

Guidelines for Adult Behaviors in ECE Programs

Adapted from *Your Child's Self Esteem*, by Dorothy Corkille Briggs

Adults are responsible for creating the conditions under which children can develop positive self-esteem through communicating love. Behaviors that effectively communicate love include:

- Genuine encounter: focused attention, being fully present
 - For the adult, self-acceptance frees one to focus on a child, unencumbered by inner needs

- Six aspects to creating psychological safety
 - Trust
 - Honesty, being real, authentic
 - Temper openness with appropriateness, but avoid mixed messages
 - Non-judgment
 - Blame – negative judgment – is at the core of emotional disorder and low self-esteem
 - Whenever personal worth is dependent upon performance, personal value is subject to cancellation with every misstep
 - Judgments are smoke screens that prevent love from coming through
 - Being cherished
 - Children survive on acceptance but they do not blossom on it
 - Respectful treatment is translated prizing
 - Being cherished as a person nurtures the feeling of being loved
 - Owning feelings
 - Psychological safety is eroded when a child's ownership of feelings is refused
 - Respect for a child's feelings is part of respecting his/her integrity
 - When one dictates the feelings a child should have, one literally asks him/her to give up ownership of his/her own personal, internal experiences
 - Provide for differences without withdrawing approval. Your way of seeing and feeling is not the only way of seeing and feeling
 - Empathy
 - One experiences empathy when one is being understood from one's point of view
 - Attitudes and feelings are more important than facts
 - Sensitivity to body language is essential to empathy
 - Empathy conveys love and sets judgment aside
 - Unique growing
 - The push toward growth lies within each child
 - Growth is movement by expansion and contraction. The option of retreat without dishonor makes any child more likely to embrace the unknown.

The experiences of the child that these adult behaviors are designed to produce are reflected in the following statements of high self-esteem:

- I am a separate, unique individual.
- I know I have value and worth because my parents (teachers) enjoy, understand, and respect me.
- I don't have to be a carbon copy to matter to the important people around me.
- I am cherished even when my behavior has to be limited.

Adults serve as mirrors for the child's emerging self-image. In this process, the following operate:

- Words are less important than the judgments that accompany them; non-judgmental communication is critical to ensuring the integrity of a child's self-esteem.
- A positive identity hinges on positive life experiences.
- Every child seeks a self-picture as capable and strong; they will behave according to their self-image.
- Most defenses are rooted in the child's secret belief that he is bad, unlovable, and unworthy. This secret feeling forms the core of neurosis. Neurosis is, after all, only the scar tissue around a psychological wound. The child with deep self-respect has no need for unhealthy defenses. Defenses are put up around weaknesses, not around strength and adequacy.
- Low self-esteem is tied to impossible demands on the self.

Who the adult is greatly impacts their working with children. Some of the adult expectations and the filters through which we see children include:

- Inexperience – adults lack specific experience or training.
- Borrowed standards – adults adopt standards that are not a part of who they are.
- Hang-over wishes – adults project their own hopes and dreams onto children and push them to serve as a stand-in for what the adult never did.
- Current hungers – similar to hang-over wishes, except the desires are in the present.
- Unfinished business – Unresolved experiences from the past, the pain of which produces behavior towards children that is driven by the unresolved experience, are triggered by the child's behavior.

Other Considerations

- Children rarely question our expectations; instead, they question their personal adequacy.
- Children's confidence has to be in what they truly are, not in someone else's images.
- Adults nourish from the overflow, not from emptiness.
- Adult (teacher) attitudes and self-image play a significant part in the quality of the mirroring (teaching). To be effective in supporting healthy growth in children, it is important to correct self-image deficiencies.

Corkille Briggs' descriptions lay out the challenge we face in teacher preparation, as well as program operation – many, if not most, teachers and administrators have weaknesses in their own psychological make-up that inhibit their ability to deliver on what Corkille Briggs says is critical for children's well-being. Collectively, these weaknesses produce ECE center cultures that fail to provide children what they need and perpetuate the cycle of children who grow up into adults with unresolved psychological issues and impaired functioning.



Eric Nelson, M.A.
Director, Consulting and Educational Services, Child Educational Center
Director, Outdoor Classroom Project
www.outdoorclassroomproject.org / www.ceonline.org
outdoor-classroom@caltech.edu

Why Outdoors? – The Silent Emergency

Children and Early Care and Education Outdoors

Young children who lack a high quality outdoor experience suffer from a wide variety of challenges including:

1. Physical health challenges such as obesity and poor physical development.
2. Obsession with electronic media.
3. Lack of a safe outdoor space to play.
4. Isolation from and fear of nature.
5. Lack of understanding of the interconnectedness of things.
6. A narrow and limited educational focus.
7. The epidemic use of drugs / mental and emotional health challenges / ADHD.

What is the Outdoor Classroom?

Education is not the filling of a pail, but the lighting of a fire. – Yeats

Goal of the Outdoor Classroom Project: *Increase the quantity, quality, and benefit of outdoor experiences for children.*

Outdoor Classroom Principles

- TIME – Children benefit from spending substantial time outdoors.
- ACTIVITIES – Even with a minimally developed yard, there are very few children’s activities that cannot be done outside, often more effectively.
- INTIATION – Children’s development is optimized when they spend a significant amount of time participating in child-initiated activities that are teacher-supported.
- NATURE – Children need a connection to nature in order to be whole.

Key Elements

- Teachers and program directors must *be interested* in the Outdoor Classroom and *committed* to making it happen.
- Teachers and program administrators must have the *skills and knowledge* to make it happen.
- There need to be *physical resources* that support the Outdoor Classroom (toys, equipment, etc.).
- Parents, executive management, and owners or governing boards of centers must *allow*, and hopefully *support*, the Outdoor Classroom.

Characteristics

- Children spend substantial *periods of time* outside, and it is easy and safe for them to get there; they are free to move easily between the indoors and outdoors.
- There is *space* for all activities including for running.
- There is a full range of *activities* for children to participate in, including many activities that are traditionally thought of as “indoor activities,” even when there isn’t a fully developed yard.
- While outside, children frequently initiate their own activities.
- Children are engaged with their activities and the teachers are actively engaged with them.
- The outdoor program supports continuous learning and the fact that children are learning all the time.
- The outdoor curriculum is a distinct and robust part of the overall program and changes with children’s changing needs and interests

Tenets

- Learning occurs everywhere and all the time.
- Outdoors, the process of mastering the fundamentals of literacy, math and science is greatly enhanced in a curriculum that is holistic and complete.
- The foundation of cognitive development and success in later life begins with, and relies upon, physical activity during the critical first five years of brain development.

Outdoor programs facilitate activities that are:

- **Hands-On & Interactive**
Children learn through physically acting on their environment. They need to handle, manipulate and experiment in order to learn.
- **Child-Initiated**
Child-initiated activities have no substitute; they optimize learning and build self- confidence, teaching responsibility and self-control.
- **Engaging**
The level of engagement with an activity determines when learning takes place.

Examples of Engagement

By producing engaging learning opportunities, the outdoor program and environment address the wide variety of children's learning and development needs.

- They provide frequent opportunities and lots of time.
- They provide projects and group activity that help children build communication skills and attain social / emotional mastery.
- Outdoor environments help children to build a healthy internal psychology with time alone.
- Being outdoors increases the ways of developing an interest in reading and writing.
- It fosters an interest in science and math.
- It creates a successful learning environment for the active learner.
- It helps to meet the health challenge by establishing a pattern of vigorous physical activity.
- By including space largely comprised of natural elements the outdoors enables children to connect to the natural world and learn from what nature has to teach us.
- Outdoor programs produce classroom harmony.

Examples of Activities (Notes)

Examples of the Outdoor Classroom (Notes)

How can a center cultivate or enhance its outdoor classroom?

The journey of a thousand miles starts with one step. – Lao Tzu

- Review perception survey results and discuss similarities / differences.
- Make easy changes.
- Create an ideal scene.
- Categorize components of the ideal scene.
- Establish individual priorities of the ideal scene components.
- Establish group priorities of the ideal scene components.
- Develop outcomes based on ideal scene components.
- Develop an action plan.
- Implement your plan.
- Review, revise, and make course corrections to your plan.
- Acknowledge everyone's efforts.