1992

Creating Safe Places for Conflict Resolution to Happen

Carolyn P. Edwards
University of Nebraska-Lincoln, cedwards1@unl.edu

Edwards, Carolyn P., "Creating Safe Places for Conflict Resolution to Happen" (1992). *Faculty Publications, Department of Psychology*. 618.
https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/psychfacpub/618

Creating Safe Places
for Conflict Resolution to Happen

by Carolyn Edwards

Establishing an envelope of trust, protection, and mutual regard allows children to grow in the practice of cooperation, joint problem solving, and positive social behavior. Teachers who foster children's conflict resolution skills first establish a nurturing, caring classroom community based on moral values. Otherwise, children will not feel safe enough to take the emotional risks involved in learning new ways to solve problems; and they will not care enough about their classmates or teachers to bother about their rights, needs, and welfare.

To think about such a classroom context, we need to explore three dimensions of the environment: the **intellectual atmosphere** (Is this a safe place to think and wonder?); the **moral atmosphere** (Am I important here? Does my participation count?); and the **community atmosphere** (Do these people care about me — do I care about them?).

Creating a Safe Place for Questions and Opinions

The classroom is a place where people can disagree — where it is even desirable to disagree. Differences of opinion should be seen as the normal state of affairs and a source of interest and intellectual pleasure. This should happen throughout the day, in all kinds of activities and interactions. The teacher serves as a role model for the acceptance of differences. "Really, do you think so? I never thought of it that way before," she might say to a child or another adult.

Many children will find this strange at first. Some may not be accustomed to even having opinions, much less speaking out about them. It may take them some time to find their voice. Others may be suspicious when adults ask them what they think about something; they are sure the teacher has a *right answer* in mind and that they will be corrected if they say the wrong thing. After a while, however, most children will become enthusiastic about speaking out. The teacher may need to experiment with small groups and different ways of drawing children out, using observation and home visits to learn more about the communication styles the children prefer.

Once children become accustomed to stating their ideas and expressing differences in opinion, the teacher can move on to helping them compare their ideas, test out hypotheses, and progress in thinking together. For example, if two children are arguing about how to build a block castle, they might each sketch a plan of their idea on paper and then look at each other's plans, or show the plans to some other children for discussion. After a while, just having differences of opinion gets boring; what is interesting is to see where the ideas lead, how they can be checked out.

Teachers should model the enjoyable side of conflict, thereby providing a learning opportunity. If teachers become tense and anxious, and try to *evaporate* a dispute as quickly as possible, then children too will find conflict stressful. Teachers need not be worried that children are too sensitive and vulnerable to disagree forcefully and then see whose idea is right.

Teachers can model for children that it is not so bad to be wrong; "Yes, you were right that time! I'm going to change my mind now." After all, changing their minds is something young children do all the time. Moreover, since their self-concepts

are based on concrete characteristics, they do not, like adults, judge themselves or feel judged when their suggestions prove wrong.

Creating a Democratic, Participatory Climate

Groups run best when everyone participates in governing them. Many teachers know how to use group meetings to generate a list of ground rules for the classroom and for discussing problems that arise over and over again. But democracy and participation are important not only for pragmatic reasons; children have a right to them because they are the foundation of our society.

One good place for the teacher to start when thinking about the morality of the classroom is by reading the NAEYC Code of Ethical Conduct and Statement of Commitment (published in Katz and Ward, 1991). This statement of professional values helps one clarify what basic ideals and principles are shared by our field. It includes statements of teachers' ethical responsibilities to children, families, colleagues, community, and society.

Reassured by having a *safe base* of value premises, teachers can then try to make their classroom a good and fair place for children and adults to live together. In spite of differences of opinion, it is not a place of chaos where anything goes. Children are not always able to distinguish what is secure and what is insecure in the world around them, and they need the teacher to point the way. Rebecca New tells how voting took over as the royal road to truth in her mixed-age K-2 classroom; she asked the group, "What time is it?" and a small child piped up, "Let's vote!"

Throughout the day, in all of their interactions with children, teachers should foster empathy and perspective-taking but not in a heavy-handed way that makes children cringe and want to stop listening. Katz and McClellan (1991) explain how teachers can engage in authentic communication that accepts children's feelings, establishes credibility, explicitly communicates expectations in a matter-of-fact way, and motivates children without putting others down.

Teachers should also help children understand the reasons behind different rules. Rebecca (age three) knows that she puts away toys at school after using them "so that other children can find them." She knows not to bite "because it makes someone cry." Children constantly monitor the words and actions of adults with whom they have a close relationship and incorporate their exact vocabulary. They can follow rules and control themselves more easily when they understand the why's and are not simply told, "These are school rules. This is the way we do it."

Finally, some teachers may want to orient children to the moral aspects of social life through their curriculum. They can lead discussions that highlight the existence of values and at the same time give children practice in thinking for themselves, expressing and listening to differences of opinion, and comparing ideas. These discussions can be about a real event that the children have experienced or a situation depicted in literature. Children can invent many ways to solve this conflict, try them out, and discuss them as a group. They can make their own books showing their solutions, or act them out in dramatic play.

Children can have group discussions about hypothetical problems designed to engage their minds about issues interesting to them. In **Promoting Social and Moral**
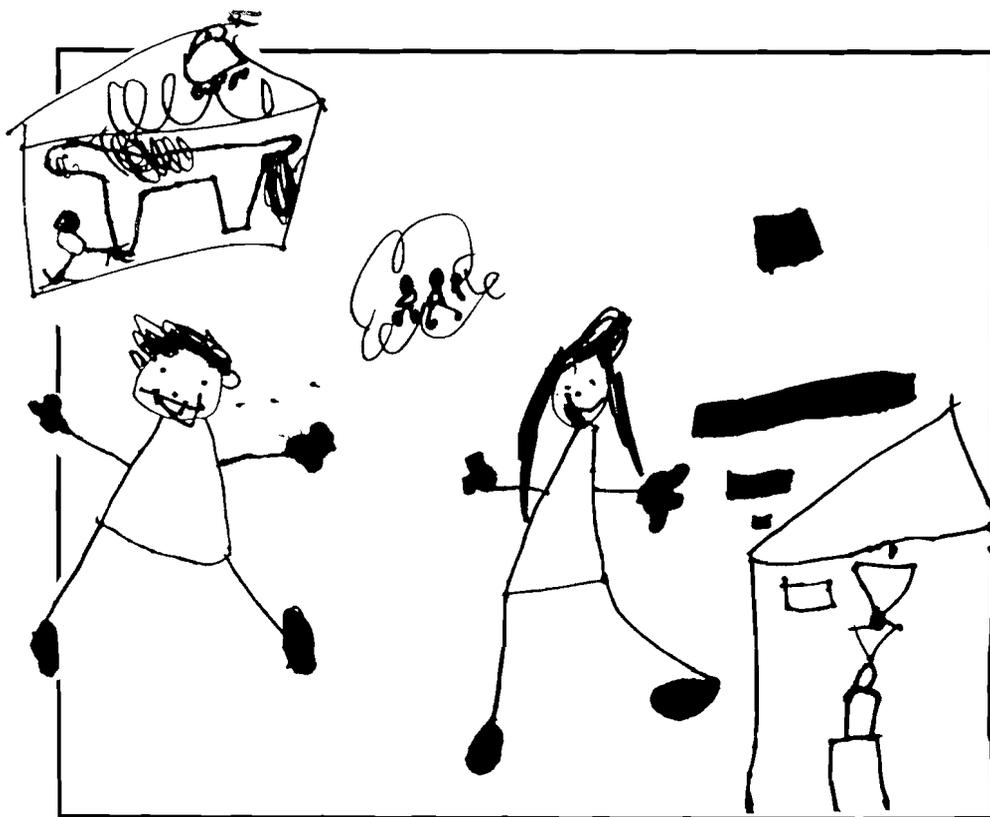
Development for Young Children (1986), I show how teachers can engage young children in *thinking games* that pose a problem with no right or wrong answer. The main thing is that the problems or issues raised should be genuinely interesting to the children; they should have depth and complexity, that is, more than one side to them. The teacher can serve as the group's *memory*, by documenting and then displaying the children's ideas in some way. For example, she can tape record the discussion, then make a poster containing examples of what children said along with a pictorial representation. This allows the children to revisit their own and others' ideas and then go on from there.

Creating a Community of Caring and Well-Being

A community can be seen as a setting in which people develop a set of connected relationships and shared values. With increased use of full-day child care for young children, it becomes more and more important to transform classrooms into core communities for children and their families. When children form friendships and an attachment to their peer group (Ramsey, 1991) and an identification with adults, they become motivated to want to learn the rules of group living and try to live by them. Without such motivation and identification, children remain outside the value system: they can mouth the rules but they do not care about them. Thus, the classroom community does not replace the child's family in its role as socializer, but rather provides critically needed support in that mission.

A community requires a time, a place, and a shared life. It is difficult for early childhood teachers to establish these in the face of low budgets, dark and unaesthetic physical surroundings, and high staff turnover. The teacher's best hope is to firmly situate the core community of her classroom in a nest of ever-widening, supportive circles that can offer two things. The first is resources: labor, time, and money to improve the physical environment; salary upgrading to reduce turnover and enhance continuity and stability; emotional and professional support.

The second is wider meanings. The classroom community is strongest when the environment and curriculum are literally drenched with images and experiences connected to outside communities — in particular, the school itself, families past and present, and the neighborhood, town, and region. This is rarely the case in American preschools and child care centers, which often have an institutional feel or are so intentionally *universalistic* in the statement they make that they could be anywhere. A community is by nature a *particular* place (Gandini, 1991), built up over the years and resonant of a shared life extending over time and connected to the visible world and people.

A school in Massachusetts strengthens community connections within the school by means of many cross-age interactions: multi-aged classroom groups (spanning two years); weekly schoolwide sings; a formalized practice of individual primary children spending regular time in the nursery classrooms; rituals to help preschool children enter the primary rooms and approach the older children; celebrations, workdays, and grand occasions throughout the year involving all or large segments of the community — children and parents.

In an excellent child care center in Central Italy, Lella Gandini and I witnessed just how early in children's lives all of these principles can become operative. During an episode that lasted many minutes, two children, a three year old girl and boy, engaged in an argument about whether a construction of play dough was a "cake" or a "pizza." Although they were both so young that they could not do much more than repeat their same simple assertions, they never hit each other, cried, grabbed, or actively sought help. In the end, the boy yielded by leaving the room. The girl, in a way that showed how she had really been listening and thinking, then revised her ideas to incorporate his.

Being part of such a community makes the children feel cared for. The school becomes more than a place where children's *cognitive, academic, social, and emotional skills are promoted*, but instead one which solidifies their basic sense of well-being. In such a community, children can be at ease together and jointly develop their own rituals, shared jokes and special codes, and strong friendships. They will become eager to negotiate and resolve conflicts non-hurtfully.

Carolyn Edwards is professor of family studies at the University of Kentucky. She has studied social and moral development in comparative cultural perspective and is currently writing about the quality early childhood programs in Reggio Emilia and Pistoia, Italy.