



INTRODUCTION

This is one aspect of teaching that I hadn't thought of until now—the emotional power teachers have over children.

—COLLEEN, UNDERGRADUATE STUDENT

Too often, caregivers are given the message that there are “correct” emotions to feel; emotions must be controlled or regulated. Language such as “over-attached,” “cares too much,” “don’t get too involved” all suggest that there is a correct amount of emotion. Once we care for someone and care about them, our heart is involved. We cannot measure the caring and concern.

—ENID ELLIOTT

Early Emotional Memories Last Forever

Very early one morning, at the conclusion of a national conference, I shared a taxi to the airport with a colleague, another early childhood teacher educator. We discussed what I would be writing about in my next book. I shared that my topic was how teachers' emotions affect their interactions with children, especially in response to what they consider challenging behaviors. She was silent for a moment and then said reflectively, "I often think that people who work with young children have been emotionally wounded when they were children themselves. It's almost as if they have chosen the profession of early care and education because of that." I thought about what she said and recognized that through the years as a teacher and professor I certainly have learned and come to understand much about my own childhood experiences and inner self through observing and interacting with children and their families.

As part of the ongoing process of exploring my inner life, I have learned to notice patterns of thought or feelings, and when or how they occur, so that I might understand myself better. For example, I have realized that I swing between feelings of being in and out of confidence. Knowing my confidence state is a good barometer for me. It helps me to know how to take on a challenge or survive a difficult day.

Understanding myself certainly enhances and enriches my life. But this is not the only reason I have undertaken this exploration. At one point in my early twenties I realized that my interactions and behaviors with young children could affect them for the rest of their lives. At the time I was reading Haim Ginott's book *Between Parent and Child: New Solutions to Old Problems* (Ginott 1969) for a child psychology course. It was while I was reading about

how it is not good to tease children that I realized teasing had always felt hurtful when I was a child.

While children are playful, it does not mean they are not serious. In fact, their play is serious indeed. They are learning about life through their play, and they take seriously what the significant adults in their lives say to them. They have to—after all, children depend on adults for their survival, emotionally and physically. When we tease young children or use sarcastic humor, they most often believe our words to be true. A child's sense of humor is not yet developed and sophisticated like an adult's. It is crucial to respect children and not to trivialize them with teasing and sarcasm. It is critical to take them seriously by validating and acknowledging their feelings. Children need to know what we really think about them almost as much as they need the air they breathe. They might lead us to believe they understand our humor in order to please us. In fact, our humor is often confusing and sometimes hurtful to children.

As a child I learned to laugh along with my stepfather, mother, and brother when they made fun of me, my ideas, or even people who were important to me, including my father, who did not live with us. It seemed to be the way members of my family expressed love—through teasing and sarcasm. So I laughed along. I also learned to believe that what they were saying was reality. Deep inside, I was hurt and confused. Ginott explains this phenomenon in his book, which I read while studying to become a preschool and kindergarten teacher in Israel. I remember that as I read his words, I wept with relief. I felt validated. More than that, I learned that I was not abnormal for having been hurt and confused by the teasing, which created in me an immediate longing for sincere, authentic, serious loving. Looking back, I realized that my interactions

as a child with significant adults in my life had affected me for a very long time. I was amazed. It was a revelation! It hit me hard and deep: whatever I would do and say with and to young children could have a profound effect on them. The responsibility became immediately awesome.

So, back in 1970, I began an exploration of my inner life in order to understand why I do what I do so that when I was interacting with young children I could be my most authentic self. The journey never ends. It has been excruciating at times and, at others, exhilarating and revealing. My exploration has made me feel uncomfortable and has occasionally caused members of my family and some of my friends discomfort too. But finding out how I came to be me is not some kind of self-indulgent, navel-gazing, egotistical preoccupation. It is my responsibility as a teacher.

Self-awareness helps me prevent inappropriate actions and reactions. For example, I am inclined to tease children because that is what I experienced as a child. But I am still able to stop myself, put myself in their shoes, and speak clearly and with respect. This is because I am aware that teasing was confusing and hurtful for me and made me feel helpless.

What to Do with Children's Behaviors That Challenge Us

Behavior management, including discipline, seems to be a popular topic these days. More than that, teachers and caregivers seem starved for information about it. In a recent survey of student teachers, in which my university's teacher education department asked how it might improve the student teaching experience, 100 percent of the students replied that they needed more behavior management strategies. Indeed, one of my colleagues says, "It's *all*

about behavior management.” During my workshops and presentations about discipline at conferences and in-service trainings, I have hardly managed to complete the introduction when teachers of young children begin to ask for solutions and answers. They ask me for strategies and prescriptions. They want me to tell them exactly what to do when a child bites, hits, refuses to clean up, answers back, throws a tantrum, or does not follow directions. Many express feeling helpless or frustrated with young children’s behaviors they consider challenging.

Usually I start off a workshop or presentation by asking participants or students to describe how they were disciplined as young children. We write the list of punishments on the board or flipchart and uncover that most of the attendees experienced some kind of pain or humiliation when they were young children. Parents have scolded, slapped, pinched, yelled at, or threatened them—and those were the milder punishments! Many in the audience express resentment from these experiences.

I cannot help but wonder how those earliest memories have affected the very people who will be disciplining children in their care. At a recent in-service training of early childhood teachers, we talked deeply and sincerely about the way we were disciplined and how it affects our behaviors in the classroom. I watched teachers and caregivers as they bared their deepest fears and anxieties, some weeping as they realized how many of these feelings were affecting their classroom management strategies and, more importantly, their sometimes misguided perceptions about children. It was powerful, and I was inspired by their courage. Like many teachers, I want to give children what I never had. For others, their early childhood memories about discipline are satisfactory enough that they want to repeat what they experienced. Clearly, our own emotional development in childhood, or ways we were guided or punished, affects

how we feel about what to do with children whose behaviors challenge us.

In *The Emotional Development of Young Children: Building an Emotion-Centered Curriculum*, Marilou Hyson describes the dangers of neglecting emotions. After reviewing the research about young children's emotions, she summarizes several points, including that emotions guide and motivate behavior "from infancy throughout life," and that all emotions, whether negative or positive, are important for development. Hyson goes on to say:

“An underlying message of all this research is that emotional development is too important to be left to chance. *Adults, including early childhood professionals, can make the difference, supporting positive development, being alert to possible problems, and intervening early and effectively.*”
(italics mine; Hyson 2004, 9–10)

Ever since beginning my career as a preschool and kindergarten teacher, I have considered the importance of my role in supporting positive emotional development for young children. I wonder how teachers can be effective if they are not in touch with their own emotional development, for our interventions in emotional situations are crucial in supporting children toward acquiring a positive self-identity. Recently, one of my undergraduate students wrote about how she is drawn to children with levels of self-confidence similar to hers as a child:

“When I was in elementary school . . . I always felt that I was not good enough and did not have the slightest bit of self-confidence. Having grown up feeling that way, I vowed

to make sure I would find the ones who have low self-esteem like I did and take them under my wings to show them that there is nothing to fear and that they are capable of many things. Because I still have many doubts and reservations about my abilities, I can detect others who share similar feelings. ”

If we are not aware of what frightens or concerns us or causes us anxiety, if we do not know our emotional limitations, we might not be as supportive as we would like to be. We might, in fact, unintentionally shame a child the way we were shamed as children. Therefore I want to emphasize an extra dimension to the concept of behavior management. It is an aspect we need to support our important work of appropriate interventions in emotional situations: self-reflection about what makes us *adults* tick emotionally.

Reflective Practice

The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) expects professionals to engage in reflective practice (NAEYC 1993). Teachers are encouraged to cultivate certain specific attitudes toward reflective thinking, such as open-mindedness, wholeheartedness, and responsibility for facing the consequences. There is evidence that reflective practice enhances change in classroom practice. Much of the research about reflective practice looks at teachers' ability to assess a situation and make sense out of the experience. Teachers who reflect on how they feel and why they feel the way they do are in a better position to understand their interactions with others. The idea of self-awareness is discussed as assisting teachers in their classroom practices and personal lives. Teachers have control over the decisions they make, yet without their

active involvement, autonomy, and reflection, it is difficult to make changes in classroom practice (Jacobson 2003).

Research about the importance of healthy emotional development has confirmed what I have been uncovering about *my own* emotional development and how *I* feel. It has helped me understand how and why I might have struggled with my relationships, professional or personal, these past fifty-eight years or so. Research has especially helped me to understand and improve my relationships with young children, families, and teachers. Throughout this book I share some of these self-uncoverings, in the hope that they will encourage you to embark on your own self-exploration. As we learn more about ourselves, we are able to understand more clearly why we do what we do, especially when faced with children's challenging behaviors. This book will not give you my prescriptions for the best ways to manage children's behaviors. I do discuss interventions *that worked for me* and that might be appropriate for you to use as well. But mostly I recommend that you find your own strategies that fit your comfort level. This will depend on how you were disciplined as a child, what your beliefs are, or what kinds of behaviors cause you discomfort and why. What has worked for me may not necessarily work for you. Our life experiences, earliest childhood memories, ways in which significant adults in our life interacted with us, and problem-solving techniques are likely to be quite different.

Overview of the Book

I begin by discussing some of the research on children's emotional development (chapter 1). Brain researchers explain that emotional memory stored in the brain during the first four or five years of life is un-erasable. The ways in which we interact with young children

affect their future emotional development and how they acquire a self-identity. The literature tells us that meaningful, loving relationships are crucial in young children's emotional development.

Understanding how we feel and why—by taking a look at ourselves—is the theme of the second chapter, where I discuss different kinds of feelings that affect our interactions in emotional situations with children. In chapter 3, I explore feelings related to anger more specifically, because anger causes many people some form of discomfort. In a survey about anger that I conducted in the spring of 2006, teachers in campus children's centers reported feelings of confusion or expressed a fear of being out of control as part of their own anger experiences. In a study about scolding in child care across the United States, Denmark, China, and Japan, Erik Sigsgaard writes about why adults scold children. One of the reasons is simply because the adults themselves were spanked or scolded as children (Sigsgaard 2005). Pre-service teachers and teachers at in-service trainings tell me, time and again, how resentful or angry they still feel, years later, when they recall feeling humiliated while being scolded as young children.

In addition to being affected by intense emotions like anger, our interactions are influenced when we feel empowered. Therefore, in chapter 4, "We Face Our Feelings of Powerlessness," I continue the discussion from "In and Out of Confidence," chapter 4 in my first book, *Confronting Our Discomfort: Clearing the Way for Anti-Bias in Early Childhood* (Jacobson 2003). Classroom management, discipline, and the way we see ourselves controlling our domain are also connected to different power issues. For example, in what ways does the power structure of our profession influence our self-identity? How did we come to choose the profession of early care and education? Put even more simply, how do we empower children when we do not feel powerful or confident ourselves? For

example, allowing children to speak out or make a stand for themselves can feel inappropriate, even intimidating, when we have difficulties being assertive ourselves.

Having confronted some uncomfortable emotions and discussed some of our inappropriate interventions, I turn in chapter 5 to the question of why we do what we do, as we claim our childhood traumas large and small. This chapter leads us into self-reflection. By creating a type of internal ethnography, or qualitative study of ourselves, which I call “researching the self,” we begin by taking a look at our own emotional history. In doing so, we become aware of what makes us uncomfortable in children’s emotional situations, and we understand how the discipline we received as young children affects our interventions and interactions with behaviors we consider challenging.

As we are repeatedly tested with our responses in emotional situations, we also come to know ourselves more deeply. Once we create a foundation of self, where we are on the road to confronting, understanding, and accepting our own emotions, we are in a better position to think about practical applications of discipline strategies in the classroom. In the sixth chapter, I discuss setting limits, what to do about tantrums, and how to meet our expectations to create safe emotional environments for ourselves as well as the children. I also take a look at the difference between discipline and punishment. By applying strategies that do not humiliate, punish, or scold, we learn, as children and adults, to accept the negative as well as the positive aspects of all our emotions.

In the final chapter, “We Can Change Our Emotional Scripts,” I talk about telling the story of our emotional history. Hyson tells us that children’s emotional development is too important to be left to chance (Hyson 2004). But what about the teachers who are

expected to guide and support children as they develop a positive emotional identity and become socially competent citizens of the world? Bruce Perry emphasizes that we have the choice to develop humane children, starting from their earliest years, by giving them strong, repetitive, positive emotional memories (Perry 2007). How do we do that if we never experienced humane treatment while growing up? The emotional development of *teachers*, therefore, is too important to be left to chance. Indeed, in the late 1950s and the 1960s, teacher educators suggested that:

- teacher preparation should involve a development of awareness about their emotional life;
- human emotional qualities are at the core of teaching;
- and the very behavior of teachers is a product of their emotional self-identity. (Jacobson 2003)

It takes courage to confront our emotions and realize that some of the ways we were treated as children affect how we perceive those behaviors we consider challenging in young children. In many cases it is not so much that a particular child has behavior problems. In fact, often it has to do with how we *perceive* those behaviors in connection with how we remember being treated as young children, or how we observed our peers being managed with similar problems. Indeed, it is all about our relationships with one another.

This book is for you, about you and me—the adults who care for and educate young children. Whether you are a student preparing to become an early childhood teacher, a beginning or veteran teacher of young children, or a teacher educator, this book is intended to help you uncover your own feelings as you try to manage children's behaviors and think about strategies that might work for you. It is meant to serve as a guide for your own self-reflection,

rather than yet another set of instructions about *the right way to do it*—external strategies or techniques designed to fix children's behavior problems.

Many years ago a friend gave me a poster featuring words written by Haim Ginott, the child psychologist I wrote about earlier, who had influenced me in the early 1970s. I still have these words hanging up in my office. They accompany me as I work with families, children, and their teachers. I give them out to everyone I know, and I share them with you now.

“I've come to a frightening conclusion. I am the decisive element in the classroom. It is my personal approach that creates the climate. It is my daily mood that makes the weather. As a teacher I possess tremendous power to make a child's life miserable or joyous. I can be a tool of torture or an instrument of inspiration. I can humiliate or humor, hurt or heal. In all situations it is my response that decides whether a crisis will be escalated or deescalated and a child humanized or dehumanized.” (Ginott 1972)

Being a teacher of young children is the most powerful profession I know. It comes with an awesome responsibility: it is up to us to offer children different options, new ways to solve problems, models of kindness and compassion, and relationships that will reinforce and develop a strong, positive emotional self-identity. So many times I have looked into the eyes of a child who is angry, bewildered, or frustrated, or who has given up the fight altogether, and I see myself, recognize those feelings, or remember the anxiety from somewhere deep in my own childhood psyche. Have we forgotten so soon that once we were children too?

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