

# Democratic Life Skill 3

## Solving Problems Creatively—Independently and in Cooperation With Others

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 3 is the focus of this column and the following vignettes.

Jolie and Aubrea, two 4-year-olds who had been quarreling only a half hour earlier, are playing together with colored beads on a light board. At Jolie's friendly request, Aubrea gives her blue, green, and pink beads.

**Jolie** (*holding a bead*): Okay, where's this supposed to go?

**Aubrea** (*softly*): Okay, okay, that one goes ...

**Jolie** (*begins to put the bead in a nearby row on the light board*): Does it go here?

**Aubrea**: No, it goes ... here.

Jolie gives Aubrea the bead, and Aubrea places it in a row close to her.

**Jolie** (*placing beads next to the others in that row*): And this one goes right ... here? And this one goes right here. Okay, we have filled that part. Now what do we have to do?

For the next 15 minutes, the two girls make designs together with the beads.

Brian, wearing an orange construction hat, sits on the carpet in the construction area of the prekindergarten classroom. Using a toy hammer, he pounds a large green peg into a plastic strip. Isaiah, working on the other side of a bin full of construction pieces, says, "We're gonna make a house." Brian comments softly, "I'm making a house."

Isaiah says, "Now I need that—the hammer.

Now I need it." When Brian sets the hammer down to look for more parts in the bin, Isaiah grabs it and smiles. Brian objects, "Hey, I need it!"

Isaiah says, "I need it to snap this in," and hammers a green rod into a plastic strip. He quickly finishes and hands the hammer back to Brian: "Here you go." Brian says, "Thank you." Isaiah says, "Yup."

Both boys continue working separately. After a while, Isaiah moves around the bin and picks up a second structure Brian had been working on. "You make this?" Brian grabs at it with his free hand and says, "Don't, you. Don't!" He shakes the piece he is holding at Isaiah and makes jabbing gestures and threatening noises.

Isaiah puts down the structure and backs away: "Don't, it's going to break and hit people." Brian moves his "weapon" away from Isaiah. Isaiah cautiously sits down and says, "Okay."

Isaiah gingerly moves over beside Brian, and the two boys begin to join their structures together. Brian, singing to himself, hammers in the last connector and says, "There you go."

Together, the two boys carry the finished structure to the teacher. Isaiah beams. Another child walks up to them, looks at the construction, and says, "Cool!"

These two vignettes from Deb Gilbertson's Head Start classroom happened on a single day in April. They exemplify democratic life skill 3: "Solving problems creatively—Independently and in cooperation with others." When Deb viewed video clips of these vignettes, she grinned when she saw that the two girls who had been in conflict earlier were now playing together. And she was elated that the two boys could manage a dispute and work together. Deb commented that all four children had made significant personal gains during their year before kindergarten.

### Reflection, vignette one

The Guidance Matters column in the March 2013 issue of *Young Children* focused on democratic life skill 2, "Expressing strong emotions in nonhurting ways."

In the vignette in that column, the same Aubrea and Jolie had a conflict over a wand. Aubrea made fists and yelled at Jolie, “I will never play with you again, ever!” In the present vignette, shortly after their argument the two girls are playing together with beads and a light board. There is no doubt that the problem solving in the girls’ cooperative, creative experience here goes deeper than just deciding where colored beads should be placed.

Young children—like all of us—have conflicting feelings when forced to apologize (Gartrell 2012). But after the hurt of a disagreement passes—often (as in the case of Aubrea and Jolie and the wand) via the good guidance of a teacher—most children are ready to make up and move on. Children tend to reconcile their differences without formal ceremony. But they do so more easily if they experience the coaching of an early childhood professional who over time models and teaches the skills of cooperative problem solving and reconciling differences.

During their cooperative play, Aubrea gave Jolie her choice of beads, and Jolie deferred to Aubrea’s views on where the beads should be placed. It seemed like Aubrea and Jolie were each trying to remind the other that they could be trustworthy and could once again be friends. The

real problem they were solving was not about patterns, but about getting over the anger and hurt of the wand incident and getting on with the business of using their minds together. As children make gains with these fundamental social-emotional capacities, they build creative thinking skills through ongoing experiences in a developmentally appropriate classroom (Hyson 2008). Nothing promotes reconciliation and significant learning like friendly sharing in a creative activity.

### Reflection, vignette two

Deb commented that until fairly recently, if Brian had swung a “weapon” at Isaiah like that, Isaiah would have retaliated physically. Because of his progress with democratic life skill 2 over the year, Isaiah was able to shift his priorities. By his actions with Brian—sharing the hammer and getting Brian to calm down and refocus his energy—Isaiah transformed parallel play into cooperative play. During cooperative play and activities, individuals typically encounter some conflicts (expressed disagreements). As children learn to manage their emotions in such situations, they experience rewards in both the process and results of the creative activity they share.

## New Online Training From NAEYC

# Documenting Quality: A Teacher’s Guide to Creating a Classroom Portfolio

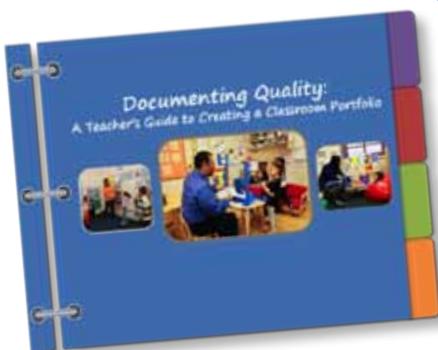
Discover [best practices](#), organization tips, and practical strategies for creating a classroom portfolio. Take an in-depth look at classroom portfolios to better understand what they are and how they’re put together. View examples of classroom portfolio evidence and work with sample documentation in hands-on learning activities.

An [excellent resource](#) for programs pursuing NAEYC Accreditation of Programs for Young Children, **Documenting Quality** explains and demonstrates the value of well-made classroom portfolios.

NAEYC’s online courses provide Continuing Education Units (CEUs).

List: \$75 • Member: \$60 **20% savings**

**Order online at [learn.naeyc.org](http://learn.naeyc.org)**



**naeyc**<sup>®</sup>



Solving problems creatively is perhaps *the* essential brain-building activity for young children (Hyson 2008). Developmentally appropriate practice offers the continuous benefits of the intrigue, engagement, persistence, and gratification inherent in creative problem solving. Young children need to play for the sake of playing, create for the sake of creating, and solve problems in authentic ways that relate to their current perceptions of the world (Copple 2012). Brian’s singing and saying “There you go” as he makes the final connection, and Isaiah’s beaming to the teacher as he helps carry the creation, signify the emotional, social, cognitive, and physical problems surmounted by the boys—and the personal benefits gained by each.

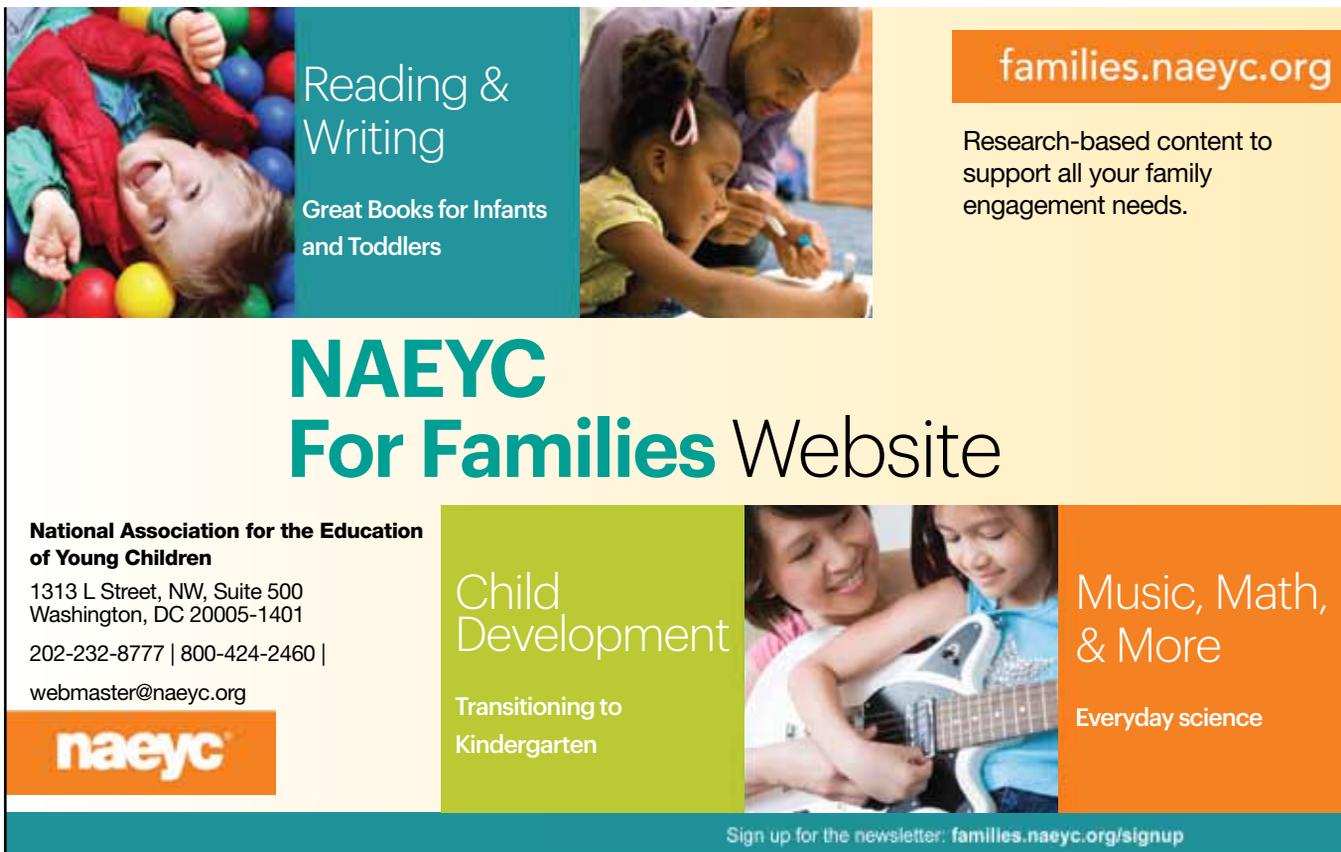
**Nurturing creativity**

As a teacher builds trusting relationships with children, children’s stress levels go down, their trust levels go up, and they begin to realize all that they can accomplish in an encouraging classroom. Children frequently problem solve without the involvement of peers. An example is Cynthia, a 4-year-old who mixed the pieces of five easy puzzles together to make finding pieces more challenging and then completed each in just a few minutes. Teachers need to recognize the essential brain-building

function of individual creativity and problem solving, which often appear (almost by definition) in unconventional ways.

**Solving problems creatively is perhaps *the* essential brain-building activity for young children.**

Along with others (Hyson 2008; Copple 2012), I maintain that lifelong capacities begin in young children with ongoing opportunities to engage with books, writing and art, music, building materials, physical activities, and technology. Teachers who nurture independent activities in such areas touch the lifetimes of children. An early childhood professional who brings in more complex puzzles for Cynthia (and other children) is an example. The adult might encourage Cynthia both to complete the new puzzles on her own *and* to scaffold her perceptual acuity by completing them with others. Teachers can nudge, but should not push, individual children adept at independent problem solving to interact with others. There is inherent value in a capacity for creative problem solving for the child both alone and in social situations with others.



Reading & Writing  
Great Books for Infants and Toddlers

families.naeyc.org

Research-based content to support all your family engagement needs.

**NAEYC For Families Website**

**National Association for the Education of Young Children**  
1313 L Street, NW, Suite 500  
Washington, DC 20005-1401  
202-232-8777 | 800-424-2460 |  
webmaster@naeyc.org



Child Development  
Transitioning to Kindergarten



Music, Math, & More  
Everyday science

Sign up for the newsletter: [families.naeyc.org/signup](http://families.naeyc.org/signup)

## The early childhood predicament

**Three-year-old Henri makes a Father's Day card with corkscrew circular scribble on the front and personal script (scribble writing) inside. A teacher offers to print Henri's written message at the bottom of the card, "because adults can't always read children's writing." Henri agrees and dictates, "Dad, you drive far every day. I like it when you get home."**

Young children are not yet ready for projects to produce preordained products (Copple & Bredekamp 2009). An illustration is having a class all make the same "Frosty the Snowman" picture after a late winter snow. Typically, many children say "teacher do it for me," or fail to complete the project on their own. Only a few make Frosty "right." Such projects undermine children's progress with democratic life skill 3 because in their minds, they replace the open possibilities of creative problem solving with the persistent illusion that there is just one way to solve a problem—the teacher's way. We don't want high school students to copy others' assignments. Why should we "teach" copying in early childhood by pushing the noncreative replication of adult-imposed end products?

Better to have children make their very own unique and creative pictures of what they like to do outside in the snow. Put open-ended materials in the art area—blue paper, chalk, cotton balls, glue, and markers. Sit back and enjoy the variety and the charm of the creative results. When the activity is open-ended, all can find meaning in their creative problem solving.

As illustrated nicely by Henri's Father's Day card, when teachers provide open-ended materials and the time and space needed to use them, young children work actively to solve creative, personal, and interpersonal problems. Such developmentally appropriate practice fosters children's progress and mastery of the third democratic life skill.

## References

- Copple, C., ed. 2012. *Growing Minds: Building Strong Cognitive Foundations in Early Childhood*. Washington, DC: NAEYC.
- Copple, C., & S. Bredekamp, eds. 2009. *Developmentally Appropriate Practice in Early Childhood Programs Serving Children From Birth Through Age 8*. 3rd ed. Washington, DC: NAEYC.
- Gartrell, D. 2012. *Education for a Civil Society: How Guidance Teaches Young Children Democratic Life Skills*. Washington, DC: NAEYC.
- Hyson, M. 2008. *Enthusiastic and Engaged Learners: Approaches to Learning in the Early Childhood Classroom*. New York: Teachers College Press; Washington, DC: NAEYC.

**Dan Gartrell**, EdD, is emeritus professor of early childhood and foundations 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, What the Kids Said Today*, and *Education for a Civil Society: How Guidance Teaches Young Children Democratic Life Skills* (published by NAEYC).

Thanks to the staff and parents of Mahube-Otwa Head Start in northern Minnesota, and especially to teacher Deb Gilbertson, of Detroit Lakes, for permission to use the opening vignettes.

Please send possible guidance anecdotes and other comments to [dgartrell@bemidjistate.edu](mailto:dgartrell@bemidjistate.edu).

A study guide for this article is available through [www.naeyc.org/memberlogin](http://www.naeyc.org/memberlogin).

Guidance Matters is available at [www.naeyc.org/yc/columns](http://www.naeyc.org/yc/columns).

Copyright © 2013 by the National Association for the Education of Young Children—1313 L Street NW, Suite 500, Washington, DC 20005. See Permissions and Reprints online at [www.naeyc.org/yc/permissions](http://www.naeyc.org/yc/permissions).

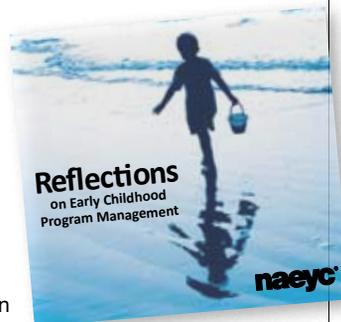
## New DVD from NAEYC!

### Reflections on Early Childhood Program Management

In this new DVD from NAEYC, hear from 11 early childhood experts as they share their words of wisdom covering

- > Elements of healthy organizations
- > Written policies and procedures
- > Human resources management
- > Financial management

This DVD is designed for individual or group use. A downloadable note-taking guide includes questions to encourage users to reflect on the topics addressed.



Item #: 8047 • List: \$50 • Member: \$40 **20% savings!**

Order online at [www.naeyc.org/store](http://www.naeyc.org/store).

**naeyc**<sup>®</sup>