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# The Value of Conflict: Socialization in the Parent-and-Child Class

~ Kim Lewis

Often when I have that first intake conversation with parents who are enrolling in one of our parent-and-child classes, the topic of socialization comes up as one of the reasons that motivates them to participate in our out-of-home program. I imagine that they carry an ideal picture in their minds: a place where their children will make friends, learn to share, take turns, play peacefully with same-age peers, happily give up what they are playing with, ask politely for toys, make space for other children (and certainly refrain from bumping into them, grabbing them, or pushing them), and otherwise learn to be “nice.” While we can smile knowingly because, in fact, nothing will be further from the truth, this image is persistent. The socialization of children is a very sensitive area because parents often hold themselves and other parents up to the highest standard of “good,” as evidenced by the behavior of their children in public places.

Misunderstanding the socialization process in the very early years can lead to embarrassment and shame, and harsh criticism of each other. Skillful facilitation and honesty about what is realistic will go far. So will a newfound appreciation for the value of conflict and its resolution with little ones and their parents.

One of the first things I suggest to parents is that conflict is a beautiful thing. We live in a culture with a sort of “happiness addiction” and aversion to conflict. We know people who are so conflict-avoidant that they won’t speak up about their differing opinions and ideas to their own detriment. While admitting that conflict can’t be avoided is important, admitting that it’s actually a good thing can be a stretch for many adults.

For very young children, who are newly exploring the world of “the other,” conflict helps them learn—experientially, right down to their bones—what works and what doesn’t. The facilitator might view the exploration of the other children in the room as she views the exploration of the toys and equipment. Just as she would let the children practice climbing up on a wooden box all by themselves, over and over again, without helping them, she can allow the same exploration in the human environment

with other children. To do this means being close by, being very patient, allowing them to struggle on their own and interfering only as a last resort. Here follow some examples of how I work with conflict and socialization in the parent-and-child classroom with the children and the parents.

If the class is an infant class, and the children are beginning to be mobile, they will crawl right on top of each other, touching each other, often reaching for the eyes or pulling hair. I usually allow as much of this contact as seems okay with each of the children. I especially read the non-verbal cues of the child on the bottom who is being crawled upon. Very often, the child either likes it or doesn’t mind it, so I do nothing. Similarly-aged babies can take more of this contact than I realized at first. The parents might not understand this either. I ask the parents to sit back and allow me to handle the interactions.

Just relax. Let things be. Observe. Open up to all the non-verbal signals. Sense into the room. These are the skills that help with conflict, and which we can develop as parents and facilitators.

Sometimes the touching and pulling on each other is gentle enough to allow, so again I do nothing. But I have to gauge the children to see how well they are tolerating it. If it is clearly unwelcome touch, I put up my hand and block the contact, saying something such as, “He doesn’t like that,” or “She likes it softer like this,” or “I won’t let you pull her hair.” I think this helps the parents experience a calm, nonjudgmental way to work with these budding conflicts, minus the criticism and the labeling of children as “aggressor” or “victim.” I usually reassure the parents, too, saying all these exploratory behaviors are normal.

I think it’s important to observe and point out what a true non-verbal “no” looks like when it comes from a child (recoiling, trying to escape, crying), and to support the child with a clear “no” from the adult (put a hand up, say “enough,” put a stop to it). I encourage the parents to watch for these “no”s.

When the adults slow down, wait, and tolerate some level of discomfort in their children, it builds the children’s resilience because it expands what they can tolerate. Over time, the children discover that

they can put up with minor nuisances coming from other children, and they become less bothered by them. Additionally, putting a stop to behavior when there is a clear “no” also builds resilience because the children begin to learn that while some stress can be tolerated, too much stress will be stopped.

Finding ways to model saying “no” to children, so that they experience it and grow their own tolerance for it, is part of their healthy socialization. Saying “no” extends to the parent-and-child relationships in class, too, and this comes up in conversations. Sometimes I observe parents who let their little children hit them or scratch them or pull on them, and while the parents don’t like it, they don’t know how to put up a boundary that maintains the child’s dignity. We can use signals such as the tone of our voice, a protective gesture, and the words “I won’t let you hurt me,” or “I’m asking you to stop” to add up to a clear “no” that doesn’t shame the child. In these instances, the parent takes responsibility for his or her own self-care and self-respect. It’s a healthy model for the children to emulate as they mature.

As the children grow through their ones and twos and become even more mobile and capable, the conflict possibilities also grow. Children begin to purposely take things out of other children’s hands! What? In a sweet Waldorf parent-and-child class? My observation is that these young children in our classes are very curious and interested in taking away and giving back and taking away and getting back, in endless cycles.

If they’ve been attending classes since infancy, their distress is minimal during this back-and-forth phase because they are more used to it. They take it in their stride and become ingenious about how to get an item back. But for other children it can be quite distressing, especially if this is a completely new experience, or if they have siblings and have already become sensitive to having things taken from them. Parents, of course, can also become highly distressed.

If the children are left alone and tolerating it, the interchange becomes quite fascinating to observe. The children will become more and more resourceful in getting what they want in ways the adults wouldn’t ever imagine. But parents in the parent-and-child classroom might be new to this idea of allowing the children time and space to figure it out. This is where the familiar admonition “to share” starts cropping up. Parents often feel that children

are considered “well socialized” when they share, and “poorly socialized” when they don’t. But when parents enter into the children’s exploration of each other with expectations such as “you must share,” the children lose the opportunity to experience some other possible ways of relating to one another.

What actually happens when a toy is taken away in class? Some children let it go easily, some not so easily. Some let it go for now, then remember it and find it later. Some let it go, then as quickly take it back. Some cry. Some scream. Some look to a parent. This can be most distressing for parents. They want to help—especially if the facilitator isn’t doing anything and allows it to happen!

In my classes, I do let this back-and-forth with the toys go on without interference. I don’t ask the children to share because I don’t think sharing is age-appropriate or reasonable in the parent-and-child class. It’s a very mature capacity that even adults struggle with. Children will imitate sharing, to some extent, so I do encourage modeling it for the children in adult-child interactions. But young children can’t be expected to consistently offer up their toys simply because another child is temporarily attracted to them.

Over time, if adult-imposed “sharing” becomes highly ingrained in children, it takes on a whole new, unanticipated, and opposite meaning, which is “give it to me.” A child might complain to a parent or teacher that “So-and-so isn’t sharing,” which in essence means, “So-and-so won’t give it to me.” Now the adult is required to retrieve (grab) a toy from another child because he didn’t share? This kind of sharing doesn’t work.

While grabbing is normal for little children, it is not a highly socialized behavior, so I almost never take a toy away from a child (even though many adults constantly take things away from children). When a child seems upset that someone didn’t “share,” I might say in a voice meant to calm, “Yes, she has the brush, and you want it. She has it now. She is keeping it.”

What else do I do with all the grabbing? I work with proximity. I try to come close by. I take in as much of the situation as possible. I say very little, if I speak at all. I gauge the children’s distress and finally, if the situation is getting too difficult for one or both of the children, I do speak up. I might start by saying, “You both want it” in a voice that is soothing. (Don’t underestimate the soothing power of the voice in stressful situations.) I keep speaking

this way as needed: “It’s hard when you both want the same thing.” “You were really enjoying this toy.” “She is pulling hard.” “She isn’t letting go.” Something will usually shift. I don’t offer a solution right away, and when I do, it’s generally to point out that there is another identical toy in another part of the room. (With children under three, I try to have duplicates of everything.)

As I said, I rarely take an item out of a child’s hand—but I have done it. Again, with as much dignity toward the children as possible, I let them know what is about to happen to give them a chance to respond. I might say, “This has gone on too long. I’m going to take it,” and I open my palm. Sometimes a child will give it to me. Sometimes a child won’t. I might add, “You still want it, you are still really wanting it. I can tell. But I am taking it out of your hand. I’m sure there will be a chance to have it later.” And there always is.

I also help children to ask for the things they want. I work together with them. I don’t expect them to know how to do it. I usually say something such as, “I can help you with that, we can ask together.”

Children usually don’t have the words for this highly mature skill of asking for what they desire. “Mike is trying to tell you that he would like the rake; can he play with it now?”

When Tom doesn’t give it up, I might say something such as, “That is how Tom says no, he’s not finished with it, you will have to wait.” I might add, “I know, it’s hard to wait.” The interesting thing is that now Tom has the opportunity to seek Mike out and give him the rake when he’s done. It gives Tom the opportunity to play with a toy until he is finished and to be thoughtful in offering it to Mike. In this way, the stressful situation eventually finds its resolution.

Conflict is very interesting because it’s not the stress of conflict that is truly stressful to children, it’s the unending stress without a resolution that wears them down and raises their cortisol levels. Normal stress followed by some kind of solution actually builds resiliency better than no stress at all, because children learn to see a way out, and therefore they can tolerate the conflict a little better the next time

around. They begin to expect to find solutions, are more hopeful about the possibility of solutions, and become more skilled at creating and discovering solutions.

Let’s move from taking toys away to physically hurting the other children. Very young children come too close to each other constantly. They push, pull, hit, and even bite. These are all considered anti-social behaviors for good reason. Even very young children will learn to avoid children who are hurtful. How are these children “socialized” in the parent-and-child classroom? Again, this is a sensitive area because parents will criticize each other—silently or vocally—based on their children’s anti-social behaviors.

I try to reassure the parents that these are within the realm of normal childish behaviors, especially in a class setting with similar-aged peers. The behavior is not a reflection on their parenting. I might even ask the parents to check in and become aware of their own inner thoughts and feelings surrounding these behaviors. What feelings bubble to the surface? The parents do have negative feelings: guilt, shame, frustration, exasperation, hurt, and resignation. In a group setting, it’s a relief to hear what other parents feel. It tends to bring the parents closer to each other.

Some of the children’s immature and hurtful behaviors can be allowed in the same way I allow a baby to crawl over another baby. Maybe a child is just pushing a child away to let him know he is too close. Maybe it isn’t actually hurtful. Or maybe it is part of an ongoing frustration when one child’s (non-verbal) requests have been ignored, and she finally says “enough” with a push.

These are very young children who are coming up with very immature solutions, and too many times, it results in escalation and tears. I think it’s okay for children to experience this—to experience that pushing and hitting and screaming are unsatisfying ways to handle conflict. Because they are so unsatisfying, I am always on hand to offer something else. Again, the adult’s voice is important. I use it to reassure both the parents and the children. I might say, “She doesn’t know she is too close, I will help you tell her.” To the other child: “Sue, he’s saying that you are too close, maybe we can move you a little.”

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Or, “He is telling you ‘No, I don’t want you to hit me.’ I’m putting my hand here so you cannot hit him.”

It’s reassuring when children know that their bodily comfort will be honored, because eventually children will internalize the words and gestures and say for themselves, “I’ve had enough.” Most children do give up anti-social behavior if they are stopped every time. I feel my own fuse get shorter when children purposely seek out their classmates to hit, pinch, scratch, or bite them, even after very clear boundaries have been demonstrated repeatedly. In this case, I might say, “Your friends don’t want to be hurt, you can be close to me now,” and I pick them up. Or I tell the parents to keep them close. Again, part of early socialization is consistently honoring the “no” of other people.

As I briefly mentioned earlier, handling conflict is done by the facilitator in the presence of the parents. I don’t generally ask the parents to handle conflict in class at all because I want them to relax and experience something new in case they want to incorporate it in their own parenting.

What about facilitating socialization between the parents? The parents will also come into conflict in class now and then. That could be a whole topic of its own, but I will say that again, the conflict is not the problem. It’s only the ongoing conflict that is never resolved that becomes problematic. A positive attitude toward conflict, and openness and hopefulness toward exploring and discovering unique solutions will help.

Another question we can ask is how this view of socialization in the parent-and-child class relates to Waldorf education in general. By coincidence, as I was working on this essay I ran across an article I’d saved from the wonderful journal *Childhood*, from the summer of 1988. This was a reflection on Waldorf education, which brought up the relationship between my suggestions for the parent-and-child class and anthroposophy.

Steiner saw the unfolding of children in seven-year waves (with smaller waves within those waves) that take time, that come at the appropriate time, and that can’t be forced to come any sooner. It’s important to help parents understand that some of their social expectations are simply not appropriate until later. Waldorf education cultivates development from within outward rather than forcing children into molds and then evaluating them from outside.

It’s important to help parents understand that sometimes they impose social expectations, such as sharing, on their own and other people’s children from outside and then criticize the children when they don’t conform. If sharing and generosity don’t bubble up from within, is it really sharing?

We also know that children need opportunities to develop confidence, courage, and self-reliance through their own unique and individual experiences, and this requires time and space to explore without adult interruption. The freedom to explore the human environment in class leads to discovery and cultivates skills in finding creative solutions to human struggles. The article also reminded me of Steiner’s insight that with adults who are teaching or caring for children it is more important who they are than what they know (or think they know—about the socialization of children, for example).

To be people who have reverence for all things, minerals, plants, animals, people, stars; who care for things, people and the world; who take interest in others and teach through their will to do good; who have an infectious joy for life; who recognize themselves as divine and who stand upright with confidence that the spiritual world will give them strength, who work alongside the angels—these are the true requirements for all of us who wish to facilitate socialization in young children. Being socially skilled is a true art. The art of being with our fellow human beings with love and dignity can’t be taught by age three; it is a skill we allow to evolve over our entire lives. But when we let go of some of our preconceived notions and observe what is really happening in these early years, it can help us to make a healthy beginning on this life-long journey. ♦

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