

Encouraging an Expressive Environment: Supportive Communication from the Inside Out



Jimmy is unhappy that his classmate Marie has taken a block he wanted to use. He gets more frustrated as he sees her add it to the top of her building and so he stands up and kicks her structure over. Marie screams and throws a block at him. The teacher, Annie, reaches the block area just as both children burst into tears. She sees Jimmy go to pick up another block and grabs his hand. “Jimmy,” she says firmly, “use your words!”

It is widely accepted that an appropriate strategy in promoting social/emotional growth is to encourage children to learn to use verbal expression rather than physical reaction to communicate their needs and feelings to adults and peers alike. Yet, telling children to put their feelings into words is only one step in supporting their ability to think about their own and others' emotions.

Marie speaks before Jimmy can get a word out, “My house! He broke it on purpose!” Annie puts her arm around Marie and says, “Jimmy, Marie’s upset— what happened?” Jimmy closes his lips tightly and bursts into tears. His teacher puts her hand on his arm. “You look so sad, Jimmy. Please tell me what happened.”

For children to develop the ability to express themselves with their own words, they need to be given repeated chances to practice this skill in a supportive environment in which the adults themselves are comfortable promoting the open discussion of feelings, concerns and ideas. Such an environment goes beyond one in which children are simply told to “use your words,” to one in which staff, parents and children all receive the message that acknowledging and discussing feelings is important and healthy—what is called an **expressive environment** (Katz, 1994).

How can a program support an expressive environment?

To achieve a truly expressive environment for children and for childcare staff, staff members need not only to encourage children to express themselves, but also support other adults in doing so. Each individual staff member has to take responsibility for expressing his or her concerns and ideas clearly, consistently, and appropriately. This may be where the demand can be greatest; adults, not unlike the children they teach, can express themselves at times in action more clearly than in words. Actions such as taking extra sick time, not participating in staff activities, or avoiding certain people or situations can be very clear communications that are counterproductive to establishing an open and consistent environment that supports all its members.

Annie is upset about the proposed plan to move her teaching partner to a different classroom. When a parent asks about the stability of the teaching team, Annie is tempted to share the possibility of the move and her own feelings on the subject. But, instead, she listens to the parent describe her child’s attachment to her teachers, and then suggests that the parent share her





feelings with the program's Educational Coordinator. Annie then decides to ask the Educational Coordinator for her own meeting.

In order for staff members to communicate with confidence, however, they must feel that their views are valued by the program's administration. Leadership in this area has to come from the program administrators: they have to establish open communication as a professional goal within the program **and** model it in their own communications with colleagues, staff, and parents. Program leaders must be willing and prepared to consider the concerns and ideas of their staff, as well as the children and parents served.

Other ways in which programs can work towards an expressive environment include:

- **Opportunities for reflective practice** must be built into the professional development plans for staff. Encouragement of self-reflection as a professional tool and providing staff with opportunities to share their reflections with one another are important skills that need to be nurtured.
- **Regular supportive supervision** should be put into place for all staff across professional roles, in which reflective practice is welcomed.
- **Professional training and opportunities for program staff to practice appropriate communication**, including new strategies for dealing with difficult conversations and promoting positive interactions with adults and children.
- **Regular group discussion should take place** in order to help staff to reach a consensus about a shared set of principles, encourage collaboration, and build perspective-taking skills.

In order to participate in these strategies, individuals must examine their comfort level in recognizing and acknowledging their own emotions, and in discussing emotions with the adults and children around them. Culture and personal history can play profound roles in a person's views on expressing emotions, especially outside of the home. These views may extend to the appropriateness of young children expressing themselves if it includes sharing information about their home lives. Some teachers believe discussing what happens in a child's home is an important element of their role in a child's life, and a type of communication that increases vigilance to a child's safety. Other early childhood professionals believe encouraging such conversation invites children to ignore the boundary of privacy between home and school.

Staff members may also differ in their own past experiences

with expressing themselves in the workplace. Some may have never been given the opportunity to voice their opinions or concerns. Others may believe that sharing their feelings with coworkers is the only outlet they have for expressing themselves. While it might be tempting to dismiss such tactics as gossiping or complaining, acknowledging such a range of viewpoints is important to understanding how individuals seek out and use opportunities to express themselves. Supervisors, administrators, workshop leaders and consultants need to recognize and be ready to discuss the different views professionals hold on communication, and be willing to meet staff where they are in order to work together towards an expressive work environment that supports staff and families alike.

Carol, the program's Educational Coordinator, was a little surprised to hear from a parent and teacher in the same day about the same topic. At first, she felt a little defensive when Annie came to her immediately following the parent—as if she were getting “ganged-up” on. But as she listened to the teacher's concerns regarding the potential move of a member of her classroom's team, she realized that Annie had thought her objections through carefully. Carol appreciated that Annie stayed calm throughout the conversation, even though she clearly had strong feelings about the matter at hand. Even though Carol does not have an immediate alternative plan, these two conversations have made her consider rethinking the shift in teaching teams, and so she tells Annie she will try and revisit the matter. Carol then decides to talk to the director in order to share the concerns expressed and to ask for help in brainstorming other options that could avoid moving Annie's teammate.

Open, honest communication can be difficult to achieve in work and in our personal lives. But the benefits of such open dialogue will be worth the challenges and fears encountered in having it. In a truly expressive work community, a program staff can come to a shared understanding about what kind of activities are necessary to promote a positive program climate, the social and emotional growth of the children served, and an active and responsive outreach to the parent community.





For more support on this topic please see the following Family Connections materials:

Short Papers:

Supportive Supervision: Promoting staff and family growth through positive relationships

Self-Reflection and Shared Reflection as Professional Skills

Better Communication with Children: Responding to challenging subjects

Better Parent Communication: What do I say when a parent tells me something difficult?

Understanding Depression across Cultures

Trainings:

Module One: *Program Climate and You*

Module Three: *Talking to Children*

Module Four: *Better Communication*

Reference:

Katz, Lilian. "Expressive Environments for Children and Adults." *Young Children* 49, no. 5 (1994): 2.

Additional Resources:

Bloom, Paula Jorde. *Great Place to Work: Improving Conditions for Staff in Young Children's Programs*, rev. ed. Washington, DC: National Association for the Education of Young Children, 1997.

Koplow, Lesley, ed. *Unsmiling Faces: How Preschools Can Heal*. New York: Teachers College Press, 1996.



Encouraging an Expressive Environment: Supportive communication from the inside out was developed by the Family Connections Project at Children's Hospital Boston, under the Innovation and Improvement Project grant from the Office of Head Start, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Authors of *Encouraging an Expressive Environment: Supportive communication from the inside out* are Mary Watson Avery, William R. Beardslee, Catherine C. Ayoub, and Caroline L. Watts. © Children's Hospital Boston 2008. All Rights Reserved.