

GUIDANCE MATTERS

Dan Gartrell

From Rules to Guidelines Moving to the Positive

At the end of a wing in an elementary school, a prekindergarten class walks past primary grade classrooms four times a day. The preschoolers have trouble remembering not to talk. With doors open due to the school's old air conditioning system, their chatter distracts the primary children and their teachers. The principal discusses the problem with Renilda and Cathi, the pre-K teachers. They agree to figure out a way to have the preschoolers walk in line more quietly.

Renilda recalls a group punishment from her own schooldays—when some children talked in line, the entire class had to “practice” walking up and down the hall five times in complete silence. Renilda shares with Cathi how she still feels bummed out about the experience—she wasn't one of the ones talking—and how negative the class felt toward the “talkers” and upset they were with the teacher.

Not wanting to introduce the negative dynamics of group punishment in their classroom, the two teachers hold a class meeting. They matter-of-factly explain the problem to the children and ask what would help them remember to walk quietly. The teachers acknowledge each idea the children offer. One child says, “We could be mommy and daddy elephants. We have to tiptoe so we don't wake the babies.” Everyone likes this idea, and they decide to try it.

As the children line up the next day, the teachers ask them if they remember how they are going to walk quietly. The children remember. When the class tiptoes by the principal's office, he

notices them and declares, “I like how you boys and girls are walking quietly down the hall.”

“Shh,” one child says, “you'll wake the babies.”

The problem with rules

Think about the likely differences in learning climate in these settings:

- One classroom has the rule, “No talking in line.” Another has the guideline, “We are quiet in line so we don't wake the babies” (or with older students, “. . . so we don't bother children in other classrooms”).
- One classroom has the rule, “Don't hand in work with careless mistakes.” Another has the guideline, “Mistakes are okay. We just need to learn from them.”

In a *Young Children* article worth revisiting, Wien (2004) makes the case

that rules tend not to be helpful in early childhood communities. Rules are usually stated as negatives. In fact, the way most rules are worded, it seems as if adults expect children to break them (Wien 2004). For example, with the rule “No hitting,” teachers often feel pressure to be hypervigilant for this behavior, and then basically can only ignore the behavior or punish the child when it happens—limited options indeed. Even when rules are not totally negative, such as “Be nice to your friends,” they may have an unspoken “or else” implication in teachers' minds.

When an adult enforces rules with children, the children know they have done something wrong. However, the negative experience in rule enforcement does not teach them what to do instead (Readdick & Chapman 2000); for example, “You know the rule, no hitting! Go to the time-out chair.” Busy with enforcement, adults easily forget the importance of teaching children positive strategies like using words or walking away as alternatives to hurting a classmate.

Rules can cause teachers to label children, lump them in groups, and enforce rules accordingly: be lenient with the “good children,” who mostly obey rules, and be strict with the “naughty children,” who often break

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rules. Studies show that children frequently subjected to punitive rule enforcement feel rejected, develop negative self-images, and may have long-term problems with aggressiveness in school and life (Ladd 2008; Ettekal & Ladd 2009).

Professor Gary Ladd, at Arizona State University, and his associates have conducted landmark studies on the long-term impact of rejection on young children (Ladd 2006; Buhs, Ladd, & Herald-Brown 2010). Such children are rejected by peers, who are bothered by their classmate's aggression, and by teachers, who punish the children for breaking the rules. (Remember that time-out is really temporary expulsion from the group [Readdick & Chapman 2000].)

Rules tend to reduce teaching to law enforcement. A rule-enforcement orientation can make teachers stricter than they really want to be (Gartrell 2010a). A joke about this is the teacher who meant only "not to smile until Christmas"—but didn't smile for 30 years! Over those years, what are

the implications for the groups this adult leads? For the teacher's aspirations to be a positive professional?

Toward guidelines

The purpose of having guidelines is to teach children to use them. For instance, with the guideline "We are friendly with our mates," the adult can calm down an upset child, then teach the child how to use friendlier words to express her feelings. (This teaching is built on a positive adult-child relationship that the adult is always working to improve [Watson 2003].) In this sense, guidelines are not just "permissive rules"—a common misperception (Gartrell 2010a). When there is danger of harm, teachers must be firm—but firm and friendly, not firm and harsh.

Techniques like *guidance talks* and *conflict mediation* work well, along with *class meetings*, in the firm but friendly teaching of guidelines (Gartrell 2010a). The expectation is that children live up to guidelines

all the time, not just sometimes. Guidelines identify classroom standards that teachers assist children (and other adults in the classroom) to learn and to use.

When adults model positive expectations, they teach children the skills they need for civil living (Copple & Bredekamp 2009). From the guideline "We are friendly with our mates," a child extrapolates saying, "Please share the markers." Perhaps with a teacher looking on, the comment invites dialogue and problem resolution. This set of interactions sure beats demanding, refusing, grabbing, pushing away, and the teacher's enforcing a "No fighting" rule.

With infants and toddlers, guidelines are expectations in teachers' minds. Teachers consistently refer to and model them in teaching prosocial behaviors. An example is "Friendly touches, Freddie," as the teacher helps Freddie give gentle pats to another child.

With older children, writing and posting guidelines provides a functional



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literacy activity as well as a quick visual reminder. Just a few guidelines work well; one classroom (as mentioned) had only one: “We are friendly with our mates.” (These teachers preferred the term *mates*, as in *classmates*, to *friends*. They respected the children’s right to define their own friendships.)

In the elementary grades, three or four guidelines work well (too many makes things complicated) (Gartrell 2010). Examples are

- We are friendly with others and ourselves.
- We solve problems together.
- Mistakes are okay. We just need to learn from them.

Class meetings

In the vignette Renilda and Cathi use a guidance fundamental, the class meeting, to engage children in working with guidelines. Teachers remark that solutions to problems reached through class meetings—such as tip-toeing like mommy and daddy elephants—are frequently more creative

than what they themselves might have come up with (Gartrell 2010b). Class meetings can involve children in setting new guidelines and re-teach the use of existing ones (Gartrell 2006). Teachers often hold class meetings at the beginning of the year to invite the group to develop a few overall guidelines (Vance & Jimenez Weaver 2002). Class meetings empower children to be contributing citizens of a learning community, work together to attain a sense of belonging, and develop individual responsibility (Vance & Jimenez Weaver 2002; DeVries & Zan 2003).

Toward the positive

As I see it, moving to the positive requires an attitude shift by the teacher from being a technician to being a professional. A technician operates with the ongoing mission of rule enforcement. In contrast, a teacher who is a professional continuously makes judgments about situations based on a mission to understand and guide—a mission greatly aided by the use of guidelines that transcend rules and their baggage.

In the process of becoming more effective professionals, teachers need to trust in and refine their developing skills of observation, communication, and relationship building. Change, which often takes some courage, begins within the mind of the teacher. Adults learn even as they teach, and that is a good thing—for the children and for the adults.

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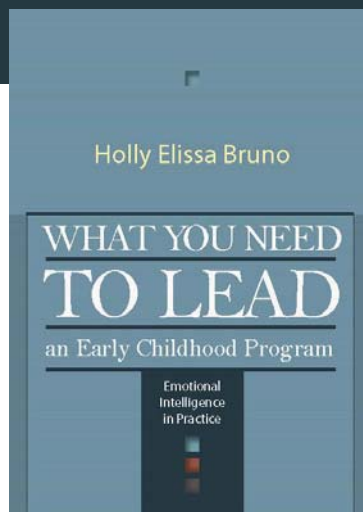
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