

## 4. BUILDING COMMUNITY

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Today's five-year-olds will be adults in the early twenty-first century. Their world will be very different than the one we live in. Societies are changing. Communities are being redefined. How can parents and educators best prepare young children to be successful members of tomorrow's communities? What social skills will they need? The Brazilian activist Paulo Freire asserts that educators must be guided by "dreams and utopias." He declares, "I can't respect the teacher who doesn't dream of a certain kind of society that he would like to live in."

We have the opportunity to create the kind of community in which we can share dreams of success for all children. Building communities that will equip young children with the social skills they will need is a basic goal of the Step by Step Preschool Program.

In *Teaching Children to Care*, Ruth Charney has written, "In today's world, it is particularly urgent that we extend beyond the domain of self and the lessons of self-control. We need to find connections to others, and to feel ourselves members of many groups — intimate groups, community groups, and a world group. We need to teach children to give care as well as to receive care." (1992, p. 32).

Charney writes that teachers build community by expecting children to:

- *Know names* Children learn and use each other's names and get to know the interests and feelings of others.
- *Take turns* Children learn how to take turns. As they get older, turn taking occurs often without arguing or quitting the activity.
- *Share* Children learn to share attention, private time with the teacher, space at the sandbox, snacks, and crayons.
- *Make room in the circle* Children learn to make room for latecomers to the circle and to sit with children who are not their best friends.

- *Join activities* Children learn how to join small groups in a constructive manner.
- *Invite others to join* Children learn how to extend invitations that will bring others into their activities.
- *Be friendly* Children learn how to greet and express interest in others.
- *Cooperate* Children cooperate on projects, solve problems together, and play games as a team or in a group.
- *Solve conflicts* Children learn that by talking about problems and sharing feelings and points of view, conflicts can be resolved.

## Setting the Tone

The teaching team sets up the room, selects materials, plans the daily schedule, and most important, truly sets the tone for everything that happens in that classroom. Attitudes of respect, sincerity, humor and fun contribute greatly to this tone, as Murphy and Leeper observe in the following passage:

*The single most important influence on a child in a classroom, naturally, is the teacher. The entire program revolves around her. Adult helpers enrich and bolster the teacher's relationship with the children. . . . A skillful, understanding teacher, whose primary goal is caring for children, can provide a challenging program, even when the physical setting is not ideal. . . . A good teacher in a well-planned setting combines the basic elements for successful child care (Murphy and Leeper, 1974).*



## Ways to Show Respect for Children in the Classroom

- √ Always use the child's name.
- √ Speak to the child individually as often as possible.
- √ Get down to the children's level when talking to them by kneeling or sitting on a low chair.
- √ Listen to what children say to you and respond to what they say.
- √ If you tell children that you will do something for them later, be sure to do it.
- √ Express honest appreciation for a child's work.
- √ Give children the opportunity to share their work and interests with others.
- √ Use children's ideas and suggestions and acknowledge their contribution.

There must be respect for one another in the classroom — among the teaching team and the children. Respect is an essential component of a healthy classroom community. Teachers model the kind of understanding, respect, and care that is expected of children. The quality of respect that the children experience is a key factor in the development of their own self respect. Self-respect provides a solid basis for satisfying relationships with the other children.

When the teaching team shows respect to every child, children learn how to accept all children — the child who is a slow runner, the child who is an excellent painter, and even the child with different or difficult behavior. When children see and feel that each of them is accepted and respected, they become comfortable and feel free to develop their own interests and styles.

The teaching team needs to recognize that like adults, children are sensitive to, and aware of, the sincerity shown them. Praise for a child's work must be individualized and honest; interactions should be natural and not forced.

Children enjoy and respond to age-appropriate humor and fun. Adults do not have to fear that they will lose control of classroom order if they laugh and joke with children. On the contrary, laughing together can enhance the warmth and friendship between teacher and child and encourage cooperation within the classroom.

## ***Teaching about Diversity***

Many of today's preschoolers will be working with people from around the world. Many of these people will be from different cultures and speak different languages. An ability to work smoothly and respectfully with others will be critical for success in the years ahead. Few children will be untouched by the potential problems that will occur if they are not at ease with diversity and not able to cooperate and collaborate with people who are "different".

Young children are gaining information about their ever-widening world and forming opinions about what they experience. They try to learn the significance of differences. Children look to adults in their lives, such as parents and teachers, for cues. The Step by Step Program believes that diversity is to be celebrated and appreciated, rather than avoided. It is the duty of parents and teachers to help children understand how hurtful prejudice and bias are. Issues of fairness, so important to young children, can be used as a springboard for helping children appreciate why it is unfair to categorize playmates and neighbors.

Adjusting to life in a multicultural society takes time and experience. The child-centered classroom helps children grow in their willingness to appreciate differences through positive real-world experiences. Issues of differences are infused throughout the curriculum. Time spent addressing these issues can significantly enhance the self-image of children and support families as well. Teachers have reported that their classes have become more productive and less disruptive when issues of diversity are addressed.

The teacher can help children expand their thinking about similarities and differences by incorporating these guidelines into daily teaching strategies:

- *Pay close attention to children while they are talking.*
- *Set a calm, relaxed atmosphere so children have enough uninterrupted time in the conversation to form and express their ideas.*
- *Affirm the thinking with comments like: "I believe you."*
- *Clarify the thinking by repeating the idea back to the child using some other key words and phrases.*
- *Offer supportive, thought-provoking comments such as: "Gee, that's an interesting idea," "What makes you think that?" "Does anybody else have an idea?" "Once somebody told me . . ." "What do you think of that idea?"*
- *Avoid evaluating children's ideas by saying "good idea" or "good solution," because it gives children the impression that there is one right answer and that you are looking for the child to find the one right answer.*

*Roots and Wings*, York, S., 1991, p. 119-120

The Step by Step Program encourages teachers to respond to discriminatory behavior in the following ways:

- Do not ignore it.
- Explain what was observed and engage participants in discussion.
- Do not fear conflict.
- Become aware of your own attitudes.
- Be understanding.
- Recognize your own frustration.
- Model expected behavior.
- Be ready to intervene.
- Be nonjudgmental.
- Distinguish between categorical and stereotypical thinking.

Adapted from *Roots and Wing*, York, S., 1991.

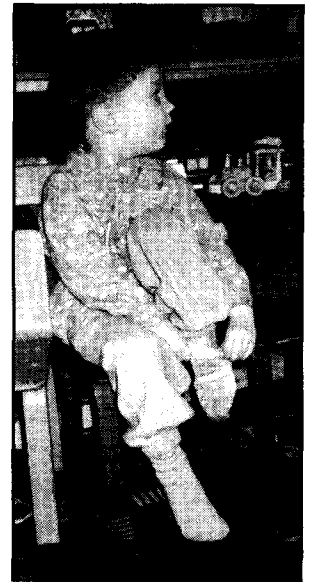
The learning environment and curriculum should reflect the language, culture, and customs of the children and families in the program. *Promoting Cultural Diversity and Cultural Competency*, the self-assessment checklist found at end of this chapter, can be extremely helpful as you plan a culturally appropriate format.

## **Teaching Responsibility**

Children are often far more competent at caring for their belongings, cleaning up after themselves, and working independently than adults expect. Good early childhood programs provide real-life opportunities for children to make decisions, take responsibility, and do as much as they can for themselves. As children overcome challenges, they develop mastery and self-confidence.

Teachers should not do for children what they can do for themselves. Feeding, toileting, and dressing are among the important self-help skills mastered by toddlers and preschool-aged children. When adults feed preschool children, clean up for them, dress them, and in other ways infantilize them, they give the clear message that the children are not capable. Instead, teachers should communicate to children that they are able to do many things on their own. Children feel pride and accomplishment when they can put on their coats by themselves or wash off the tables after snacks.

Teachers learn to distinguish between assistance and intervention: helping a child who is unable to complete a physically or developmentally difficult task, but not intervening when the child is trying hard to complete the task alone. Sometimes teachers intervene because it is faster, easier, or too painful to watch the child struggle, but the child who is unable to perform an entire task can at least carry out part of it. If, for example, a child is unable to cut his meat without help, the teacher might encourage him to use the knife to cut the potatoes, bread and carrots on his plate.



Responsible children grow up to be responsible citizens. Through practice, children learn to understand their impact on material objects and other people. The preschool environment provides children with many opportunities to practice this important life skill. Shelves that are labeled help children learn to put away their materials after each use. Making a job chart with rotating jobs such as waiter (snack helper, lunch table setter), janitor (floor sweeper), zoo keeper (pet feeder), botanist (plant waterer), teacher (attendance taker), musician (selector of songs), and librarian (book chooser) allows children to participate in the daily maintenance of the classroom.

When children help formulate class rules and then abide by those rules, they function as part of a democratic community. When teachers insist that children work out a solution to a disagreement, they learn to accept the consequences of their actions. In child-centered classrooms, children are viewed as competent and responsible. They are encouraged to do real work and participate in the decisions that govern this work. Teachers take pleasure in creating opportunities for children to become partners in the learning process.

Classrooms that function as communities are dynamic; they convey a sense of excitement and energy. As children are involved in their important work and play, they reflect their teacher's confidence in them. They feel competent, responsible, and are empowered to do their best.

## ***Decision Making***

Making decisions is fundamental to the child-centered classroom. Choosing activities, materials, food, and clothes helps children practice the decision-making process in safe, structured ways. They learn to take responsibility for their choices and understand the consequences of their actions. The child must ask herself, "If I play with the blocks now, I may miss the cooking activity. Which is more important to me?"

When the teacher asks the children to vote on the name of the class's new rabbit, they learn that they have the power to make something happen as a group. They also learn that the group democratic process may not always support their individual choices.

Making choices requires practice. The preschool schedule allows many opportunities for children to make choices: where to sit in the circle, which activity center to work in, who to play with, whether to throw the large or small ball, or what to make with clay. Effective choice making should not be confused with intelligence; rather, it is a skill that is learned through experience and practice.

Children in classrooms where choice is built into the learning environment will weigh the costs and benefits of their choices and make appropriate decisions for themselves. As children practice making choices, they become better at making decisions in an increasingly complex world.

## **Classroom Rules**

### **The Need for Limits**

In our own homes, each of us has rules, routines, and rituals. The way we do things makes us comfortable; it seems like the right way to do things. We think of our way as the “right” way. Children get accustomed to the way things are done at home, and it becomes the natural way for them.

Children in a preschool program are confronted with a set of rules and expectations that are necessary for group living and may differ greatly from those at home. The nature and extent of classroom rules also vary, depending on the teacher, the curriculum, the physical arrangement of the classroom, and the children in it. Most children are quite willing to accept the expectations of the preschool. They are more comfortable when they know what they may do or may not do and what they can expect of others.

Children vary in the degree to which they conform to a routine and accept some of the expected ways of behaving. One of the best ways to maximize conformity to classroom routines is to involve children in developing rules, changing rules, and making new rules when necessary.

A major objective in working with young children is to teach them self-control. Teachers can help children learn self-control by explaining the consequences of undesirable behaviors and helping children recognize and find solutions for problematic behaviors. Involving children in solving a problem can have long-term benefits that are superior to traditional reward-or-punishment techniques. Rules and expectations for classroom behavior help children develop self-control.

The teaching team will find these general guidelines helpful when establishing rules:

- Teachers must be clear in their own minds about what is and is not permissible within the classroom setting.
- The teaching team must be consistent about what is acceptable behavior.
- The teaching team should develop rules with the children.
- Over time, children should come to understand that the rules serve all the class members.

## ***Importance of Consistency***

An adult who combines affection with fair and steady rules is modeling consistent behavior. Children feel secure when the adult is consistent. Clarity eliminates many potential problems. If children know that when they return to the classroom from the playground, they must put their jackets in their cubbies and then go to the reading area and select a book, they will have a routine they can follow each day and in which they can be successful. On the other hand, if children do not know what is expected of them when they return to the classroom, chaos may result: children may run around wildly and create a disruptive situation.

Consistency about what is acceptable within the classroom setting creates an environment that guides children in how to behave. It creates a climate that, both directly and subtly, establishes clear expectations for behavior.

- Apply rules to all children. For example, one rule may be “No hitting.” You could express the rule as: “Treat others gently. You may not hit another child; I will not let anyone hit you.”
- Always explain the reason for a rule to a child. For example, if one child is hitting another, first stop the hitting and then explain the reason for not hitting and the effect of hitting.
- State rules positively. Say, “Please walk in our classroom,” instead of “Don’t run.”

Some rules or limits vary from teacher to teacher and group to group. For example:

- Individual tolerance for noise varies, as do the acoustical qualities of classrooms. Therefore, rules about using “talking” voices inside the building and allowing “shouting” voices outside might be determined according to the situation.
- The need for a rule curtailing running might depend on the space in the room, the number and nature of the children, and the opportunities for outside play.

## ***Involving Children in Developing Rules***

When a situation causes disruption or distress to children, it is appropriate to set limits and to involve children in developing the rules. For example:

Evan and Mikol are building in the block center. They are showing the teacher their grocery store building when Marianna runs through the area and knocks it down. This is not the first time such a situation has occurred. What do you do?

Sit down with the three children. Ask them:

- What was the problem?
- What caused the difficulty?
- What can they do so this doesn't happen again?

Once the children have identified running as the cause of the problem, they are ready to identify the solution. The teacher may need to guide the children to recognize that running should not be allowed in the block center. Once they reach this point, the teacher needs to ask how to share this decision with other children in the class. The children may decide to make a sign (or ask the teacher to make one) that says, "Slow down" or, "Come in only if you are walking."

Since the problem had concerned other children at other times, the teacher may want to identify this rule for all the children. When making the rule, the class should focus on the problem, not on the child who caused the problem.

## ***Re-evaluating Classroom Rules***

If children are not following the rules, the teaching team needs to consider the following questions:

- Are the expectations clear to the children?
- Are the activities too hard?
- Are the children expected to sit too long? To stand in line too long?
- Do the children have enough time to move around?
- Are the adults demonstrating and doing projects while the children merely watch?

- Are there specific reasons why an individual child is misbehaving? (For example: fatigue, physical problems, home problems, personal adjustment problems?)

When families and children are helped to understand rules, they are also assisted in the transition process from home to school. When children participate in creating rules, they acquire problem-solving skills and develop self-control. Families can practice this process of making family rules or guidelines at home.

**PROMOTING CULTURAL DIVERSITY  
AND CULTURAL COMPETENCY**

Self-Assessment Checklist  
for Personnel Providing Services and Supports  
in Early Childhood Settings

**DIRECTIONS:** Please select A, B, or C for each item listed below.

A = Things I do frequently  
B = Things I do occasionally  
C = Things I do rarely or never

**PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT, MATERIALS AND RESOURCES**

- 1. I display pictures, posters and other materials that reflect the cultures and ethnic backgrounds of children and families in my classroom or program.
- 2. I select props for the dramatic play area that are culturally diverse (e.g., dolls, clothing, cooking utensils, household articles, furniture).
- 3. I ensure that the literacy area has picture and story books that reflect the different cultures of children and families in my classroom or program.
- 4. I ensure that table-top toys and other play accessories that depict people are representative of the various cultural and ethnic groups within my country or society.
- 5. I read a variety of books that expose children in my classroom or program to various life experiences of cultures and ethnic groups other than their own.
- 6. When such books are not available, I provide opportunities for children and their families to create their own books and include them among the classroom resources and materials.
- 7. I encourage and provide opportunities for children and their families to share experiences through storytelling, puppets, marionettes, or other props.
- 8. I plan trips and community outings to places where children and their families can learn about their own cultural or ethnic history as well as the history of others.

- \_\_\_ 9. I select videos, films or other media resources that are culturally diverse to share with children and families in my classroom or program.
- \_\_\_ 10. I play a variety of music and introduce musical instruments from many cultures.
- \_\_\_ 11. I insure that classroom meals include foods that are unique to the cultural and ethnic backgrounds of children in my classroom or program.
- \_\_\_ 12. I provide opportunities for children to cook or sample a variety of foods from culturally diverse groups.
- \_\_\_ 13. If my classroom or program consists entirely of children and families from the same cultural or ethnic group, I feel it is important to plan an environment and implement activities that reflect the cultural diversity within my country or society.
- \_\_\_ 14. I recognize and ensure that curricula I use include traditional holidays celebrated by my country/society as well as those that are celebrated by the culturally diverse children and families in my classroom or program.

### **COMMUNICATION STYLE**

- \_\_\_ 15. For children who speak another language, I attempt to learn and use key words in their language so that I am better able to communicate with them.
- \_\_\_ 16. I use visual aids, gestures, and physical prompts in my interactions with children who are not proficient in the dominant language of my country or society.
- \_\_\_ 17. When interacting with parents who are not proficient in the language of the dominant culture in my country or society I keep in mind that:
  - limitations in language proficiency is in no way a reflection of their level of intellectual functioning.
  - their limited ability to speak the language of the dominant culture has no bearing on their ability to communicate effectively in their own language of origin.

- they may or may not be literate in their language of origin or the language of the dominant culture.

- \_\_\_ 18. When possible, I ensure that all notices and communiqués to parents are written in their language of origin.
- \_\_\_ 19. I understand that it may be necessary to use alternatives to written communications for some families, as word of mouth may be a customary or preferred method of exchanging information.
- \_\_\_ 20. I use bilingual volunteers or staff to serve as interpreters for meetings, conferences, or other events for parents who would require this level of assistance.
- \_\_\_ 21. I avoid correcting the language expressions of children who speak a non-standard dialect.
- \_\_\_ 22. I accept and recognize the differences between language used at school and at home.
- \_\_\_ 23. I encourage and invite parents to volunteer and assist in classroom or program activities regardless of their ability to speak the language of the dominant culture.

### **VALUES AND ATTITUDE**

- \_\_\_ 24. I avoid imposing values which may conflict or be inconsistent with those of cultures or ethnic groups other than my own.
- \_\_\_ 25. I discourage children from using racial and ethnic slurs by helping them understand that certain words can hurt others.
- \_\_\_ 26. I screen books, movies, and other media resources for negative cultural, ethnic, or racial stereotypes before sharing them with children in my classroom or program and their parents.
- \_\_\_ 27. I provide activities to help children learn about and accept the differences and similarities in all people as an ongoing component of program curricula.
- \_\_\_ 28. I intervene in an appropriate manner when I observe other staff engaging in behaviors which show cultural insensitivity.
- \_\_\_ 29. I recognize and accept that individuals from culturally diverse backgrounds may desire varying degrees of acculturation into the dominant culture.

- \_\_\_ 30. I accept and respect that male-female roles in families may vary significantly among different cultures (e.g., who makes major decisions for the family, play and social interactions expected of male and female children).
- \_\_\_ 31. Even though my professional or moral viewpoint may differ, I accept the family/parents as the ultimate decision-makers for services and supports for their children.
- \_\_\_ 32. I recognize that the meaning or value of education may vary greatly among cultures.
- \_\_\_ 33. I accept that religion and other beliefs may influence how families respond to illnesses, disabilities, and death.
- \_\_\_ 34. I understand that traditional approaches to disciplining children are influenced by culture.
- \_\_\_ 35. I accept and respect that customs and beliefs about food, its value, preparation, and use are different from culture to culture.
- \_\_\_ 36. I advocate for the review of my program's mission statement, goals, policies, and procedures to ensure that they incorporate principles and practices that promote cultural diversity and cultural competence.

### **How to use this checklist**

This checklist is intended to heighten the sensitivity of personnel to the importance of cultural diversity and cultural competence in early intervention and early childhood settings. It provides concrete examples of the kinds of practices which foster such an environment. There is no answer key with correct responses. However, if you frequently responded "C", you may not be engaging in practices that promote a culturally diverse and culturally competent learning environment for children and families in your program.

Developed by T.D. Taylor, Early Childhood Special Educator, Georgetown University Child Development Center, University Affiliated Program, Washington, D.C. (June, 1989, revised 1993.) Adapted for CRI, February, 1995.