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Guiding Behavior

In the terms of developmentally appropriate practice, guiding behavior is synonymous with teaching for healthy emotional and social development. The term often used for teaching that guides young children's behavior while empowering healthy emotional and social development is *guidance*. In their landmark 2009 work for the National Association for the Education of Young Children, Carol Copple and Susan Bredekamp establish that good guidance includes both individual and social dimensions.

Individual Dimension

Psycho-neurologists who study brain development increasingly focus on the importance of managing stress as a dynamic in healthy emotional and social development. Due to neurological issues, environmental issues, and often both, some children experience unmanageably high stress levels. Jack Shonkoff and Andrew Garner make the case that this *toxic stress* hyperstimulates the amygdala, the center of the brain that senses threat and triggers stress hormone reactions and related behaviors.

An immediate impact of toxic stress is that the child is quick to show survival ("fight, freeze, or flight") behaviors, which often include aggression, in relatively normal everyday situations. The child feels threatened and acts out in a mistaken effort to protect physical and psychological well-being. In fact, toxic stress can result in posttraumatic stress-like reactions by the child, often mistaken by adults as willful challenging behavior—the child intentionally choosing to be "bad."

Megan Gunnar, Adriana Herrara, and Camelia Hostinar report that the long-term effect of toxic stress on emotional and social development of the child can be devastating. The young child can become vulnerable to a cycle of toxic stress, leading to an aggressive survival reaction that results in punitive adult reaction and peer rejection, which in turn leads to debasement of self-identity and continued toxic stress.

A central goal of guidance is to provide leadership that assists the child to build *resilience*. Ann Masten defines resilience as the ability to use emotional and social skills to overcome, or bounce back from, the effects of difficult conditions and stress in one's life. Karen Cairone and Mary Mackrain write that key in this effort is the creation of external and internal protective factors.

External protective factors are improved conditions in the environment at home and at school that reduce sources of stress in the child's life and restore the child's ability to build trusting relationships with significant others.

Internal psychological factors are attributes and skills that empower the child to manage stress, express strong emotions in non-hurting ways, and build healthy relationships—in other words, to begin a path of healthy emotional and social development.

Directly with individual children, early childhood professionals build a positive relationship (secure attachment) with the child, so that the child's sense of trust grows and a willingness to learn new skills is reinforced. Sustained warm personal contact with the child, both during and outside of conflict situations, is essential. Through this relationship the caring adult guides the child to make gains in initiative capacities, sociability, a sense of humor, perspective-taking, helpfulness, and a willingness to reconcile and forgive.

Cairone and Mackrain report that due to toxic stress, mis-expression of these nascent strengths may occur during conflicts that the young child experiences. This understanding is a key challenge for the adult when encountering challenging behaviors. The adult looks at conflicts as teaching opportunities. There are consequences when children have conflicts, of course, but for the adult as well as the child. The consequence for the adult is to use a guidance approach that calms all down, mediates the conflict, and teaches what new skills the child can learn at that time, after having calmed down. The consequence for the child is to come to accept that the adult is there to help, and to move forward with emotional and social skill-building.

Gartrell and Cairone illustrate that in relation to other adults, the guidance approach starts with teamwork by staff in the use of coordinated leadership to enhance the child's resilience and empower the child to use emotional and social attributes and skills. Two or more staff persons working as a team often can accomplish what neither one can alone. The focus of collaboration includes work not just directly with the child but also with the child's family. Cairone and Mackrain state that guidance for healthy emotional and social development involves a triad relationship of early childhood professionals, the child, and key family members.

Marilou Hyson and Heather Biggar Tomlinson emphasize that professionals build relationships of mutual acceptance and trust with family members no less than with the children in their care. Using the team approach, they work to overcome occupational, social, and cultural factors that may make both family engagement with the program and productive family–teacher relationships difficult. If individual children are experiencing high stress levels, family members themselves tend to be dealing with adverse life circumstances. Locating and utilizing resources to effect a comprehensive approach with child and family member(s) is an important strategy for early childhood educators. Staff work actively with family members to cultivate mutual trust, and they support the adults in the parenting role.

Social Dimension

In the field of early childhood education, guiding behavior almost always entails group settings and guidance of children within the context of the group. The use of developmentally appropriate practice maximizes the likelihood that good guidance with individual children extends to all in the group. Terms such as *inclusive communities* and *encouraging classrooms* define the early childhood environment in which all children are supported sufficiently in their emotional development so that they can succeed in social interactions and relationships with peers and adults.

The early childhood professional guards against any individual in the community being subject to rejection and stigma. Avoiding embarrassment is key. In particular, children vulnerable to rejection tend to be active, rambunctious, and sometimes aggressive in their daily behaviors. Caring professionals reject the "80% rule," that if 80% of children in a group are behaving productively and getting along that is "good enough." Educators make professional modifications to the education program, daily schedule, group expectations, and guidance practices to make the community inclusive and encouraging for all.

Recognized practices that widen the circle of developmental appropriateness typically include reducing teacher-directed large groups and activities that require children to sit down and follow directions. Copple and Bredekamp found that active programs, with many choices and a minimum of adult direction, tend to proactively engage young children. Family groups within

the class—stable "pods" of a small number of children (typically of different ages) who might eat, rest, and do daily activities together with the same adult leader—enhance relationships among peers and with primary caring adults. Such programs empower mastery (intrinsic) motivation and active lifestyles.

Practices that build encouraging learning communities include regular large-group meetings; predictable routines with intriguing (not chaotic) variations; and attractive, culturally relevant, age-appropriate settings that offer many choices in distinct areas. Group meetings, going beyond traditional circle times, offer opportunities even for very young children to have meaningful community input and to create a climate of mutual respect. Such practices diminish the occurrence of classroom-caused conflicts that children fall into as a result of frustration, restlessness, and boredom.

Practices that early childhood professionals use in guidance interventions during conflicts—expressed disagreements between people—typically include crisis management, guidance talks, conflict mediation, and class meetings.

Crisis management techniques are used when children have lost emotional control in order to prevent harm, calm parties down, and restore equilibrium so that other guidance interventions can be effectively used. Using firm but friendly practice to help children find a place and time to calm down is central. Sometimes the place is on the teacher's lap.

Guidance talks are used when individual children have experienced a conflict resulting in serious disruption and/or harm to others. After restoring calm (and as soon as the adult can make the time), she or he talks empathetically with the child about how the child saw the conflict, what the consequences of the conflict were, how the child can help others feel better, and what the child can do differently next time to minimize harm and disruption.

Conflict mediation involves the adult using measured methods of leadership when a small number of children have experienced a serious conflict. Typically, the adult uses an interactive procedure to (1) restore calm, (2) identify how each child saw the conflict, (3) brainstorm inclusive solutions, (4) get agreement on a solution and try it, and (5) follow up, such as by having individual guidance talks, reinforcing the children's achievement at resolving the problem, and reiterating alternative non-hurting responses to use in the future.

Group meetings can be held not just as practice to build inclusive settings but also as a situational strategy to resolve conflicts that have become noticeable to many in the group. An example is when a term like *butthead* catches on. The early childhood professional adapts the steps of conflict mediation described earlier, perhaps skipping step 1 if unnecessary, and perhaps blending steps 3 and 4. Group meetings can be held to resolve such problems as forgetting safety considerations on a group walk or excluding children from joining others at play. They offer positive alternatives to traditional "group punishments," which tend to cause negative dynamics among children and with adults. A few established guidelines often help, such as, "We respect each other's ideas."

Guiding behavior, or guidance, has two dimensions, focusing on the individual child and children in a group setting. In early childhood education the intent of guiding behavior is to empower and facilitate the positive emotional and social development of each child in the group. A key consideration in using guidance is to model and teach an appreciation of the worth of all individuals who are a part of the caring community of young children and adults living and working together.

Dan Gartrell and Michael Paul Gallo

See also Aggression; Challenging Behavior; Emotional Development; Healthy Environments for Social-Emotional Development; Social-Emotional Development

Further Readings

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