

## Dan's Quick and Easy Guide to the Five Democratic Life Skills

### **Skill One: Finding acceptance as a member of the group and as a worthy individual.**

Children working on this skill are new to the program, perceive they are in danger of being stigmatized (excluded from the group), and/or are dealing with high stress levels (due to neurological, environmental, or combination causes).

#### Typical child behaviors

- Looks on but does not join.
- Easily frustrated.
- Finds routines, "little" tasks, and "small" frustrations stressful.
- Resists teacher efforts to include.
- Often feels rejected.
- Loses emotional control easily.
- Has difficulty regaining composure.

Teachers work to create relationships with children outside of conflict situations, sustain relationships during conflicts, build trust levels in the child, and help the child find acceptance as a member of the group and worthy individual.

### **Skill Two: Expressing strong emotions in non-hurting ways**

Children working on this skill have progressed enough in Skill One that they are initiating interactions with peers and adults. Conflicts happen because they are just beginning to learn the skills of avoiding and resolving problems with others and expressing strong in non-aggressive ways.

#### Typical child behaviors

- Still working on abilities to share, take turns, cooperate; has conflicts in these situations.
- Shows frequent, sometimes dramatic frustration and/or aggression during conflicts.
- May show instrumental aggression (like bullying) toward younger/smaller children.
- Quick reactions to adult intervention with sometimes intense emotional expressions—aggression and/or psychological distancing.
- Able to recover some self esteem after guidance interventions (more so than kids at DLS 1)

Teachers use what they have learned about what works with these children to steer them around and help them resolve conflicts. These children typically experience many problems around *property*—"I am using this; you' can't." "He was done with it, so I have it." Teachers use calming techniques (different than time outs), guidance talks, conflict mediation, and sometimes class meetings when children at DLS have conflicts. Important, they avoid embarrassment and shame as they sustain relationships and teach alternatives to hurting behaviors.

### **Skill Three: Solving problems creatively, independently and in cooperation with others**

Children work on this skill in two dimensions, as individuals and together with others.

1. Individually, the child summons the capacity to engage, focus, persevere, and solve the matter he or she is working on, in the child's own way. An example is a preschooler who puts together a simple 5 piece puzzle by dumping out the pieces, turning them over, constructing the puzzle on the basis of the shapes, getting an adult to help slide the puzzle onto a tray, putting the puzzle tray on top, and carefully turning the puzzle over.

2. Together with others, there is the give and take of cooperation in completing the task with each child engaging, focusing, persevering, and together solving the problem. An example is two kindergarten children who build a three story Hogwarts with blocks, put miniature figures in “windows” on each level, declare this is Harry, Hermione, and Ron waiting for Hagrid. The three argued about which figure was which character, which window each figure should go into, and who the figures were waiting for (Hagrid or Dumbledor), but they worked it all out.

### Typical child behaviors

#### INDIVIDUALLY:

- Accesses and engages with open ended learning activities.
- Stays on problems and tasks
- Solves problems, obtains results, creates products in own way
- Finds personal gratification in the problem-solving

#### IN COOPERATION WITH OTHERS:

- Through give and take with others, accesses and engages with open ended learning activities.
- Through give and take with others, stays on problems and tasks
- Through give and take with others, solves problems, obtains results, creates products in unique way
- Through give and take with others, finds personal gratification in the problem-solving

Teachers provide a learning environment in which children can actively engage in problem solving, independently and in cooperation with others. They provide a variety of learning opportunities so that every child can engage in problem solving. They recognize that the process is more important than the product and do not compel pre-determined products. They give enough assistance, but only as much assistance as the children need to feel ownership of the problem solving—across the range of problems that are predominantly cognitive, physical, linguistic, social, and/or emotional in nature. Use acknowledgment, give feedback, and use guiding questions and suggestions to support children in problem-solving efforts.

## **Skill Four: Accepting the unique human qualities in others**

Children work on this skill by going out of their usual peer-group comfort zones in terms of initiating friendly interactions with others. Examples are: An older child playing with a younger child. A girl and boy playing together. Children of different racial or linguistic characteristics playing together. A child playing with a differently abled child. A “veteran” in the group playing with a new child. A “popular” child playing with a child vulnerable for stigma. A child interacting with an adult who may be new in the classroom.

### Typical child behaviors

- Accepts spontaneous groupings with children having differing human qualities.
- Initiates cooperative activity with children having differing human qualities.
- Initiates interactions with adults in the classroom who may be new
- Shows inclusiveness and even active support toward children who may be vulnerable for stigma.
- Matter of factly discusses differences in human qualities, including behaviors and viewpoints, with apparent intent to understand, not judge.

Teachers set the scene by modeling friendly relations and accepting relationships with every child in the class, and with all other adults in the room. Through class meetings EC professionals teach guidelines and techniques for caring, inclusive interactions. Teachers set up learning situations where children can have positive interactions with others different than themselves. Teachers use

liberation teaching, as with all of the skills, to ensure that all members of the class are accepted and appreciated. Teachers positively acknowledge inclusive pairings and groupings within the class. Teachers use appropriate private acknowledgment with individual children who show acceptance of others despite differences in viewpoints as well as differing human qualities.

### **Skill Five: Thinking intelligently and ethically**

Children work on this skill in social situations when they think about the other child's needs and perspectives at least as much as their own. Examples: A child gives up a turn, like riding a trike, to another child. A child offers to share materials or an activity with others. After being hit or yelled at by another, a child does not retaliate but negotiates a solution. A child expresses how another child, perhaps upset, might be feeling. A child offers to help another, child or teacher, with a task. Important here is that the child does not feel pressured to show "prosocial" behavior; he or she chooses to do so.

#### *Typical child behaviors*

- Gives up turn or materials for child who "needs it more."
- Comforts another child who might be sad or upset
- Invites another child to join in an activity or joint use of a material
- Offer to help another child or an adult
- Expresses how another child might be feeling
- Leads others in cooperative problem-solving, including all others in doing so
- Makes choice not to take advantage of situations or another child for one's own gain.
- Suggests a solution to a problem that shows thought and takes others' views into consideration.

Teachers sit back and wonder at children who consistently show Skill Five. In a sense these EC professionals have already done their jobs, using guidance and liberation teaching when children were working on the earlier skills. In the immediate situation they supportively acknowledge the behaviors they see. Privately, often later, they convey their gratitude to the child.

**This synopsis comes from my NAEYC book *Education for a Civil Society* (2012) and "Guidance Matters" columns in *YOUNG CHILDREN* issues, September 2012 - March 2014. The columns are free downloads at <http://www.naeyc.org/yc/columns/guidance>  
Dan Gartrell, May 2014**