

Democratic Life Skill 4

Accepting Unique Human Qualities in 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 4 is the focus of this column and the following vignettes.

Vignette 1

In a campus child care center one day at lunch, 4-year-old Martin comes to the table reluctantly when he sees that he will be sitting next to Brandon, who is American Indian. Martin says to Becca, an experienced student teacher, “I’m not sitting next to Brandon. He has dirty skin.”

Becca gives Brandon a hug and whispers in his ear, “You don’t have dirty skin, Brandon. People have different skin colors, and that’s a good thing. I am going to talk with Martin.” Becca walks over to Martin, kneels next to him, and says, “Brandon’s not dirty, Martin. He just has more color in his skin than you do. Lots of people have different skin colors, and that’s a good thing. What’s important in our class is that everyone is friendly to everyone.” As she says this, she guides Martin to his chair and continues, “Brandon, could you pass the milk to Martin?” Brandon does, and Martin reluctantly thanks him. After rest time, Martin and Brandon play together, which puts a big smile on Becca’s face.

Karla, the lead teacher, compliments Becca on her handling of the situation. Later that afternoon, when Martin’s dad picks him up, Karla notices Becca talking with him quietly in the hallway. Afterward, Karla asks Becca what the conversation was about. Becca says, “I told him that Martin had said that an-

other child who was American Indian had dirty skin. I thought Dad would want to know, so he could reinforce what we tell the children in our class: people are born with different skin colors; that’s natural, and what’s important is that we are all friendly and get along.”

The lead teacher reflects about whether a student teacher should be so bold in her comments to a parent. Karla concludes that by talking with the dad so forthrightly, Becca has done something she herself would have found difficult to do. When Martin arrives the next morning and plays again with Brandon, Karla recognizes the positive impact of Becca’s work.

Reflection

A *stigmatizing act* is an act of oppression by a member of a group that is intended to disqualify another from full membership in the group (Goffman 1963). Young children who attempt to stigmatize others mostly act intuitively: they find another child’s difference in appearance or behavior to be threatening, and as a result use verbal and/or physical aggression. Although Martin’s comment was directed to Becca rather than to Brandon, it was still a stigmatizing act.

In her response first to Brandon and then to Martin, Becca used what Derman-Sparks and Edwards (2010) call *anti-bias education*—what I refer to as *liberation teaching* (Gartrell 2012). Both terms involve the use of adult leadership to ensure that an early childhood community is an encouraging place for every member. Liberation teaching goes a step further by directly addressing the psychological/behavioral—not just the cultural/racial—factors that may be at play in an act of oppression. (When a child shows aggression, he or she tends to be stigmatized by others regardless of the cultural or racial circumstances [Ladd 2008].)

In other words, early childhood professionals who practice liberation teaching do not accept—and actively work to prevent—the stigmatization of any child for any reason. Educators are particularly attuned to children who may be vulnerable—in this case Brandon, but also (depending on the teacher’s response) Martin. Liberation teaching, which I consider the highest form of guid-

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ance, is the common element in each of the five democratic life skills (DLS). At any point in the development of social-emotional skills, children act in ways that have consequences for themselves. What the teacher helps the child learn from the consequences directly impacts the child's growing ability to find acceptance, express emotions, solve problems creatively, accept others, and act intelligently and ethically (DLS 1–5).

Becca's strong relationship with Brandon, as much as the words she whispered to him, helped him manage in an oppressive situation (DLS 2) and continue to feel accepted as a member of the group (DLS 1). Becca's forthright but friendly communications with Martin and his father—her ethical and intelligent actions (DLS 5)—were meant to encourage their unbiased, inclusive responses in the future (DLS 4).

Karla thinks about whether Becca's comments to Martin's father were appropriate, coming from a student teacher. In the 1991 edition of *Roots and Wings*, Stacey York explains “the power of silence.” In the context of education, the phrase refers to adults fearing to speak out when they witness stigmatizing acts by one member of a classroom community toward another. The lead teacher decided that Becca's comments were both appropriate and courageous,

and she said she would have thought so whatever the father's reaction.

In this decision, Karla used liberation teaching with Becca, supporting the student teacher's furthering of democratic life skill 4 and her practice of democratic life skill 5. At the same time, Karla was not sure she herself could have spoken up with Martin's father as Becca did. The successful use of a democratic life skill by one person tends to empower all in the social setting. Becca modeled for Karla a way to overcome the power of silence issue. By speaking with both Martin and his father, Becca demonstrated a fine use of liberation teaching, a use that perhaps even furthered abilities with democratic life skill 5 in the teacher!

Vignette 2

In Cindy's Head Start family child care home, all but two of the children are 3 years old or younger. Derrick, the one 5-year-old, has a sustained interest in the computer. Cindy and Derrick have an agreement: Derrick can use the computer each day during work time as long as he asks other children to join him. On this March morning, Derrick invites four different children. Two 3-year-olds stay briefly and then move on to other activities. Jerrod, a young 4-year-old, spends 10 minutes

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on the computer with Derrick. Jerrod is familiar with the computer activity, and the two play together until Jerrod leaves.

Then Alayna, 23 months old, joins Derrick. He patiently shows her the basics, and for five minutes he helps her play the game. Then Alayna stops playing. Instead, she sits and watches Derrick use the computer for another 10 minutes, with Derrick continuing to talk with her as he plays. When it is time to clean up and go outside, the two children turn off the computer and leave together.

Reflection

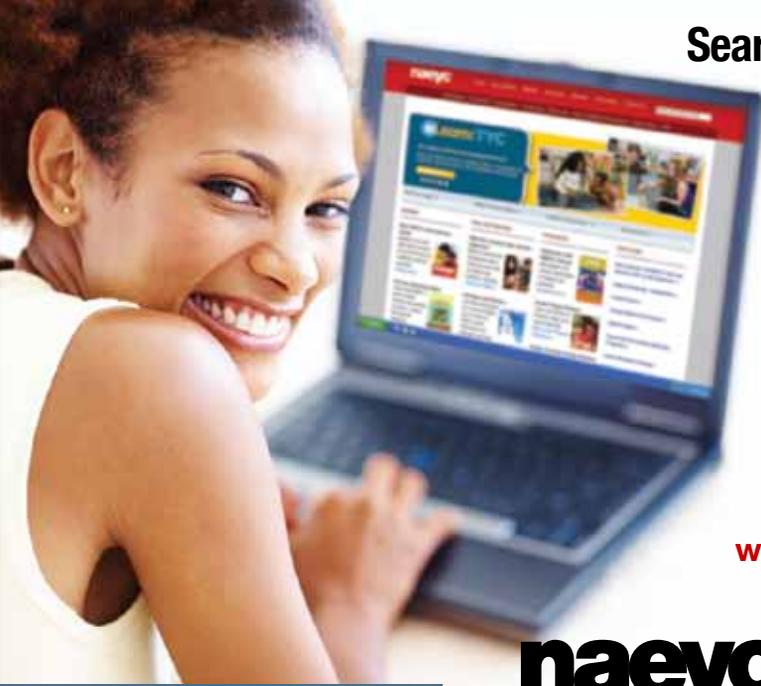
Excellent family child care providers create a friendly, family-like spirit inclusive of all. As suggested in Vignette 1, a foremost practice in teaching democratic life skill 4 is to provide buffering support to individual children who are vulnerable to being stigmatized. A second, equally essential, approach (also relevant in any early childhood setting) is to use curricula and teaching practices that encourage working together and cooperation between everyone in the group—between boys and girls and across all differences in age, culture, behavior, and appearance (Manaster & Jobe 2012). From day one

Cindy actively fostered a sense of mutual acceptance and personal worth in her group—in Derrick’s case, by helping him be a friendly leader with the younger children.

Cindy understood that Derrick enjoyed using the computer. But with society’s ubiquitous, ongoing use of digital devices among even preschoolers, some warn of growing unintended societal pressures toward “extreme individuation”—an identity formation process in some children that isolates the child from others (Elkind 2007; Levin 2013).

The joint position statement by NAEYC and the Fred Rogers Center for Early Learning and Children’s Media, “Technology and Interactive Media as Tools in Early Childhood Programs Serving Children From Birth Through Age 8” (2012), recommends that when children engage in digital activities, they do so often with other children rather than predominantly alone. Cindy used this developmentally appropriate practice with Derrick. He was allowed to use the computer on a regular basis, but he needed to clearly show cooperation in its use.

Each time Derrick explained an operation to others, he both scaffolded important learning for them and further developed his own cognitive, communication, and human relations skills. Derrick was receiving af-



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firmation as a leader in the conduct of these positive social endeavors—the complete mix needed for gaining democratic life skill 4.

A well-run family child care program teaches the acceptance of diversity across all members of the group. By guiding the children in her program to use the computer cooperatively, Cindy was using this high-status media device to teach them to accept others, whatever their unique human qualities (DLS 4). No teacher can control the stream of life children enter when they leave the early childhood program. But developmental brain research tells us that growing individuals have great difficulty mastering skill 4—and any of the democratic life skills—without an affirming foundation early in life (Shonkoff et al. 2011)

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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).

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Please send possible guidance anecdotes and other comments to dgartrell@bemidjistate.edu.

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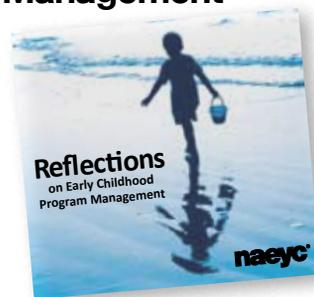
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