages from peers within the classroom milieu, where teachers can help them interpret messages and provide protection from emotional content that may be overwhelming. If opportunity for open-ended interaction is limited to outdoor play periods, or to the beginning of the day, when teachers are occupied by facilitating entry, there will be a lack of the kind of teacher–child contact needed to make affect-laden interactions meaningful. This generally results in children acting out emotional distress, and contributes to a chaotic environment.

PRESCHOOL TEACHER: MIRROR AND MODEL

This discussion of the value of children's affects has several implications for the early childhood professional. Teachers, assistants, and clinicians who care for and interact with children on a daily basis can play a significant role in helping young children comfortably show a range of affect and respond appropriately to affects expressed by others. To do this, adults must give children permission to feel and express sadness, fear, anger, worry, and loneliness as well as joy, delight, excitement, enthusiasm, and other positive emotions. This permission will be readily conveyed by the teacher's mirroring of children's affects, by identifying those affects, affirming them, and representing them in drawing, stories, and so forth (see Chapter 9). In addition, permission will be conveyed by the teacher's use of modelling to express her own geniune affects.

It is impossible for classroom adults to serve as healthy models if they are falsely cheerful, speak to children in an unnatural or forced tone of voice, offer empty compliments, or interact with children in an effusive and undifferentiated manner. Teachers who allow themselves to discretely express and verbalize the cause and effect of their own affects will give their students a valuable lesson in emotional life. The teacher who gasps in fear when a mouse dashes across the classroom can later say, "Do you remember how scared I looked before when I saw that little mouse run out of the closet? Did you feel worried when you saw my face? I was really scared for a minute. Do you know anyone else who gets scared when they see mice?" The teacher who becomes exasperated by a child's difficult behavior can later acknowledge her feelings. She might

say, "I bet I looked pretty angry before when you were stomping on those crackers! I'm glad we're both feeling better now."

In general, preschool classrooms must be relaxed, interesting places where children and adults share the joy of discovery and creativity. The sharing of pleasurable experiences will infuse the environment with the social strength necessary to accommodate the expression of negative as well as positive affects. Instead of trying to minimize the expression of negative affects in the classroom, teachers might use naturally occurring expressions of affect to help children become better attuned to affects, to differentiate among them, and to develop strategies for affect regulation when necessary. A teacher who habitually advises children in her class to ignore a classmate who is having a tantrum might try instead to engage the other children in a dialogue about what the angry child might be feeling, or about their own experiences of being so out of control. Children can create strategies for helping their classmates feel calmer.

THE AFFECTIVE CONNECTION

Teachers who allow the true affects of at-risk children to have a voice in the classroom may fear that negative affects will become pervasive and overpowering. While at-risk children may be "overflowing" with negative affects as the result of depriving and traumatizing experiences or of developmental disabilities, teachers will find that giving these affects a voice need not result in a depressing environment. On the contrary, children who are allowed to sing "If you're sad and you know you can cry" and "If you're angry and you know it stomp your feet!" will sing with interest, energy, and genuine shared feeling. The preschool experience then becomes a true "holding environment," where children feel safe with all of their feelings and learn to communicate about themselves. The teacher then becomes an important link in the child's affective connections, enabling her to be herself while reaching out to others.

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