

GUIDANCE MATTERS

Dan Gartrell



The Beauty of Class Meetings

WHEN STUDENT TEACHING in a second grade classroom last spring, Julie noticed that the children were having problems during bathroom breaks.

Some students crawled under stalls and locked the doors, stood on top of sinks, threw water, and took too long to return to class. My first response was to give consequences to the children who I thought were doing these things, but this led to finger-pointing because there were always children involved who didn't get caught. On a particularly rough day, we held a class meeting to discuss the problem and come up with a solution. Everyone sat in a circle, since the children were used to sharing in this way in morning meeting.

Me: I want to talk about our bathroom breaks. I'll pass around the talking stick, and you'll have a chance to share. On this round of sharing, I want you to say in one or two sentences how you think bathroom breaks have been going.

Maria: Bad, because we're all goofing around.

Justin: I don't like it when we all get in trouble, because not all of us are being bad.

Brad: I think other teachers are getting mad because we're always loud.

Torii: It makes me mad when I have to go to the bathroom and the doors are locked, and I have to crawl on the gross floor [to unlock a door].

Me (after the class shared): Now I'm going to give everyone a chance to say one thing they think they could do to make bathroom breaks go better (*passing the talking stick around again*).

Trevor: Not stand on the toilets.

Brad: Pick up the paper towels.

Me: I know Patty [our janitor] would really appreciate that. She already does so much to help us keep our building clean.

Maria: I think we should all try to use quiet voices. We should just do our business and get out.

Jinada: If there are three people in there, we should come out.

Me: I think it would help a lot if people would remember our rule about only having three students in the bathroom at a time. Thanks for reminding us about that, Jinada.

Justin: Maybe we should have a *quiet* contest in the halls!

Me: These are all really good ideas! I'm going to write them down on a poster, and tomorrow before our bathroom break we'll go over them to make sure we remember our plan.

The children had as much time as they needed to express their feelings and suggest solutions. I offered brief reminders of our plan over the next few days. The bathroom breaks became much less stressful for all of us!

Encouraging classrooms are classroom communities in which all children are valued members and learn to solve their problems. Teachers who make their classrooms encouraging rely on social problem solving: guidance talks with individual children, conflict mediation with children in small groups, and class meetings if many are involved. When situations include many children, teachers, like Julie in the anecdote above, often do not know exactly who was involved. Group punishments—typically used when a teacher doesn't know who is to blame—demean the group and create negative dynamics among the children. Class meetings, as Julie's anecdote shows, allow all children (including those involved) to become participating citizens who together can solve the problem.

For class meetings to be successful, teachers need to be proactive leaders. As Julie did, it is important for teachers to put aside personal feelings about blame (and work privately with the individuals involved). Teachers should hold class meetings regularly before problems develop. With the children, teachers can create and reinforce a few guidelines for meeting etiquette, such as these:

- Everyone has a chance to speak.
- We listen to each other.
- We treat all with respect.

Dan Gartrell, EdD, is director of the Child Development Training Program and professor of early childhood and elementary education at Bemidji State University in northern Minnesota. A former Head Start teacher, Dan is the author of *The Power of Guidance, A Guidance Approach for the Encouraging Classroom*, and *What the Kids Said Today*.

Please send your guidance anecdotes and other comments to dgartrell@bemidjistate.edu. Thanks to young Minnesota teacher Julie Gronquist for sharing her experience with class meetings. Children's names in all anecdotes are changed.

Illustration by Patrick Cavanagh.

This column is available online in *Beyond the Journal*, November 2006, at www.journal.naeyc.org/btj.

Sometimes, using a revered prop such as a talking stick to signify who is speaking reminds all others to listen.

To actually solve problems through the meetings, I suggest that teachers follow a five-step procedure: (1) calm everyone, including themselves if necessary, and orient the children to the process; (2) define the problem cooperatively; (3) brainstorm possible solutions together; (4) decide together on a plan using the solutions suggested; (5) take an active role in guiding the plan's implementation. Julie clearly followed all five steps and turned a budding crisis into a class accomplishment.

Class meetings are a regular activity in many preschool and primary classrooms and are vital components of such education models as the Responsive Classroom (Kriete & Bechtel 2002). Meetings may occur once or twice a day (opening and ending) for group conversations and discussions of routines and events; or they may take place less frequently, like once a week. Teachers most fully realize the worth of class meetings when they use them to resolve public problems and conflicts that affect the whole group. Sometimes teachers hold class meetings beyond those regularly scheduled to address such issues.

For children, the values of class meetings are many. A common phobia in our society is a fear of public speaking. Class meetings encourage not just the development of a wide range of language skills, but confidence in using them. Because topics discussed are of high interest, speaking and listening skills develop through the meetings.

Another vital contribution is that class meetings, when led with sensitivity by the teacher, build empathy in children. A favorite anecdote of mine indicates this ability. In a Head Start class, a four-year-old who had needed crutches progressed to using a leg brace. On the first day that Charlie wore the leg brace, it squeaked. Children began calling him "Squeaky

Leg Charlie." The teacher talked with Charlie, and the next day he willingly gave the class a demonstration. The children listened and looked at and touched his new brace. They and the teacher talked about how fine it was that Charlie no longer needed crutches. The name-calling stopped. On a day thereafter, the children's teacher was out of town at a workshop. The assistant later told the teacher that two children had approached the substitute and explained, "Charlie's got a new leg brace. It squeaks, but he gets around on it really good."

Meetings to solve common problems have a rich history in the United States, going back to township meetings in colonial times and Native American gatherings before that. No other educational practice prepares children for citizenship in a democracy like class meetings. If done well, they tell children "My ideas matter" and "I'm glad I belong to this group." What a positive message to give to a child! What a positive way for educators to affirm the democratic ideal that our society is still striving to attain.

Class meetings model and teach democratic citizenship. Like nothing else, class meetings sustain encouraging classrooms. They are vital to developmentally appropriate early childhood education, and the references suggest we cannot start them too early.

To increase your knowledge

All of the books cited in References offer useful ideas. The Gartrell and Vance and Weaver books address preschool as well as primary grade levels. These *Young Children* articles also provide useful ideas:

Harris, T.T., & J.D. Fuqua. 2000. What goes around comes around: Building a community of learners through circle times. *Young Children* 55 (1): 44–47.

McClurg, L.G. 1998. Building an ethical community in the classroom: Community meeting. *Young Children* 53 (2): 30–35.

A step you can take

While reading about class meetings, note ideas you think might work with the children in your group. Discuss them with fellow staff. Try holding class meetings for a few weeks. Review what is working and what you would like to change, and try them again. Think about what you learned from the experience, about the children and about yourself.

References

- Gartrell, D. 2004. Sustaining the encouraging classroom: Class meetings. In *The power of guidance: Teaching social-emotional skills in early childhood classrooms*, 93–105. Clifton Parks, NY: Thomson/Delmar; Washington, DC: NAEYC.
- Kriete, R., & I. Bechtel. 2002. *The morning meeting book*. Strategies for Teachers series. Turners Falls, MA: Northeast Foundation for Children.
- Vance, E., & P.J. Weaver. 2002. *Class meetings: Young children solving problems together*. Washington, DC: NAEYC.

Copyright © 2006 by the National Association for the Education of Young Children. See Permissions and Reprints online at www.journal.naeyc.org/about/permissions.asp.

Index of Advertisers

Ann Kare/93
Bright Horizons/97
Child Care Information Exchange—World Forum/99
Core Knowledge/77
Crayola/19
CreativeCurriculum.net/78
Creative Pre-K/100
CTB McGraw-Hill/21
Environments/3
Erikson/Inside back cover
Highlights for Children/29
HighReach Learning/95
Kansas State University/47
Kaplan Early Learning Company/53
Kendall College/91
Macmillan/McGraw-Hill/43
NACCRR/1
NAESP (National Association of Elementary School Principals)/67
National Center for Learning Disabilities/9 and Back cover
Old Dominion University/Inside front cover
Pacific Oaks College/51
Pearson Assessments/83
Pearson Early Learning/5
Milliken Play'nWash/33
Project Construct/49
Research Press/85
Riverside Publishing/57
SRA/McGraw-Hill/59
School Kids Healthcare/87
Sopris West Educational Services/63
Teaching Strategies/7
Thomas Built Buses/11