

# GUIDANCE MATTERS

Dan Gartrell

## Democratic Life Skill 1 Guiding Children to Find a Place

**D**emocratic life skills are social-emotional capacities that children need to be productive citizens and healthy individuals in a modern, diverse society. The construct for these skills comes from many sources. One helpful source is Maslow's concept of two coexisting sets of motivational needs in each individual: one set for security, belonging, and affection; the other set for exploration, learning, and growth (1962). Democratic life skills 1 and 2 (below) relate to the stronger motivational source—for physical and emotional security. As children attain skills 1 and 2, they become ready to make progress with skills 3, 4, and 5.

With this column we begin a series exploring the 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)

Skill 1 is the focus of this column and the following vignette:

Jen is lead teacher for a group of young Head Start children, most under 4, including Atreyu and Wyatt. After leading the group in morning song and welcoming Atreyu, she asks the children, "Do you think Atreyu is feeling happy or sad today?" A few children say sad. "Why do you think he is feeling sad?"

Someone suggests Atreyu is sick. Jen responds, "That would make me feel sad. I don't think he is sick. Atreyu is missing his mom today. So he is feeling sad. He might need a little extra friendliness today." Gail, a volunteer, rubs Atreyu's shoulders. He looks down the whole time, but does not object to being the focus of attention.

After singing the greeting song for Wyatt, Jen asks, "Wyatt, how do you

feel today?" Smiling, Wyatt says, "I got a blanket." Jen acknowledges, "Yes. Does that make you feel happy?" Wyatt exclaims, "Yeah!" He holds the blanket to his face and smiles.

A bit later, Jen and Atreyu stand by a horizontal time line. She is holding his hand and rings a bell: "It's clean-up time. Please put your toys away." Wyatt, also near Jen, is using two four-foot corner cardboard strips as ramps for his car. Wyatt falls to the floor, kicking and screaming.

Jen kneels down to Wyatt, keeping Atreyu close. "Wyatt, are you upset because it's clean-up time?" Wyatt continues to scream but stops kicking.

Jen helps Wyatt up: "My goodness, you have some deep feelings today." Again holding Atreyu's hand, she points to the time line: "Wyatt, I was just showing Atreyu that first we have circle and breakfast, then we will play outside." Jen shows Atreyu the end activity. "That's when your mom is coming to pick you up." Pointing to work time on the chart, Jen adds, "Look, Wyatt. At work time, you can use

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the ramps again.” Wyatt has quieted, listening to Jen, but cries again.

Jen says to Wyatt, “It looks like you aren’t done with the ramps. Do you want to put them someplace where you can get them at work time?” Wyatt walks away carrying one ramp. Still holding Atreyu’s hand, Jen takes the other ramp and says, “Let’s go with Wyatt to help him find a place for the ramps.” Jen and Atreyu walk together, holding the second ramp. The three put the ramps in a special place until work time. Atreyu still looks sad. Wyatt goes on to the next activity.

Later, during work time, both Wyatt and Atreyu play with the ramps, using cars then balls. Wyatt enjoys the activity nonstop for 40 minutes. Atreyu smiles for the first time that morning when his car goes down the ramp. When a third child, Mark, later takes Atreyu’s ball, Jen coaches Atreyu to say, “That’s my ball.” Mark gives Atreyu his ball back, and Jen asks Atreyu if he can help Mark find his own ball. Atreyu nods and goes with Mark to find a second ball.

## The good news

The first democratic life skill has two parts: finding an acceptable place as a member of the group and finding oneself as a worthy person. In young children, the two are closely linked. Within the family group, through secure attachments with one or more family members, the child feels safe and loved. With basic safety needs met, infants feel worthy and face new experiences with a sense of trust. The same dynamic applies in early childhood classrooms. As young children see themselves welcomed and supported in this new group, they feel a sense of belonging and, as a result, are empowered to develop positive self-identities (Ostrowsky & Jung 2003).

Jen, the teacher in the vignette, worked hard to help two very different 3-year-old boys feel welcome, accepted, and worthy. She used a morning song, the time line, and supportive responses to ensure that the

boys felt they belonged in the classroom. She used educational materials appropriate for their age and interests to nudge them toward growth, changing the plans for work time to do so. In this early childhood classroom, Atreyu and Wyatt were gaining in both parts of democratic life skill 1.

## The other news

My concern is that in a different classroom, these two boys might have been left out—and left behind. In 2005 a national study at Yale University documented that

- expulsions from preschools were three times higher than in K–12 classrooms;
- boys in preschool were 4.5 times more likely to be expelled than girls; and
- additional support resources for staff and mental health resources for children were needed to stem these trends (Gilliam 2005).

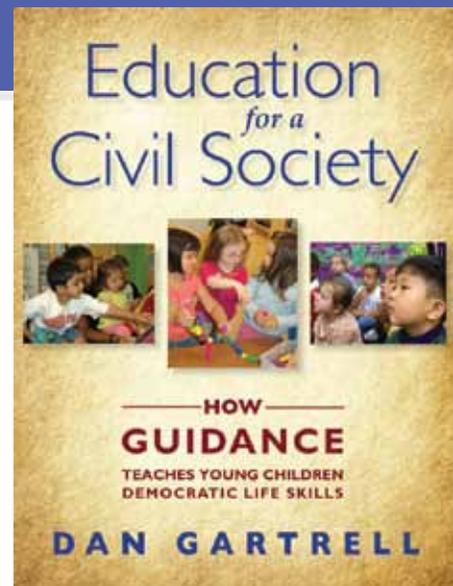
## NEW from NAEYC!

### Education for a Civil Society: How Guidance Teaches Young Children Democratic Life Skills

*Dan Gartrell*

It is essential that children gain, through teacher guidance, the democratic life skills, which are the social-emotional skills they need to succeed in and participate civilly in modern life. Part One establishes historical roots for the type of education that prepares children for this participation. Part Two makes the case that best practices in early childhood education offer the approach to education for democracy that society needs. Part Three provides an overview of the five democratic life skills including anecdotes that illustrate how guidance fosters the development of these important life skills.

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Kagan and Reid (2009) suggest that additional resources, including those kinds the Yale study called for, still are greatly needed. This means that in many programs, teachers would be dealing with the behaviors shown in the vignette—commonly called “challenging”—on their own, without support. (Atreyu had experienced trauma before he and his mother came to this community and was dealing with the aftermath on a daily basis. Jen reports that this was a typical day for both boys.)

In programs attuned to developmentally appropriate practice, and with adequate support for a teaching staff (as in Jen’s class), teachers help children like Wyatt and Atreyu with democratic life skill 1 every day. But due to the resource issues indicated, along with pressures to get preschool children ready for the academic and behavioral expectations of public schools (Rose 2004; Wolk 2008), some preschools would consider these two boys to be liabilities, and they might fall into psychological, and perhaps physical, rejection (Gilliam 2005).

Tyre (2009) and Gurian and Stevens (2004) suggest reasons that a new education gender gap disfavoring boys tends to start in the early childhood years: Most preschool boys do not have the sensory integration and task-persistence skills of most young girls. Many boys are geared for active/interactive learning experiences, involving big body movement on a sustained basis (Carlson 2011). In reaction to an emphasis on narrowly defined academic achievement prevalent nationally at the K–12 levels (Wolk 2008), some preschools feel pressure to emphasize “readiness” skills such as following directions, listening and responding in large groups, and doing extended seatwork.

Adults in these preschools may be influenced toward a skewed interpretation of developmentally appropriate practice, as pertaining to most children in the class but not to those unable to master the emphasized skills (Wolk 2008). Rather than look for reasons these children cannot master the skills,

preschool personnel may dismiss them as “not ready” for their programs.

Nelson and Shikwambi (2010) make the case that male teachers, since they were once boys themselves, may be intuitively responsive to young boys with respect to developmental characteristics, activity levels, curriculum adaptations, and patterns of conflict. Johnson (2008) makes the case that more male teachers at all levels would benefit both boys and girls.

But this is not to say (in any way) that many female teachers do not relish having active young boys in their classes. They do, and they adjust their curriculum and responses accordingly—just as Jen did. To help all children find a place in the classroom and see themselves as worthy individuals (particularly young boys), educators of both genders need to bring classrooms into the twenty-first century (Thomas & Seely Brown 2011).

To this end I suggest the following:

- Readiness is a state of mind, more than a state of knowledge.
- To make classrooms developmentally appropriate for all, they should be less like quiet libraries and more like summer camp.

For many reasons, increased activity levels and a heightened priority on human relationships benefit both young girls and boys (Ostrowsky & Jung 2003; Carlson 2011). Not the least of these reasons is to assist children with democratic life skill 1.

## Summing up

Atreyu was dealing with serious separation issues in his first experience away from a mom who is his foundation of love and security, including during trying times. Wyatt found transitions difficult due to the particular perception process he brings to life experiences. Jen supported both children, whose behavior might cause them to be vulnerable to adult rejection. Instead, by feeling accepted as worthy members of their class, the boys are progressing in building positive per-

sonal identities, making steps toward attaining the first democratic life skill.

Democratic life skills are the subject of my book *Education for a Civil Society: How Guidance Teaches Young Children Democratic Life Skills*, published by NAEYC. NAEYC will also offer a related e-book, including video clips that are the basis of the vignettes in this series on the democratic life skills.

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