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Teaching Children to Create a Better World

by Rachel Robertson

Each time a tragedy occurs, impacting the children and families at our centers, I write a letter to our families in that geographic region sharing guidance about talking to and supporting their children through such events. These days, it feels like I am writing a letter almost every month, and my heart feels heavy with the weight of them all.

While first and foremost I am trying to comfort our children and families, it is incumbent upon us to channel the hope that our children have and use it to teach the next generation the skills, knowledge, and opportunities they need to continue making the world a better place.

We all know that children can sense how complex, confusing, and divisive the world around them can be. It is also a great reminder of how early childhood is the perfect time to begin equipping them with the skills needed to think



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Prove It: Achieving Quality Recognition for Your Early Childhood Program, and *Healthy Children, Healthy Lives*, (Redleaf Press) and two children's books: *A Teacher's Promise* and *When You Just Have to Roar* (Redleaf Lane). She is currently the Vice President of Education and Development for Bright Horizons Family Solutions.

critically, to explore the ideas of inclusion and diversity, to practice kindness and compassion, to develop empathy, and to become thoughtful stewards of the planet.

This is just what the late Jim Greenman had in mind when he developed the curriculum now used at Bright Horizons centers across the nation. As Greenman expressed, "Our job is to help our children become the people that we will confidently entrust the world to: people with the values, knowledge, and skills to confront the challenges that we have left them."

As educators focused on whole-child development and thoughtfully preparing children to be future citizens, we have daily opportunities to do just that. Certainly, extraordinary events not only test us as citizens and human beings sharing a planet, they also test us as educators. Children grow into the kind of people they will become at least in part by how we guide them through their questions, concerns, and fears. It is our responsibility to act intentionally and use these instances to teach.

In the past year, it became obvious that we needed to relaunch our curriculum, Toward a Better World. We wanted to

both ensure that our educators understood the importance of this unique element of our curriculum, as well as equip them with developmentally appropriate tools and resources. This does not mean our values supersede family values. Our goal is to help children see their role in this world and become active and confident participants in their future.

"Sociability is the ability to engage in successful social experiences. Social skills are essential to school and life."

Sharon Bergen and
Rachel Robertson,
Healthy Children, Healthy Lives

Teaching Connecting and Caring

It is important to provide ideas to help guide children from an egocentric approach to caring and sharing with others, first in the home and classroom and eventually in the wider world. Not only are social capabilities like perspective taking and empathy important for developing relationships, but they pave the way for the development of addi-

tional skills and experiences throughout a child's life.

Developing compassion and caring for others begins in infancy and it is our role to nurture and support behaviors that lead to sociability.

Here are a few ideas:

- Provide responsive care for young children. Build trust by demonstrating that adults will comfort and nurture them when they need it.
- Ensure the baby dolls in the classroom are well taken care of. Providing places to sleep, ensuring they are dressed, and giving them occasional baths allows children to mimic and explore how to care for another being.
- When a child is upset or hurt, instead of telling children what to do or requiring an apology, ask children to participate in resolving the situation. "Gemma is sad because her block tower was knocked down. How can we help Gemma?" This takes longer, but appropriately uses a challenge as an opportunity to teach and build perspective.
- Purposefully teach children about emotions. Reflect aloud about your own emotions and model how to manage them. When a child physically expresses an emotion, help her name it and learn to manage it.
- Respect children's individuality. Avoid requiring children to share all the time. Instead, allow for small group, partner, or individual activities. Teach collaboration skills through activities and projects such as a group mural.

Building Sustainable Environments

One of the cornerstones of *Toward a Better World* is to help children learn how to care for the world in which we live and make it a healthier, more beautiful, and sustainable place.

Helping children learn they have the power to make a difference is a powerful lesson. While occasional volunteer efforts are important and valuable, it is important to build the desire in children to take daily action to make the world a better place. Through activities and projects, this desire can be encouraged.

Connecting with and appreciating the natural world are of equal importance. Richard Louv's work has brought a lot of attention to the idea of "nature deficit disorder." Young children who have positive and enriching experiences with

nature will be the people who grow up to take care of and decide the fate of the earth. Outdoor experiences should certainly be opportunities to run and move freely, take reasonable risks, and play with abandon, but they should also be seen as a way to connect children to the world they live in, to cultivate curiosity in living things, and to help them fall in love with the natural beauty all around us.

Encouraging Community Support

It is never too early to begin learning how to participate in relationships and communities. This starts with developing identity and empathy. As children become less egocentric, they begin to understand that not all children have the same access to resources, and they consider actions to help. Educators can model these behaviors by demon-

The Power of One... One Parent, One Child, One Classroom, One Center Changing the World for the Better

Preschoolers at the Medtronic Child Care Center in Moundsview, Minnesota, were inspired by a parent speaking to the students about her work trips to Nairobi, Kenya, where she also visits an elephant sanctuary on a regular basis. The parent informed the students of how this sanctuary helps to raise orphaned or endangered infant elephants and reintegrate the animals into the wild.

While learning everything they could about elephants, the students decided to hold an art auction and raise funds to adopt a baby elephant from the David Sheldrick Wildlife Trust in Nairobi. The artwork was elephant-inspired and the final pieces raised enough funds to adopt not one, but four baby elephants. The students continue to learn about the lives of the four elephants that they have adopted.



strating care and concern for each other, children, and families.

- Learn about community by reading about and exploring neighborhoods. Explore the concept of “home” and what that means to each individual family.
- To engage in the community, a group of children can write get well cards to a hurting friend, visit a nearby elder care facility, or sponsor a cause.
- Young children can have a lot of fun hosting an art auction, collecting change for change, or hosting a hop-a-thon.

Additionally, children’s worlds are full of “helpers” who go to work to help others: police officers, firefighters, teachers, doctors, military personnel, relief workers, volunteers, and everyday people doing extraordinary things. The beginnings of compassion, generosity, responsibility, and courage come from finding and supporting community helpers and identifying with them. Help children explore these professions through project work and imaginative play.

Promoting Diversity and Peace

In celebrating diversity and promoting peace, it is particularly important to listen to and respect children’s ideas on how to make positive changes in the world. Children come to the world with an inherent sense of what is right. Rather than viewing their ideas as either “cute” or “idealistic,” long-term dispositions are promoted when children are listened to, taken seriously, and actually given the opportunity to try their ideas to effect change. Taking a proactive approach to challenging prejudice and stereotyping can feel daunting, but educators can do this through listening, engaging families, and modeling.

Do you find this article to be a helpful resource? Visit www.childcareexchange.com or call 800-221-2864 for further information about this article and many other exceptional educator and trainer resources.

Knowing that children are just exploring concepts and can sometimes inadvertently make a biased statement can help a teacher respond positively with respectful guidance rather than shock or shame. It is crucial to help children understand that it takes more courage to resist discrimination than to go along with it. Literature is an excellent way to introduce ideas, dispel stereotypes, and prompt thinking. Here are a few suggestions:

Infants and Toddlers

Whoever You Are by Mem Fox

Baby Dance by Ann Taylor

The Peace Book and *It’s OK to be Different* by Todd Parr

Preschoolers

Hey Little Ant by Phillip M. Hoose, Hannah Hoose, and Debbie Tilley

The Big Orange Splot by D. Manus Pinkwater (could also be Toddler)

All the Colors of the Earth by Sheila Hamanaka

A Porcupine Named Fluffy by Helen Lester and Lynn Munsinger

School-age

Miss Rumphius by Barbara Cooney

Wonder by R. J. Palacio

The 100 Dresses by Eleanor Estes

Thank You, Mr. Falker by Patricia Polacco

Parents and Educators

Roots and Wings by Stacey York

Anti-Bias Curriculum: Tolls for Empowering Young Children by Louise Derman-Sparks

Diversity in Early Care and Education Programs: Honoring Differences by Janet Gonzalez-Mena

Final Words

It feels important to recognize that we’re living in a particularly divisive and challenging time in this country. While progress is made, it often feels like we’re going backwards, too, and the impact of change is unequally distributed among us. Some of us are living through these events, while others of us are witnesses. It is essential that we model for children what we want them to do: listen to each other, ask questions, provide support, withhold judgement, learn, and grow.

We must have hope that together, we can teach children to build lifelong qualities of caring and compassion as well as the desire for children to take action and make the world a better place. Whether it is in the midst of a crisis or during every day experiences and activities, from comforting children impacted by a hurricane to collecting books to donate, or tending to a classroom garden, we have the opportunity and responsibility to support and teach children as they become our future. If not us, then who?

For more information and resources about helping children and families through tragedy: www.brighthorizons.com/TalktoChildren/ for further information.

To learn more about Toward a Better World: www.brighthorizons.com/programs/care-school-curriculum

* Some content in this editorial is based on material created by Linda Whitehead, Bright Horizons Family Solutions, Senior Advisor, Education and Development.

