

Democratic Life Skill 5

Thinking Intelligently and Ethically

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—independently 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

A study guide for this article is available at www.naeyc.org/memberlogin.

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—their 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

- Cozolino, L. 2006. *The Neuroscience of Human Relationships: Attachment and the Developing Social Brain*. New York: W.W. Norton.
- Gartrell, D.J. 2012. *Education for a Civil Society: How Guidance Teaches Young Children Democratic Life Skills*. Washington, DC: NAEYC.
- Ginott, H.G. 1972. *Teacher and Child: A Book for Parents and Teachers*. New York: Avon Books.

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.

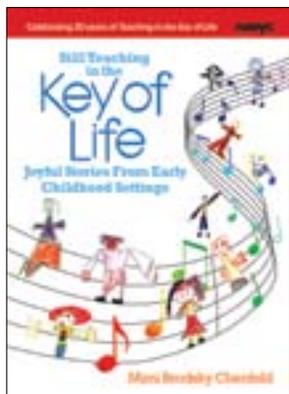
Copyright © 2014 by the National Association for the Education of Young Children—1313 L Street NW, Suite 500, Washington, DC 20005. See Permissions and Reprints online at www.naeyc.org/yc/permissions.

New Book from NAEYC!

Still Teaching in the Key of Life: Joyful Stories From Early Childhood Settings

Mimi Brodsky Chenfeld

Remember the joy of teaching!
Twenty inspirational stories remind teachers why everyday moments are so important in the lives of children. Copublished with Redleaf Press.



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
(9:00 AM–5:00 PM ET, Monday–Friday)

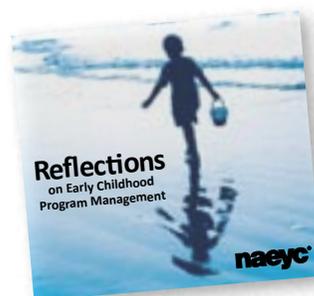
naeyc

New DVD from NAEYC!

Reflections on Early Childhood Program Management

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 • ISBN: 978-1-928896-89-0
List: \$50 • Member: \$40 **20% savings!**

Order online at www.naeyc.org or call 800-424-2460 option 5
(9:00 AM–5:00 PM ET, Monday–Friday)

naeyc

Your leadership development gifts at work

Donations to NAEYC'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 Donato at NAEYC: phone 800-424-2460, ext. 8824, or email kdonato@naeyc.org.

Thank you. Your contributions can influence early childhood forever.



Left: 2012 NAEYC Annual Conference Lasting Legacy Scholarship winners.

Top: 2013 NAEYC National Institute Lasting Legacy Scholarship winners with Diane Trister Dodge (standing, center).

naeyc