

Having the Hard Conversation with Parents

— Nancy Blanning

Some years ago at a workshop on developmental and incarnational support for young children, a teacher approached me with a question. She asked, “When can I tell the parents that their son is autistic?” My answer was, “Never.” This encounter has stuck with me ever since. My one-word reply needs much explanation to appreciate the context of how delicate our gesture toward other human beings has to be. As teachers, we must appreciate what challenges and responsibilities face us as we strive to create life with the children entrusted to our care and with their parents.

As educators, we need to be awake and attentive to what we see in a child’s development and behavior; that is our professional responsibility. Questions will form in our minds with many children, as had happened for this teacher. Do we see something that time will resolve—a transitional moment when the child falls apart while she is developmentally reconfiguring herself? Is what catches our attention a little quirk that marks the individuality of the child but is not an impediment? Or is there something that mystifies and troubles us? We question whether what we see may be a concern to accompany the child for a long while, perhaps her whole biography. When such questions come, what do we do? And, heaven help us, how do we speak with the child’s parents about our questions?

The “never” arises out of considering what our role is with the child. We are not medical or psychological diagnosticians; we have no authority to give the “labels” the world is so liberally assigns. We rather want to sense and understand the individuality of the child. As early childhood educators, we join the parents in escorting the child into earthly life, now in the social setting of the class. In his book *The Therapeutic Eye*, Peter Selg describes how Rudolf Steiner looked at other human beings, especially children, with deep, warm interest. This sincere, warm interest without judgment or classifying is our goal. This is the starting point with any child—with any human being—as the first step in creating the free, safe space into which the other per-

son can reveal herself. Commonly we are already in a state of irritation or frustration when we begin this questioning. These annoyed and frustrated feelings need to be acknowledged. They are a hurdle for us to strive to get beyond so these do not cloud or distort the picture of who this child is.

Then we watch. We work to create an objective description of what we see. What puzzles us? What concerns, worries us? These kinds of questions are usually what make us wake up to a child. But we also want to look for what delights us with a child. What gives us joy in this child’s presence? What makes us laugh or shake our heads in amazement when the child lets us into her unique experience of the world? When we have viewed the child from as many sides as possible, we will have performed the necessary prelude for speaking with the parents. We have to be able to describe the child in such a way that the parents feel, “This teacher really knows and likes my child. She (or he) sees all the wonderful things we know about our child and also fairly describes the things we are challenged with, too. There is no judgment here, only caring. We are all on the same side.”

This all takes time to prepare. Unless a child is at such risk or a danger to others that we must act quickly, taking time at the beginning to “warm up the space” for the child and the family is essential. We are not just working with the child; we are building a relationship with the parents upon which all future interaction will depend.

Dr. Gerald Karnow once stated a cardinal principle we must not forget: no parents can ever be objective about their own child. Whenever anything suggests that a child’s development or behavior is less than normal and healthy, parents will react in their shock and alarm. Parents commonly become defensive, distressed, angry, even accusatory toward the teacher. If this does not happen during the conversation, it is likely to unfold later on. If we understand and expect that “having the hard conversation” is going to evoke these responses, then we are better able

to hold a calm state of mind and not respond in kind and become defensive ourselves. Taking in and digesting such observations about one's child is a process and takes time. Knowing this helps us appreciate how important it is to carefully observe and ponder the question of "who is this child?" and let our sincere, warm interest guide what will be a tender conversation with the parents. This is going to be only the first of perhaps many conversations on behalf of the child. We cannot expect that everything will be sorted out and settled quickly.

~ *Even if some offensive or scary label might be applied to this child, would he or she then become any less special, adorable, unique, or valued? The fundamental being of the child is not changed by such "sticks and stones."*

Staying in observation, describing what we see without implying judgment or conclusion, is a huge help. Words are both powerful and subtle; we must pay careful attention to which words we choose. An example of where we might get trapped could be as follows. "Joey never listens to me at circle time. He just gets silly with Caleb standing next to him." There are conclusions imbedded in this statement. We do not yet know what Joey's experience is. But we can describe what we see. "When the teacher speaks at circle time, Joey does not begin to gesture or look at the teacher. He and Caleb talk with one another and laugh." We could even go further and say, "They seem to be having a fun time with each other. I would like to find a way for them to have fun in the imagination of the circle."

The example above is relatively easy to address without giving offense or alarm. But we increasingly see more complex behaviors in children that are hard to understand. We see the spectrum from withdrawn, aloof children who miss social clues and seem isolated from the class to the child who is consistently disruptive, wild, distractible, and even physically hurtful to others. Sometimes we may have a hunch about what might be occurring but need to have others with more specialized expertise lend their view. Here is where it is both helpful and professionally responsible to ask for an outside opinion. After we have described as fair-

ly as possible, we can say that we are trying to understand what is prompting these behaviors or challenges for the child and request the help of other professionals to unlock this mystery.

This can be met with reluctance. Parents say that they do not want their child to be "labeled." And neither do we. Yet we want to understand so we can form ideas of what to do. We need information that other professionals can supply to achieve this. Even if some offensive or scary label might be applied to this child, would he or she then become any less special, adorable, lovable, unique, or less valued because of a new word? The fundamental being of the child is not changed by such "sticks and stones." Encouragement like this can help give the parents courage to embark on a possibly intimidating path. We can all do well if we keep reminding ourselves that the destination of the journey is to accompany the child into life so she can flourish as her destiny presents itself.

One of the things that can be so puzzling to parents is that what we describe may be things they do not see at home. The two pictures may actually be quite contradictory. For example, at home one little boy was quiet, played well by himself, and was a harmonious and calm playmate with another single child. In the classroom he was a tornado. The mother came to observe and was horrified by what she saw. Her immediate response was, "What is wrong with this classroom?" What can be baffling to both parents and teachers is that both experiences are objectively true. We are seeing multifaceted expressions of a human being in different situations. We have seen both with our own eyes. In acknowledging this and not insisting that one or the other is the "true" child, we can begin to take a step toward seeing what we can do to help harmonize these contradictions.

Nothing is more precious to parents than their child. Nothing is more tender or sensitive than to hear that all is not going well. Conversations to introduce concerns are not going to be easy, no matter how carefully we prepare them. Yet the more interest, time, and thoughtfulness we give to preparing our encounter will be of great benefit to all. The parents have tacitly chosen us to be their partners in escorting their child into life. We strive to honor and respect the child. To do the same with parents and invite their partnership with us will always be a right step. ♦

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