



A Guidance Guide for Early Childhood Leaders

Strengthening
Relationships
with Children,
Families, and
Colleagues

Dan Gartrell, EdD

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A Guidance Guide for Early Childhood Leaders

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A Guidance Approach for the Encouraging Classroom

The Power of Guidance: Teaching Social-Emotional Skills in Early Childhood Classrooms

Education for a Civil Society: How Guidance Teaches Young Children Democratic Life Skills

Guidance for Every Child: Teaching Children How to Manage Conflict

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*To my wife, Professor Julie Jochum.
Thank you, Dr. J, for your helpful input and endless support.*

Contents

A Readable Introduction	1
Chapter 1. Guidance: What It Is	5
Chapter 2. The Theory Chapter	17
Chapter 3. Guidance Communication	29
Chapter 4. Guidance with Children	45
Chapter 5. Readiness: Not a State of Knowledge but a State of Mind	63
Chapter 6. Guidance Leadership with Parents	75
Chapter 7. Guidance Leadership with Staff and Outside Professionals	93
Index	111

A Readable Introduction

GUIDEBOOKS ARE TYPICALLY MATTER-OF-FACT, to the point, and semi-interesting. They provide information in a concise way but neglect, as is often done in our world, an essential understanding about learning. Every act of learning, by each of us every moment of our lives, has not just a thinking dimension but also a feeling dimension. Unless the learning act is understandable and also *feels right*, it will have limited long-term benefits for us. In 1969 psychologist and theorist Carl Rogers called positive learning that stays with us *significant learning*. Significant learning is at the heart of developmentally appropriate practice. And to encourage significant learning is why we use *guidance*.

For many years, early childhood (EC) teachers, supervisors, and trainers have encouraged me to write a book such as this. Over my fifty-year career, I have worked closely with these leaders in many settings.

Regarding “a big bunch” of matters, I have listened, discussed, counseled, civilly disagreed, and supported them—always appreciating the importance of their roles and understanding how hard they work.

This guidebook is meant for people in leadership roles in EC programs, ranging from directors and principals, to classroom managers and lead teachers, to trainers and coaches, to experienced EC teachers, caregivers, home visitors, and family child care providers. Throughout the book, I refer to you as leaders (and for variety “professionals” and sometimes “teachers”—in the general sense) because leaders are what you are. Every day you are touching the lives of the children, coworkers, and families you work with. My task in writing this guidebook is to encourage you toward further engaging in significant learning about guidance.

Who is a teacher? I like the pragmatic definition that children give: anyone in the setting who is bigger than they are. In my book—oh yeah this is my book—a teacher is an EC leader who works in a professional capacity with children, staff, and/or families in the program. In other words, administrators are teachers too. “Teacher” is meant in this general sense.

Leaders who use guidance do what very good teachers have always done, teach for meaningful emotional learning that works with, and not against, cognitive learning. If you think about it, guidance leadership pertains no less to working with staff, family members, and coworkers—as chapters 6 and 7 emphasize. This book is about using guidance in an inclusive manner with the different populations EC leaders work with.

Occasional humor is sprinkled throughout this book, ranging in quality from fairy dust to troll droppings, to keep things light-ish. Each chapter offers “balloons” to highlight key ideas. Concluding each chapter is a wrap-up section, a single take-away question that encourages readers to apply ideas from the book to their actual situations, and reference notes.

This book uses abbreviations selectively and usually for quite familiar EC terms. Some key terms and their abbreviations are early childhood (EC); prekindergarten (pre-K); kindergarten (K); developmentally appropriate practice (DAP); and National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC). To me, all child care is educational for children and needs to result in significant learning every day. So the term in the book for early childhood education is ECE rather than ECCE (early childhood care and education). A few other abbreviations for guidance terms I often use appear in some chapters of the book.

At various times throughout my career, I have been a Head Start teacher, college child development associate trainer, director of a training program for nondegreed EC professionals, supervisor of pre-K and kindergarten student teachers, family child care coach, professor of EC education, and now emeritus professor of education. I have written many times on the subject of “moving beyond discipline to guidance” and still enjoy writing and speaking on this topic—so long as I can take a nap now and then! :-})

Over the years, my “output” has included the column Guidance Matters in the National Association for the Education of Young Children’s journal *Young Children* and many articles in EC journals and magazines. I have also written a textbook, *A Guidance Approach for the Encouraging Classroom*, now in its sixth edition, and four other books, two published by Redleaf Press.

This guidebook has connections to my earlier works and especially to *Guidance for Every Child: Teaching Young Children to Manage Conflict* (2017), also published by Redleaf Press. Where an idea in the guidebook connects with a more thorough treatment elsewhere, reference is made to the source and a link is given, often to resources on my website, www.dangartrell.net. But for all that, I have written this

book to be used on its own. After all these years of writing about guidance, hopefully I have finally gotten it right. :-})

Since 1970 I have done more than three hundred trainings and presentations in most states, Germany, and Mexico. I have always tried to use some of the same guidance communication practices in my sessions that are discussed in chapter 3, a key chapter in the book. Friendly humor and receptiveness to the input of others are two. Readers who have attended any of my trainings or presentations might enjoy coming across some of the same one-liners and stories in this guidebook as they did prior. (Notice I said “might”—some of these “sharings” are on the order of old troll stools.)

Most of the references in this guidebook are to my other published works. This is not the case in the other works, but I see this guidebook as a culmination of my guidance authorship and so refer readers to my earlier writings on various topics. My apologies if the self-referencing becomes tedious.

Thanks to the People Who Helped

Three long-time colleagues deserve my thanks: Leah Pigatti, June Reineke, and Dacia Dauner. Leah, Dacia, and June began as teachers in EC classrooms and over time became directors of their programs. Two of them were my students, and two have completed doctorates. The three together have more than eighty years of EC leadership experience and yet are all much younger than me!

In addition, Bryan G. Nelson, founding director of MenTeach, gave me helpful feedback in chapter 7 in the section on male EC teachers. These four professionals, with Professor Leah Pigatti in the lead, carefully read and gave useful feedback during this project. Over the years, Leah has been a steadfast reviewer of my manuscripts, and for this great gift, I tip my toupee! The readers made the work better.

Finally, thanks go to the entire editorial and production staff at Redleaf Press. It's nice to have a nationwide, nonprofit publisher right in the neighborhood in St. Paul. I give special thanks to editors David Heath, Douglas Schmitz, Christine Florie, and senior editor Melissa York for their patience and professional competence.

Reference Notes

Rogers, Carl. 1969. *Freedom to Learn*. London: Pearson.

Guidance: What It Is

BY BRINGING NEGATIVE ATTENTION to children when they “misbehave,” conventional discipline carries the heavy baggage of punishment. We intuitively know the importance of not punishing young children. If we think about it, the children we work with are only months old. A two-year-old has less than thirty-six months of on-the-ground experience. A three-year-old only has thirty-six to forty-seven. A big, honking just-five-year-old has only sixty months, one-eighteenth of the projected life span of many young children today.

Young children are just beginning the complex emotional-social learning process that continues throughout their lives. How complex? Many of us know folks in their seventies who have a hard time expressing strong emotions in nonhurting ways. Young children are just beginning this vital lifelong learning that even senior adults have not always mastered! Being only months old, young children are going to make mistakes in their behavior, sometimes spectacularly, as all beginners do.

Learning from Mistakes

Guidance is teaching for healthy emotional and social development. On a day-to-day basis as conflicts occur, leaders who use guidance teach children to learn from their mistakes rather than punish them for the mistakes they make. Teachers help children learn to solve their problems rather than punish children for having problems they cannot solve. In the guidance approach, leaders first assist children to gain their emotional health in order to be socially responsive and then support their social skills that are needed to build relationships and solve problems cooperatively. For this reason, in a change from my earliest works, I make a practice of referring to “emotional-social” development and not the other way ’round.

Even though it rejects punishment, guidance is authoritative (“possessing recognized or evident authority; clearly accurate or knowledgeable” [Merriam-Webster 2020]). No one is to be harmed in the early childhood learning community—child or adult. But in the guidance approach, the professional is firm and friendly—not firm and harsh. There are consequences for when a young child causes a serious conflict. But the consequences are for the adult as well as the child. The adult needs to work on the relationship with the child and use communication practices that calm and teach, not punish. The consequence for the child is to learn another way.

Using conventional discipline, a teacher puts fifty-four-month-old Marcus on a time-out chair for taking a trike from Darian, a younger child. (Darian objected loudly and was forced off.) In the time-out, Marcus is *not* thinking, “I am going to be a better child because the teacher has temporarily expelled me from the group. Next time I will not take things from others. I will patiently wait my turn—and am not thinking at all about getting back at Darian!” Really, Marcus feels embarrassed, even humiliated, upset, and angry—far from the emotional set needed to figure out what happened and what would be a better response in the future. (Thought: Isn’t the adult here contributing to a bully-victim dynamic?)

Whatever the noble linguistic roots of the term *discipline*, to discipline a child has come to mean “to punish.” Again, *punishment makes it harder for children to learn the very emotional-social capacities we want them to learn*, such as waiting for a turn on the trike or using the trike together.

In contrast a leader who uses guidance intervenes without causing embarrassment; helps one or both children calm down; talks with the two about what happened; guides them toward another way to handle a similar conflict in the future; and facilitates (not forces) reconciliation. In the process, the leader conveys to the children that they are both worthy members of the group, they can learn a new way, and they can get along (avoiding a bully-victim dynamic).

The leader makes the time for this mediation because by modeling as well as teaching friendliness during conflict, *the whole group* is learning. Firm, friendly, and intelligent teaching is what I mean by moving past discipline to guidance—proactively teaching children that they are worthy individuals, belong in the group, and can learn to manage their strong emotions.

Reframing the Conventional Wisdom about Discipline

In moving to guidance, the EC leader does well to look at three concepts associated with conventional discipline. The following table illustrates the reframing of discipline thinking to guidance thinking. Discussion of each idea shift follows.

From “Discipline Thinking” to “Guidance Thinking”	
FROM	TO
1. Challenging children	Challenged children
2. Being patient	Being understanding
3. Misbehavior	Conflicts and mistaken behavior

1. From “Challenging” Children to “Challenged” Children

A beautiful benefit of brain research that has been conducted over the last thirty years is that it is helping us understand the behavior of young children like never before. Years ago if a child caused frequent and extreme conflicts, the conventional wisdom was that this was a “bad kid,” or at least a “challenging child with a bad home life.” Those who believed in the positive potential of all children didn’t have a lot more than general long-term studies to back their guidance efforts. Now, with the findings of neuroscience, there is more.

The matter comes down *not* to the character of the child—and whether the child is labeled “challenging”—but to the amount of *stress* the child is living with. At the time of birth, the brain’s defense system, mediated by the amygdala, is already functioning. Generating emotional reactions to incoming perceptions, the amygdala is a key part of the limbic system, located within the temporal lobes in the lower area of the brain. If the amygdala senses a threat, it orders up stress-related hormones that slosh around in the brain (hypo-scientific term here), causing the individual to show survival behaviors for self-protection.

Human survival behaviors are well known—fighting (aggression), freezing, or fleeing. In this connection, babies who cry out of discomfort are showing the survival behavior of aggression. No matter what the circumstances, the persons

present, or the time, babies are going to let the world know when they feel the stress of discomfort. And so it should be for their survival. In the context of the EC learning community, however, survival behaviors are often counterproductive. They are mistaken efforts at self-survival that other members of the community find challenging.

By around age three in the frontal lobes of the cortex in the upper brain, the child's conscious thinking and response systems have begun to develop. "Executive function" is the term for the mechanism that mediates intentional thinking and doing. Executive function integrates the processes of recall, idea formation, task persistence, and problem-solving.

In the young child, developing language and social awareness play a crucial role in the processes mediated by executive function. This understanding provides a useful explanation for why preschoolers bite less frequently than toddlers. Three-year-olds are gaining language skills and social awareness that toddlers have not yet developed. For me, two notes about executive function are essential (the first is political; skip to second note if you'd like):

1. Executive function begins to develop at around age three, but it does not reach full and mature operation until individuals are in their twenties. Think of the differences in the behaviors of teenagers and twentysomethings to nail down this understanding. In my view, this is why teens should not be able to purchase guns until they are twenty-one—the current legal age for alcohol and tobacco.
2. In young children's brains, the amygdala system is more fully formed than the executive function system. If unmanageable stress enters a child's life, amygdala functions override beginning executive functions. Being totally dependent on others for security, young children are particularly vulnerable to strong amygdala reactions and survival behaviors. Toxic (unmanageable) stress can result from a single adverse event or a series of events in a young child's life that the child perceives as threatening. Insecure relationships with primary family members are a widespread cause of this plaguing stress in young children, though not the only cause (see Gartrell, 2017).

Brain research has put a new focus on the role of stress in people's lives. The term *toxic stress* has come to explain stress that is beyond the individual's ability to manage. For me, however, this term can set off an either/or shortcut reaction in others. Either you have toxic stress or you don't. *Unmanageable stress* seems more nuanced, and I often use this term instead of *toxic stress*. Unmanageable

stress refers to a level of stress that impedes healthy problem-solving and creative behavior.

Unmanageable stress begins where “healthy stress” ends. Healthy stress in young children, what I like to call “intrigue,” is when amygdala and executive functions are integrated in activity around problem-solving and the resolution of cognitive dissonance (things that don’t appear to fit together). For example, a child who relishes putting together a new puzzle is showing healthy stress. A child who doesn’t solve the new puzzle but stacks the pieces in the middle of the board and says, “This is a castle in a lake,” is also showing healthy stress—unless this child is told, “You are not doing it right.” A child who can’t do the puzzle and sweeps the pieces on the floor is experiencing unmanageable stress—likely *not* just in that moment.

Unmanageable stress felt at different levels results in survival behaviors shown to different degrees. Outside of the early childhood community, survival behaviors might help children in traumatic situations. Within the community, leaders who use guidance recognize that children who display especially the survival behavior of aggression are not “bad” children. They are showing mistaken survival behaviors and are really asking for help. Children show challenging survival behavior in encouraging EC communities because it is a safe place in their lives. They know they won’t be punished for acting out with survival behaviors, even if the behaviors are mistaken.

Understanding the link between unmanageable stress and serious conflicts is important. As children become older, if they are not helped to manage toxic stress, the amygdala system becomes overdeveloped at the expense of underdevelopment of executive function. Think long-term learning difficulties here and chronic oversensitivity to everyday events that seem threatening. Leaders work hard with young children to build relationships that make stress manageable while brains and personalities are still “plastic” (pliant and rapidly forming). Professionals leverage their efforts at guidance leadership by working together with family members and fellow staff. They understand that challenging behaviors happen because children are challenged.

2. Patience or Understanding?

Nancy Weber first brought this idea to light in 1987. Her “food for thought” article in *Young Children* continues to be a topic of interest on the internet.

Weber’s idea is that the importance of patience is overplayed in EC education, and the importance of understanding is underplayed. People often say to EC professionals that they “must be so patient,” when they might not see themselves as

With Weber's permission, "Patience or Understanding" served as the first chapter of my 2004 book, *The Power of Guidance*. Out of respect for Weber's contribution, I paraphrase this idea shift in her terms—she said it so well.

patient at all. In making her case, Weber cites a definition of "patience," very close to that of a Microsoft search of "patience definition" today: "the capacity to withstand frustration, trouble, or suffering without getting angry or upset."

Weber's contention is that in Western culture, "patience" is often accompanied by an unintended passive-aggressive state of mind.

She means that EC professionals, being human, at some point run out of patience and act out. A leader might "lose it" when any of the following occurs:

- A child acts out one too many times.
- Children "once again" show restlessness during large group.
- A parent misses a second conference and doesn't seem to care.
- A staff member repeats an inappropriate practice previously discussed with a supervisor.

The big switch is this: instead of relying on patience with the danger of its running out, EC leaders strive to understand. Patience might or might not then be a response, but holding back after reflection is a mindful choice and not a stoic reaction. The basic point of her article is that we are unlikely to run out of understanding. To illustrate, consider that an openness to understanding helps professionals be proactive so they investigate and perhaps learn one of the following:

- The child who acts out is arriving at Head Start on a middle school bus and every morning is getting teased.
- Teacher expectations at large-group time are just not developmentally appropriate for these children at this time.
- The parent is on her own, has three young children, and works long hours as a waitress. The family often crashes at Grandma's.
- The staff person is dealing with a family member at home who has a drug problem.

Even when the professional's learning is not this conclusive, the effort to understand tends to change the dynamics of conflict situations. The leader is more likely to remain engaged with people and events and not as likely to feel alienated from the situation—and lose patience.

3. Not Misbehavior, but Conflicts and Mistaken Behavior

If the trappings of conventional discipline rattle around in our heads, we tend to think of the conflicts that young children cause as *misbehavior*. The problem is that “misbehavior” carries the same moralistic cultural baggage as “discipline.” If we interpret a conflict that a child causes as misbehavior, it is simply too easy to regard the matter in moralistic terms. Misbehavior is bad behavior, and what kind of kids show bad behavior? Kids who are bad, rowdy, wild, bullies, or from bad families (i.e., challenging). It is an easy slide to view children who misbehave as needing to be disciplined (punished). The misguided practice of “shaming children into being good” has long been debunked for not working. The punishment then has the effect of keeping stress high for the child, making emotional and social capabilities even more difficult to learn.

A widely accepted notion out there is that children act up to get attention, and that negative attention is better than no attention at all. I contend that *young children need personal affirmation, not “attention.”* Due to stress and inexperience, they haven’t learned to ask for affirmation in socially acceptable ways. Walking into the room, a child is not likely to say, “Teacher, I need a cuddle and being eased into things today. My family and I had a rough night.” Instead, they react to their inexpressible stress by sweeping cups of juice off a tray. Why? Again, their plaguing stress causes them to act out in the EC community because it is a safe place in their lives—and they are only months old. The peril of displaying a pattern of mistaken survival behavior misinterpreted by adults is that it can cause what I call a *stress/act-out syndrome*.

Development of a stress/act-out syndrome in early childhood can cause problems for a person’s entire life. The devastating cycle looks like this: Feeling unmanageable stress, young children

- act out in a mistaken effort to gain affirmation—and feel the adrenaline rush of the conflict;
- are punished—the adrenaline wears off and they feel embarrassed, upset, and angry;
- internalize negative self-messages, felt intuitively: “I am not a good kid,” “They don’t want me here,” “This is not a good place,” “I don’t know what to do”;
- with stress levels remaining high, and the anticipation of a new adrenaline rush, repeat the aggressive behavior.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has done a great service by amplifying the concept of toxic stress through the construct of *Adverse Childhood Experiences* (ACEs). This is a term many readers are familiar with and about which the CDC says this: “Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) have a tremendous impact on future violence victimization and perpetration, and lifelong health and opportunity. Working together, we can help create neighborhoods, communities, and a world in which every child can thrive” (www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/childabuseandneglect/acestudy/index.html).

Research studies by Ladd and meta-analysis by Shonkoff (in Gartrell, 2013, 2017) indicate that young children who leave early childhood education with a developed stress/act-out syndrome have continuing difficulties in school and life. The studies show that for too many young people, the syndrome comes to a head during adolescence and continues into adulthood. The result is a lasting inability to form trust-based relationships and to resolve conflicts in nonhurting ways.

Instead of “misbehavior,” I teach the concept of *conflict*. A conflict is an expressed disagreement between individuals. From the time a newborn first cries from discomfort to when a senior citizen would rather watch the falling snow than come to lunch, life is full of conflicts. Conflicts are a big part of life. Young children, new to group situations and unused to dealing with adults who are not family members, are going to have lots of stress and therefore conflicts.

EC leaders who view even spectacular disagreements as conflicts that can be resolved are in a philosophically strong position to help children engage in significant emotional and social learning.

Along with conflict, another term useful in guidance practice is “mistaken behavior.” I first wrote about mistaken behavior in that same issue of *Young Children* that Nancy Weber’s article appeared in. In considering likely motivations for children’s conflicts, I proposed three levels of mistaken behavior, still applicable today:

1. Experimentation-level mistaken behavior: The “experiment” might be uncontrolled—a child comes to the building table, wants some parts, and takes them without asking from another child who has “lots.” Or the experiment might be “controlled” (but goes wrong)—a child walks up to an EC professional and says with a smile, “Shit, teacher.”
2. Socially influenced mistaken behavior: a child is influenced by important others to engage in a mistaken behavior. A sad example with an individual child: A child sees an adult give Jordan a time-out. Later, the child says to

Jordan, “Teacher doesn’t like you, Jordan.” Socially influenced mistaken behavior also might be the “catchy” kind that happens in groups. A child calls another child a “butthead.” The word quickly becomes part of the group’s vocabulary. (Time for a large-group meeting here. See chapter 4.)

3. Strong unmet-needs mistaken behavior: level 3 is the most serious mistaken behavior. Anyone (adult or child) can have a “level 3” day and find themselves in the middle of fairly dramatic potential or actual conflicts. But when these days become frequent and conflicts are atypically severe, these children are dealing with toxic stress and showing strong unmet-needs mistaken behavior.

As suggested by my graduate school mentor, Professor Steven Harlow, the three levels of mistaken behavior reflect children’s relative states of mental health.

Children who show mostly level 1 mistaken behavior have stress pretty much in check. They are open to new experiences. In encountering them, being only months old, these young children make mistakes. Some pretty strong emotions can be behind experimentation mistaken behavior, but children at this level have enough mental health that before long they recover—and sometimes even self-teach other ways to handle future similar conflicts.

Children who show mostly level 2 mistaken behavior have insecurities about themselves and situations they encounter. They are working to manage their stress levels, but anxieties underlie many choices and decisions. These children look to others for leadership and tend to do what they think their leaders want—going along to get along. Their mistaken behaviors can be totally mild, for example, “Do you like this picture, Teacher?” asked *very* often, to a less innocent, joining with others to shun a child, “We are not going to play with you, Jordan.” If children remain at level 2 as they grow, their main source of social influence gradually shifts from adults to peers.

Children showing a pattern of level 3 mistaken behaviors—serious and repeated—are dealing with unmanageable stress. The leader works hard to build secure relationships with these children and to empower them through *comprehensive guidance* (discussed in chapters 4 and 7) to progress toward resiliency. Children at level 3 are challenged, and adults sometimes find them the hardest to like and guide. But these kids also have the most to gain—and greatly need a secure relationship with an early childhood professional. If leaders do not give up on these kids, in my view, they are working at the highest level of guidance and are practicing *liberation teaching*. Leaders who are open to understanding the motivational sources behind mistaken behavior are mastering a central guidance tool.

In my first year of teaching, before I realized that men could teach young children, I taught sixth grade in a city in Ohio. I had just graduated from a progressive college, and you can imagine my shock when during orientation the principal began handing out paddles. I didn't take one, but I was working with big kids who were used to years of paddling as the routine form of discipline.

Despite many frustrations, there were real successes that year: Ruby, who went from a first-grade reading level to a fourth; Cynthia, who finished the sixth-grade reading text in a week and blossomed with a library-based reading program, and Hobart, just up from Appalachia, becoming friends with Dyson, whose family would not have been welcome there. Understandably, it was during that long year that I began thinking about teaching for healthy emotional and social development, and I have never stopped.

Wrap-Up

In chapter 1 we talked about how conventional discipline too easily slides into punishment. (To “discipline” a child is to punish.) Punishment should not be used with young children because it elevates their stress levels. Conventional discipline actually makes children's desired emotional, social, and cognitive capacities more difficult for them to learn.

Young children are better thought of as months old than years old. They have limited experience, early brain development, and sometimes stressful life circumstances. As beginners at learning vital but complex life skills, young children are going to make mistakes, sometimes spectacularly. In progressing from “discipline thinking” to “guidance thinking,” leaders move from the notion of

- challenging children to *challenged children*,
- being patient to *being understanding*, and
- misbehavior to conflicts and *mistaken behavior*.

In the big picture, guidance is teaching for healthy emotional and social development. (Robust cognitive development will then follow.) In a day-to-day sense, guidance teaches children to learn from their mistakes rather than punish them for the mistakes they make. When conflicts occur, guidance professionals teach children to solve their problems rather than punish children for having problems they cannot yet solve. Guidance begins with building secure relationships with children outside of conflict situations. Leaders who do not give up on a child are practicing guidance at its highest level: liberation teaching.

Take-away question: Thinking of children in your program, how true is it that children who seem to be showing positive emotional and social development also seem to be confident and capable learners?

Reference Notes

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———. 2017. *Guidance for Every Child: Teaching Young Children to Manage Conflict*. St. Paul, MN: Redleaf Press.

The Theory Chapter

GUIDEBOOKS ARE PRACTICAL. As a rule, they don't have much theory. The reason this guidebook has a theory chapter is that I am betting you will find it useful. What am I betting? Hmmm. How about this? If I lose, I will inscribe your copy with 'most anything you'd like and sign it with my pen name, Groucho Shaboom. If I win, I'll do the same but use my real name! (Woo-hoo.)*

The theory in this chapter has appeared in my writings before and is the focus of my book *Education for a Civil Society: How Guidance Teaches Young Children Democratic Life Skills*. With all that practice, it is distilled to almost clarity here.

Outcomes of Guidance: Five Democratic Life Skills

Today everything educational has mission statements, goals, outcomes, objectives, and so on. Stated directly, the mission statement of this book is for EC professionals to learn more about and practice guidance so that children can engage more fully in healthy emotional and social development, and, long term, so more adults can contribute in civil and creative ways to our still-developing democracy.

Contemporary guidance has outcomes, operational goals we nudge children to gain. In this book the outcomes are stated in five democratic life skills (DLS), which derive from Abraham Maslow's elegant construct of a hierarchy of needs, still in the curriculum of most ed-psych classes. Actually, the DLS owe as much to another of Maslow's concepts in the same book (1962/2008), the presence of two intertwined motivational sources for human behavior: the need for psychological safety and the need for psychological growth. In a coconut shell, we need to feel relatively secure in order to open ourselves to new experiences, to learning and

*Send one copy to me at 535A Laurel Ave., St. Paul, MN 55102. Include a bunch of stamps to cover return postage. Be sure to say whether you won or lost the bet and what the inscription might read. Should get it back to you in two weeks or less.

Maslow wrote, “If we wish to help humans to become more fully human, we must recognize not only that they try to realize themselves, but that they are also reluctant or afraid or unable to do so. Only by fully appreciating this dialectic between sickness and health can we help to tip the balance in favor of health” (Maslow 2008, 3e).

growing. The younger the person is, the stronger the need for security to grow psychologically. Kids who feel safe and loved move more easily toward intelligent and ethical thinking. Children who feel the plaguing stress of insecurity have great difficulty doing so.

Maslow’s dual-motivations concept seems to me to have predicted the interplay of the amygdala system and executive function, prevalent in the modern brain research discussed in chapter 1. For me, this link makes Maslow’s thinking sixty years ahead of its time, maybe more.

The democratic life skills make more sense when you see the list. DLS indicate the ability of the individual to

1. find acceptance as a member of the group and as a worthy individual;
2. express strong emotions in nonhurting ways;
3. solve problems creatively, by oneself and with others;
4. accept unique human qualities in others; and
5. think intelligently and ethically.

Individuals mostly need to gain DLS 1 and 2, which are safety-based skills, to work on and make progress toward the growth-based skills: DLS 3, 4, and 5. Progress on gaining the DLS is *not* sequential—first skill 1 then skill 2 then skill 3. Instead, children intuitively work on the skills in two blocks: first on the safety-based skills 1 and 2 followed by progress on the three growth-based skills 3, 4, and 5. Leaders work directly, intentionally, and usually darn hard to guide young children in gaining skills 1 and 2. They gradually shift from a coaching role to a facilitating role as children work on skills 3 and 4. With kids who show skill 5, leaders sit back in wonder, even if the children only show the skill occasionally (like many adults?).

Note that DLS theory is not about idealizing the motives and actions of children. True, children who act mostly at levels 3, 4, and 5 are a blessing. But the theory is not even remotely about turning children into “the angels they really are.” The DLS are about guiding young children to manage rejection and anger and to progress toward self-acceptance, problem-solving, and perspective-taking. This

progress is a lifelong undertaking, so much more possible if humans can start this essential emotional-social-cognitive process early in life.

A key objective in guidance practice is for leaders to view children at levels 1 and 2 *not* as “a pain in the backside” but as a professional challenge. Children who have difficulty meeting safety needs are worthy of secure relationships with teachers no less than children who have had an easier time with early emotional-social development. The professional challenge is worth the effort. The quality of children’s lives into adulthood depends on it.

The Term *Democratic Life Skills*

Before delving into the specifics of DLS, the term *democratic life skills* needs a brief explanation. I kid that *democratic* should always have a lowercase *d*. Certainly the term does not refer to the Democratic Party; the term is meant in the social sense way more than the political. *Democratic* in the social sense means every member of the group has a say, is a worthy member of the group, and is to be appreciated. In agreement with John Dewey, the great educational and social philosopher, I contend that society is improved when more of our social groupings are more democratic—not without leaders, of course, but who use democratic values and practices in their leadership.

In line with Dewey’s thinking, though he was misunderstood on this point, *democratic* in the social sense does not imply political socialism as a form of government. A bureaucracy, elected or appointed, that makes carte blanche decisions for the masses is antithetical to the democratic society Dewey envisioned. In the broad view, an emphasis on DLS means advocating for more social democracy in more of the multitude of social groupings that form our still-developing democratic society. In the EC community, perhaps the epitome of this democracy is found in group meetings, discussed in chapter 4.

Why “life” skills? Because the DLS are vital to folks becoming healthy individuals and contributing citizens. And we work on the skills every day of our lives. The five DLS frame the life potential of human beings young and old, including staff, families, and other professionals that we share our lives with every day.

Quick and Easy Guide to the Five Democratic Life Skills

To make things concise, below is an outline that provides the operational basics of the DLS, including typical behaviors of children working on each skill, and a quick

statement of guidance practices that assist children to make progress with each skill. A thorough discussion of guidance practices that assist children in relation to the DLS forms the content of chapters 3 and 4.

The Safety-Based Skills

Skill 1: Finding acceptance as a member of the group and as a worthy individual
Children working on this skill might be 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 a combination of reasons). They show amygdala-driven survival behaviors in mistaken efforts to protect themselves. The child may well be suffering a degree of childhood posttraumatic stress syndrome.

Typical Child Behaviors

- finds any break from routines, “little” tasks, and “small” frustrations stressful
- lacks trust and so may resist efforts of others to build relationships
- is easily frustrated
- often feels rejected
- loses emotional control easily
- has difficulty regaining composure
- looks on or backs away and does not willingly join in
- shows level 3 strong unmet-needs mistaken behaviors

Despite the challenges, 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 a sense of belonging. Teachers use guidance practices fully and intentionally (practice liberation teaching) to assist the child to learn coping skills, develop personal resilience, and grow in social awareness.

Skill 2: Expressing strong emotions in nonhurting ways

Children working on this skill have progressed enough in skill 1 that they are initiating regular interactions with peers and adults. Conflicts happen because

children are just beginning to learn the skills of resolving problems with others. They are still using mistaken survival behaviors, including reactive and instrumental aggression, in the expression of strong emotions.

Typical Child Behaviors

- still working on abilities to share, take turns, and cooperate; has conflicts in these situations
- shows frequent, sometimes dramatic frustration and reactive aggression during conflicts
- may show instrumental aggression (like bullying) toward younger/smaller children
- quickly reacts to adult intervention with sometimes intense emotional expressions—aggression and/or psychological distancing
- able to salvage 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.” “You put it down, so it’s my turn now.” Teachers use calming techniques, guidance talks, conflict mediation, and sometimes class meetings when a child experiences conflicts (see chapter 4). Importantly, leaders avoid embarrassment and shame as they sustain relationships and teach alternatives to hurting behaviors. The primary task is to be firm but friendly in teaching children to manage and use nonhurting ways of expressing their emotions.

The Growth-Based Skills

Skill 3: Solving problems creatively, independently, and in cooperation with others

Two notes: (1) Public embarrassment is the most prevalent form of punishment in early childhood settings. I once heard a student teacher call out the same child’s name twelve times during a story. (The teacher would have been happy to sit next to the kid and help him keep focused if the student teacher had asked.) (2) The most common sources of conflict in early childhood settings are over property, territory, and privilege. Younger children have conflicts more over property. Older children have conflicts more over privilege (Gartrell 2013).

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 activity they are working on, in the child's own way. An example is a preschooler who mixes up the pieces of five "easy" puzzles and puts them together at the same time.
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 three kindergarten children who build a three-story "Hogwarts" with blocks, put miniature figures in "windows" on each level, and agree this is Harry, Hermione, and Ron waiting for Hagrid. The three argue about who is which figure and which figure should go in what window, but they work it all out.

Typical Child Behaviors

Individually:

- accesses and engages with open-ended learning activities
- perseveres with problems and tasks
- solves problems, obtains results, and creates products in their own way
- can handle failure, as long as the effort has personal meaning
- finds personal gratification in the problem-solving
- on occasion (especially if interrupted) is likely to show level 1 mistaken behaviors

In cooperation with others:

- through give-and-take, accesses and engages with open-ended learning activities
- through give-and-take, stays on problems and tasks
- through give-and-take, solves problems, obtains results, and creates products in a unique way
- through give-and-take, can handle failure somewhat, as long as the effort has personal meaning

- through give-and-take with others, finds personal gratification in the problem solving
- during the give-and-take shows some level 1 and level 2 mistaken behaviors

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 adult’s product and do not compel predetermined crafts. (Not, “Make Frosty like this,” but “Make a picture of you outside in the snow.”) They give enough assistance, but only as much assistance as children need to feel ownership of the activity. Use acknowledgment and pause, give feedback, and use guiding questions and suggestions to support children in problem-solving efforts. (See chapters 3 and 4.)

Skill 4: Accepting the unique human qualities of others

Children work on this skill by venturing out of stereotypical peer groups 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. Playing with a child differently abled. 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

- joins 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 toward children who may be vulnerable for stigma
- matter-of-factly discusses differences in human qualities, including appearances, behaviors, and viewpoints with an intent to understand, not judge
- on occasion shows level 1 mistaken behaviors

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 the importance of understanding human

differences and of communicating with others in friendly ways. Teachers set up learning situations where children can have positive interactions with others different than themselves. Teachers use liberation teaching 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 5: 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 a younger 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; they choose 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
- plays games and does activities for the common good and not one's own advantage
- offers to help another child or an adult
- expresses how another child might be feeling
- leads others in cooperative problem-solving, includes others in doing so
- makes a choice not to take advantage of situations for one's own gain
- suggests a solution to a problem that shows thought and takes others' views into consideration
- uses perspective-taking (empathy)
- likely to show level 1 mistaken behaviors

Teachers sit back and wonder at children who consistently show skill 5. 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. Leaders smile a lot around kids who show DLS 5.

The Five Skills in Real Life

Can young children really show DLS 4 and 5? Don't these skills require more executive function than young children can muster? Anyone who has worked with young children for a time has seen them, on their own, show perspective-taking and compassion. In most young children, the actions may be more intuitive than consciously reasoned through. But accepting unique human qualities and thinking intelligently and ethically are skills some young children can and do show.

DLS 4. In a family child care home, Jason, aged fifty-eight months, was by far the oldest and biggest child. Jason loved using the computer, which the younger children were not as interested in. Fern, the provider, made a deal with Jason. He could use the computer every day during work time on one condition: Jason needed to invite children to join him in using the computer. He was to share the computer use with them, showing them how to play games and so forth. (This was in line with Fern's thoughtful position that technology should not be an overly individual activity.)

One morning (when I was observing), thirty-eight-month-old and forty-month-old boys happened by. Jason shared in a game with each, but soon the kids left. Then, thirty-five-month-old Jodi sat down next to Jason. Jason began explaining what he was doing and offered to let her play. Jodi shook her head but watched the game that Jason continued to explain to her for almost half an hour! When Fern

In addition to *Education for a Civil Society* (Gartrell, 2012), each democratic life skill was featured in a Guidance Matters column in *Young Children*:

Column #21. "Democratic Life Skill One: Guiding Children to Find a Place," September 2012.

Column #22. "Democratic Life Skill Two: Guiding Children to Express Strong Emotions in Non-hurting Ways," March 2013.

Column #23. "Democratic Life Skill Three: Solving Problems Creatively—Independently and in Cooperation with Others," July 2013.

Column #24. "Democratic Life Skill Four: Accepting Unique Human Qualities in Others," November 2013.

Column #25. "Democratic Life Skill Five: Acting Intelligently and Ethically," March 2014.

The columns can be downloaded at www.dangartrell.net/columns.

announced it was time to go outside, the two stood up together and got their coats on—Jodi only reaching in height to Jason’s waist!

DLS 5, example one. A pre-K student teacher, Sarah, used competition to motivate her children one winter day by a race down a hall and back. As she blew her whistle, the threes, fours, and fives took off—all except for Lucy, a forty-nine-month-old who would clearly rather be coloring. Sarah yelled after her, “Hurry up, Lucy. They are leaving you behind!”

Lucy, exasperated: “I’m trying.”

Carter, already on his way back, took in the situation. The sixty-month-old said, “I will run with you, Lucy.” He made a U-turn and slowly trotted next to Lucy, who was moving her legs as fast as she could. “You can do it. You can do it!” Carter said.

The two finished the race way after everyone else. Carter and Sarah both gave Lucy high fives. Lucy smiled. With Carter’s help, she finished the race. Sarah later thanked Carter, quietly but warmly, for his generous action.

(I later encouraged Sarah to forget the racing and just have the kids run for the fun of it. She made the change, and especially Lucy seemed more relaxed about getting the exercise.)

DLS 5, example two. In this kindergarten class, Teacher Darcy asked Ayesha to play a math card game with Elsa. Elsa was a new student, coming from Somalia with her family. The card game used to be called War, but Darcy changed the game to Match. Each child puts down a card, the higher card takes the lower, but the cards go on a common pile. Ayesha had Elsa play the first card. Then Ayesha quickly found a card with a lower number and put it down! She counted the numbers on the cards in English with Elsa. Elsa was pleased to have helped make a big pile. When they got done with the game, Elsa asked, “Again?”

In my view, Ayesha and Carter were both showing the perspective-taking that is central to DLS 5—perceiving the situation from the other’s point of view. Carter’s action with Lucy was a one-time event. Teacher Sarah said Carter continued to be friendly toward all the others in the group, but Sarah did not notice a repeat of the boy’s amazing example of thinking intelligently and ethically on this day with Lucy.

Kindergarten teacher Darcy had long-term hopes for Ayesha with Elsa. After Ayesha’s self-initiated altruism during the card game, she continued with more friendly mentoring of her new friend, Elsa. The two did many things together that kindergarten year. And Elsa, who was big for her age and fearless, repaid Ayesha for her friendship. Was Ayesha “cheating in reverse”? Maybe once in a while, putting other people ahead of traditional rules is intelligent and ethical. What do you think?

Wrap-Up

We work with children on gaining the five DLS in two blocks. The first two DLS are needs-based, meaning children working on skills 1 and 2 have unmet needs for security and belonging that make it difficult for them to

1. find acceptance as a member of the group and as a worthy individual, and
2. express strong emotions in nonhurting ways.

Children struggling to meet DLS 1 and 2 have unmanageable stress levels that make them sense threats easily and resort to level 3 mistaken survival behaviors. Teachers need to use guidance intentionally and comprehensively, starting with building secure relationships with these children. As trust is established, children can make progress in dealing with their plaguing stress and seeing the world as less threatening. As the children grow to see themselves as accepted and worthy, they have fewer conflicts and are better able to manage strong feelings. They are ready to progress to meeting DLS 3, 4, and 5 by

1. solving problems creatively by oneself and with others;
2. accepting unique human qualities in others; and
3. thinking intelligently and ethically.

The central guidance problem is to provide encouraging leadership with children who are challenged in terms of meeting DLS 1 and 2. As mentioned, I call the ability to guide these children toward resiliency “liberation teaching.” Liberating teachers cannot accomplish this big task on their own. They need to use guidance leadership with fellow staff and parents so adults can work together to accomplish this life-changing objective (see chapters 6 and 7).

Take-away question: How does your new knowledge about DLS change the way you view the members of your EC learning community and your relations with them? Bonus question: Was this theory helpful?

Reference Notes

The five DLS have appeared in my writings for many years. The most comprehensive resource is Gartrell (2012):

Gartrell, D. J. 2012. *Education for a Civil Society: How Guidance Teaches Young Children Democratic Life Skills*. Washington, DC: NAEYC.

———. 2013. *A Guidance Approach for the Encouraging Classroom*. Boston: Cengage Learning.

Maslow, Abraham. 2008. *Toward a Psychology of Being*. New York: Wiley.