With this column we conclude 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—indepenently and in cooperation with others
4. Accepting unique human qualities in others
5. Thinking intelligently and ethically (Gartrell 2012)

Life skill 5 is the focus of this column and the following vignettes.

**Vignette 1**

As another child gets off a trike, 3-year-old Raul gets on it. He is in the right place at the right time to ride. However, Dmitri, almost 5, is signed up for the trikes, and he is next on the list. Raul forgot to sign up.

Facing Raul, Dmitri straddles the front wheel of the trike and tries to persuade Raul that it is his turn. Raul yells no and screams when Dmitri grabs his arm and forces him off the trike. Across the room, teacher Kaisha sees the incident.

As Dmitri rides off, he looks over his shoulder and sees Kaisha tending to Raul, whose screams have become howls. Dmitri makes a U-turn and rides back. He gets off the trike and offers it to Raul, explaining to the teacher, “He is crying loud, and he needs it.”

Kaisha tells Raul that Dmitri is returning the trike, and she asks Raul whether he still wants to ride. Raul nods and gets back on the trike. The teacher says, “Remember, it’s Dmitri’s turn when you are done.”

Kaisha sits on the floor with Dmitri, and the two have a guidance talk. She invites Dmitri to give his view of what happened. The two talk about how younger preschoolers are just learning the routines, and they brainstorm what Dmitri could do next time instead of taking the trike. Kaisha thanks Dmitri for coming back and offering the trike to Raul. She tells him it was a thoughtful and helpful thing to do.

Kaisha oversees the trike exchange when Raul tires of riding. She asks Dmitri and Raul if they can say something friendly to each other. Dmitri apologizes, and with Kaisha’s help, Raul thanks Dmitri for letting him ride. Kaisha reminds the 3-year-old to sign up for the trikes next time, and notes to herself that she will help him do so.

**Reflection**

This anecdote illustrates young children’s beginning development of perspective taking—the high-level ability to see things from another’s point of view. Humans work on the twin capacities of perspective taking—perceiving how another views a situation and empathizing with how that person feels—their entire lives. Perspective taking is central to the ability to use democratic life skill 5 (DLS 5).

Typical of the social and emotional development of many preschoolers, Dmitri seemed to be thinking mostly about himself, especially at the beginning of the conflict. When he heard the younger child’s wails and realized how Raul felt, Dmitri empathized with Raul and tried to improve the situation. Kaisha saw Dmitri’s new awareness as an opportunity to teach democratic life skill 5, “Thinking intelligently and ethically.”

Kaisha’s decision to let Dmitri ride the trike when Raul was done reflected her application of guidance to the situation. Dmitri did not suffer the “logical consequence” of losing his trike-riding privilege for forcing the younger child off the trike. Instead, the teacher used guidance to help him look honestly at the conflict and think about a better way to handle such a situation. The teacher also encouraged Dmitri to make amends to Raul.

Kaisha conveyed to Dmitri that she believed in his progress in thinking intelligently and ethically. She built on their relationship to encourage him to continue making progress. Kaisha hoped her guidance would help Dmitri apply life skill 5 at the beginning of a conflict the next time. She also reminded Raul about his responsibility, as a member of the classroom community, to follow the sign-up routine for a turn on the trikes (DLS 1).

**Vignette 2**

Ansha and Lena are from different neighborhoods and different cultural backgrounds. But despite
these differences, or perhaps because of them, the two 4-year-olds are best friends. They hug each other when they arrive in the morning and hug each other when they leave in the afternoon. They play together frequently.

Lena has very long hair. It is so long it comes almost to her waist. Her mom keeps it brushed and sometimes braided. One Friday afternoon, the two girls hug goodbye, and Lena goes home with her sister, who is in her late teens—her mom has gone out of town for the weekend and the older sister is in charge. Lena’s sister has just started cosmetology school, and on Monday Lena arrives in the classroom with a blue buzz cut!

The teachers see Lena and stand with their mouths open. They have no idea what to say. Lena walks over to Ansha, hugs her hello, and asks, “What do you think of my new haircut?” Ansha looks at her friend’s hair, starts to say something, then changes her mind. She tells Lena, “I’m still getting used to it.” “Me too,” says Lena, and the two go off to play.

The teaching team already knows Ansha is very together, but they learn just how together she is during this exchange. This morning Ansha has modeled what to say for all the adults in the room!

Reflection
Lena’s long hair was a physical feature so established in everyone’s mind that a blue buzz cut shocked the entire class. Ansha, knowing that her response would mean a lot to Lena, decided against her initial impulse to blurt out her opinion. Instead she said something that showed both honesty and caring about her friend’s feelings—and that is what perspective taking is all about. At age 4, Ansha was thinking ethically and intelligently.

The staff had long been aware of Ansha’s warm and secure attachments with her family members, which is important for the development of democratic life skill 5. Having secure attachments with caring adults promotes the development of the brain’s executive function—that is, the realm of the brain that enables people to take others’ perspectives, manage their impulses, engage in learning, and ultimately interact successfully with others. Young children can attain life skill 5 only when healthy relationships help keep stressors in check and when development of the executive function allows children to respond thoughtfully to others.

Caring adults need to be sensitive to children’s attempts to think intelligently and ethically. When adults observe children’s behaviors that they consider domineering or interfering, they can guide children to modify such behaviors in positive ways—think budding leadership and empathy. As adults help children experience success with early prosocial efforts, children begin to establish a foundation for thinking ethically and intelligently (Cozolino 2006). To paraphrase Ginott (1972), a child must feel right to do right.

Early childhood professionals encourage progress toward democratic life skill 5 when they model and teach perspective taking with early learners. This is so especially when children struggle with life skills 1 (finding acceptance as a member of the group and as a worthy individual) and 2 (expressing strong emotions in nonhurting ways). Positive adult–child relationships help children meet their basic needs for safety and belonging (DSL 1 and 2) and progress in their emotional and social growth (DLS 3, 4, and 5).

As John Dewey and Jean Piaget maintained, the ability to think intelligently and ethically is a critical goal in progressive education for learners of all ages (Gartrell 2012). Now, at the conclusion of Guidance Matters columns addressing the five democratic life skills, I offer one message in particular for readers to consider: Education for the whole child, including the emotional and social domains, is education for democracy—in this century and for the next. The field of early childhood education, in teaching and in authentic assessment, has led the way in education that, in developmentally appropriate ways, nurtures and empowers children. We must continue to lead in this essential endeavor, helping us all to continue on this amazing human journey.

References


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). Note that the names in the vignettes have been changed. Please send possible guidance anecdotes and other comments to dgartrell@bemidjistate.edu.

Guidance Matters is available online at www.naeyc.org/yc/columns.

Copyright © 2014 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.
testing at a local AEYC meeting (or a meeting of another association concerned with early childhood education), and provide written or oral testimony regarding legislation relating to testing.

Materials from advocacy groups such as Defending the Early Years (www.defyproject.org) can also help teachers stay up-to-date on current developments, and get involved in public efforts to protect young children from the potential ill effects of inappropriate assessments. In all of these efforts, teachers can share the fact that multiple measures provide a better sense of a child’s development and help to shape effective curriculum.

We hope that reading this dilemma will encourage early childhood educators to consider the ethical dimensions of assessing young children, particularly in the area of testing academic achievement. We encourage you to add your voice to those of other advocates committed to ensuring that assessment is beneficial for children and does not put them at risk from potentially harmful practices.

New Ethical Issue—
 Reporting Classroom Behavior

Our-year-old Joseph’s use of aggressive behavior has been a challenge for the past month. Joe’s 6-year-old brother, Michael, has been developing a plan with his coteacher and director to help him channel his energy and emotions in more positive directions. Arlene was glad when Joseph’s behavior improved and that this family’s approach to discipline is quite harsh.

Arlene was concerned about this request because she suspects that the family’s approach to discipline is quite harsh.

Arlene reminded Arlene how important it is to her and her husband that Joseph behave in school. Victoria asked Arlene to report to her immediately if Joseph misbehaved so that they can punish him. Arlene is concerned about this request because she suspects that this family’s approach to discipline is quite harsh, based on her previous conversations with Victoria and her observations of how the family interacted during a recent supper held at the school.

To resolve this dilemma, follow Steps 1–6 as presented on pages 85–86. When you have completed your analysis and come up with a proposed course of action for Arlene, send an email to the coeditors. Include your recommendation and a brief description of how you combined the Code (and, if necessary, the Supplement for Program Administrators) and your professional judgment to reach this resolution.

Stephanie Feeney, PhD, is professor emerita of education at the University of Hawaii at Manoa. She has served on the governing boards of NAEC and the National Association for Early Childhood Teacher Educators (NAECTE). She has written extensively about professionalism and ethics and since the 1980s she has been involved in developing and teaching the NAEC’s Code of Ethical Conduct. Feeney@hawaii.edu

Nancy K. Freeman, PhD, is professor emerita of early childhood education at the University of South Carolina in Columbia. For many years she chaired the Governor’s Committee on the Regulation of Child Care Facilities, has served as president of NAECTE, and was recognized as the 2012 Outstanding Early Childhood Teacher Educator by NAECTE. nkucer@gmail.com

Focus on Ethics is available at www.naeyc.org/yc/columns.

Copyright © 2013 by the National Association for the Education of Young Children. See Permissions and Reprints online at www.naeyc.org/yc/permissions.

Respond to this dilemma

This column is designed to involve the readers of Young Children. Email your proposed resolution to Arlene’s situation to the coeditors. Be sure to use the subject line “NAEC Ethics.” Responses should be no more than 500 words and must be received by April 28, 2014. Our analysis will appear in the September 2014 issue.

...or send us one from your experience

We hope you will share with us an ethical dilemma you have encountered in your workplace to be considered for presentation in this column. Send a short (400–500 words) description of the situation to the coeditors. Be sure to use the subject line “NAEC Ethics.”

Contact the coeditors by email: Stephanie Feeney at feeney@hawaii.edu and Nancy Freeman at nkucer@gmail.com.

References


Your leadership development gifts at work

Donations to NAECY’s Building a Lasting Legacy Campaign support scholarships, fellowships, professional development initiatives, public affairs initiatives, resource material development, and Affiliate services.

For more information and to make a contribution, please visit www.naeyc.org/legacy or contact Kathleen Cassidy Donahue at NAECY: phone 800-424-2460, ext. 8824, or email kdonafo@naeyc.org.

Thank you. Your contributions can influence early childhood forever.

New Book from NAECY!
Still Teaching in the Key of Life: Joyful Stories From Early Childhood Settings

Miri Brodsky Chunfeld

New DVD from NAECY!
Reflections on Early Childhood Program Management

Hear from 11 early childhood experts as they share their worlds 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 • ISBN: 978-1-928896-89-0
Order online at www.naeyc.org or call 800-424-2460 option 5 ($0.00–$5.00 in ET, Monday–Friday)

Item #: 173 • ISBN: 978-1-938113-01-7
List: $12 • Member: $9.60
Order online at www.naeyc.org or call 800-424-2460 option 5 ($0.00–$5.00 in ET, Monday–Friday)

Left: 2013 NAECY Annual Conference Lasting Legacy Scholarship winners.
Top: 2013 NAECY National Institute Lasting Legacy Scholarship winners with Dane Trister Dodge (standing, center).