Democratic Life Skill 2

Guiding Children to Express Strong Emotions in Nonhurting Ways

With this column we continue a series exploring five democratic life skills:

1. Finding acceptance as a member of the group and as a worthy individual
2. Expressing strong emotions in nonhurting ways
3. Solving problems creatively—independently and in cooperation with others
4. Accepting unique human qualities in others
5. Thinking intelligently and ethically (Gartrell 2012)

Life skill 2 is the focus of this column and the following vignette.

> In teacher Deb's Head Start class, preschoolers have been using props introduced through stories in the dramatic play area. Another adult made several magic wands from cutout stars stapled on heavy-duty straws. Boys and girls have been playing with the wands, and on this day Deb discovers that only three wands are still operational. Hallie joins a group of three children playing with the wands and asks them if she can play with one. Deb helps the children understand that Hallie is asking to use a wand when they are finished. They agree, and Hallie, looking sad, sits on a bench to wait.
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> Abrea, holding her wand, goes into a special cardboard play area. Jolie, holding her own wand, looks at Hallie and goes into the play area. She returns with a second wand and gives it to Hallie. Abrea storms out after Jolie, very upset, "Hey, I wasn't done with that!"
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> Jolie turns to Abrea and says calmly, "Well, you put it down. And when people put it down, that means they are done." Abrea shoots a glance at Deb, who nods in agreement with Jolie, as this is a classroom policy.
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> Abrea holds up her fists and glares at Jolie, saying, "I'm not playing with you ever again!" She complains, "I wasn't done with that," and goes back into the play area and crawls under a table.
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> Deb follows, kneels by the table and says, "Abrea, you sound very mad." Abrea tearfully says, "Jolie took my wand and gave it to Hallie." Deb asks in a low voice, "Did you lay it down?" Abrea nods. Deb continues, "When you put it down, nobody knows that you have it. Jolie thought you were done."
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> Hallie and Jolie come into the play area with their wands to see what is happening. Deb says, "Hallie, look at Abrea's face. She looks sad. She wasn't quite done with that wand. When you are done with your wand can you give it to Abrea?" Hallie and Jolie both nod yes and leave.
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> Deb turns back to Abrea, who states, "I want the gold one." Deb tells her, "You'll have to wait," then adds, "You know what? We can make one. We could trace a star and cut it out and find a stick to put it on."
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> Now out from underneath the table, Abrea perks up: "I have an idea." She moves quickly out from under the table, past Deb, and sits down at the art table. She looks for the star stencil and paper. Deb makes sure Abrea has the materials and watches as Abrea makes a new wand. Later Deb sees Abrea and Jolie together. They play for more than 15 minutes, sharing pegs and deciding together where the pegs will go on a light board.

Guidance and safety-based skills

In 1962, Abraham Maslow wrote an influential book outlining his famous psychological construct of a *hierarchy of needs*. Maslow says that all individuals, and especially children, must have their *safety needs* met—for security, belonging, and affection—before they can progress in cognitive and emotional learning.

In the last few years, brain psychologists such as Gunnar, Herrera, and Hostinar (2009) and Shonkoff and colleagues (2011) have documented that children who do not have their safety needs met experience chronic toxic stress, see the world as a threatening place, and show an unhealthy pattern of survival behaviors (fight or flight) in everyday situations. Unless adults directly meet their safety needs, these children experience great and lasting difficulty with healthy brain development and social relations.

Giving all due acknowledgement to Maslow and current brain research, the construct of democratic life

skills refers to the first two skills as *safety based*. By this I mean that positive relationships with adults help children feel secure, have a sense of belonging, and feel loved. Children are directly dependent on adults for meeting these safety needs, and children must have these needs met to gain the first two life skills. With the safety-based skills met, children then can progress with the *growth-based skills:* 3, 4, and 5—the subject of columns to come.

Let's look at Deb's good guidance in relation to the two safety-based democratic life skills. First of all, Deb bolstered each child's previous attainment of the first skill. The bottom line in guidance is to always support the child's feeling of acceptance as a member of the group and worthiness as a growing individual. The first skill has an acute phase—when young children first begin a program or when their life circumstances become traumatic. (Guidance Matters columns published in the March, July, and November 2011 issues of *Young Children* address these situations.) After children such as Jolie and Abrea show initial achievement of the first skill (group acceptance and positive feelings of self-worth), every subsequent action by the early childhood professional serves either to reinforce or undermine this skill. Even as teachers guide children toward progress with skills 2 and beyond, they work to sustain gains already made in the first skill.

Positive relationships with adults help children feel secure, have a sense of belonging, and feel loved.

Deb supported Abrea's acquisition of the first skill by looking beyond the child's outburst. Deb was able to do this because she recognized the progress Abrea had made with the second skill—how hard the child was working to balance her strong feelings with the nonhurting expression of them. (Deb also recognized that Abrea had a right to her feelings and accepted that anyone might feel upset in a similar situation.)

By acknowledging Abrea's feelings and explaining them to the other girls, Deb demonstrated acceptance of Abrea. By reinforcing the classroom policy with the child, Deb helped Abrea recognize that there was a reason behind Jolie's action and that everyone is expected to follow class guidelines. By helping Abrea problem-solve a constructive response to her dilemma, Deb was reinforcing Abrea's ability to manage her emotions (the second skill) and work to resolve a problem creatively (which helped Abrea make initial progress with the third skill). At the art table, Abrea got right down to making the new wand, with a look on her face that conveyed positive resolve. Abrea also showed she could move past the strong emotions of the conflict by playing with the child who had made her angry earlier.

The second skill and emerging executive function

People work on the second democratic life skill their entire lives, and young children are just beginners. The ability to use the second skill requires psychological progress with a group of essential mental capacities identified collectively by the term *executive function* (Gartrell 2012). Executive function, which governs thought processing and judgment, enables us to use reason to resolve problems. Executive function is just starting to develop in young children's brains and is still maturing even in adults in their 20s (Elliott 2003). In my view this vital brain capacity is enabled as children gain the first skill; shows directly in children's progress toward the second skill; and empowers children to develop the third, fourth, and fifth skills (Gartrell 2012).

Jolie's actions illustrate her exercise of emerging executive function. In attempting to be responsive to one classmate (Hallie), Jolie used the logic of a classroom guideline. But in so doing, she upset another classmate (Abrea), who in her own view was not done with the wand she had set down. Deb recognized that children such as Jolie will make natural mistakes in this complicated effort, and she offered important support for Jolie's application of the guideline—helping her to begin using executive function.

In this situation Jolie clearly demonstrated the second democratic life skill when she calmly explained to Abrea why she retrieved the wand. Even when Abrea yelled that she would never play with Jolie again, Jolie managed her emotions and found a way to reconcile with Abrea—shown as the two used the illuminated pegboard together later that morning. The complexities of life require individuals

to summon the executive function necessary to register emotions and manage them to help resolve conflicts. Impressively, preschooler Jolie was largely able to accomplish this task.

The teacher's role

Much effective teaching, which Deb showed here, can happen when early childhood professionals themselves feel strong emotions in a situation gone awry. Deb might well have felt frustrated or helpless, thinking, "Oh geez, they're fighting because I didn't have enough wands!" If she felt these emotions, she managed them in ways that made the resulting conflict a meaningful learning experience for all.

Deb's responses modeled for and taught the children how to make progress with the second skill. Deb helped Abrea realize that she need not be a victim, but a proactive community member who could manage her emotions and take creative action to resolve the conflict for herself. With Jolie, Deb publicly backed the child's use of a classroom guideline and later privately commended Jolie for this and for not getting upset with Abrea.

The teacher helped these young children live by established social guidelines and begin to take the perspective of others when conflicts occur. With a teacher's good guidance, even young children can gain sophistication in the second democratic life skill and move ahead with the third, fourth, and fifth.

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Please send possible guidance anecdotes and other comments to dgartrell@bemidjistate.edu.

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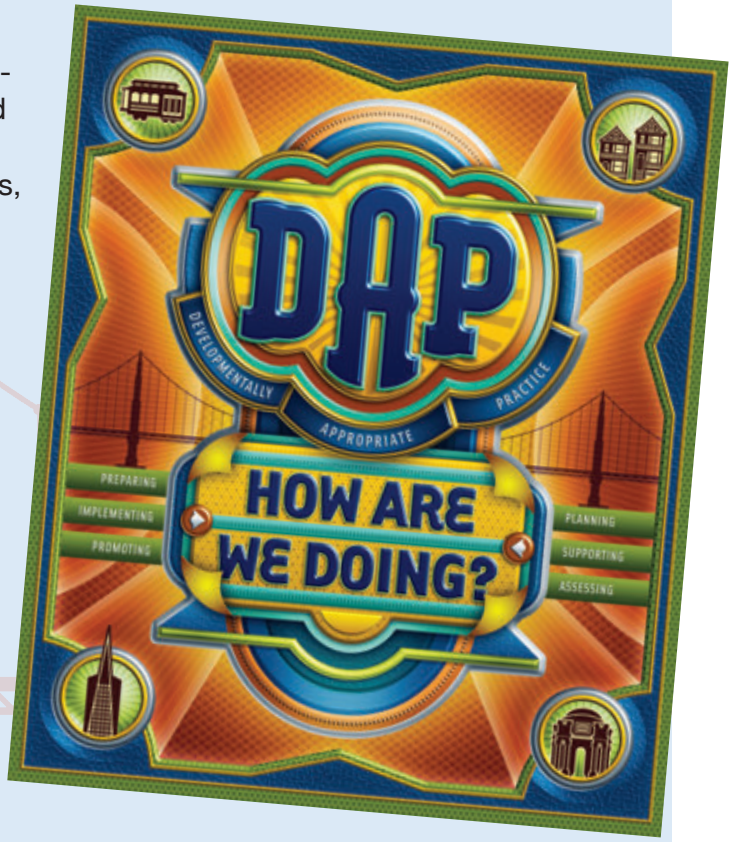

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