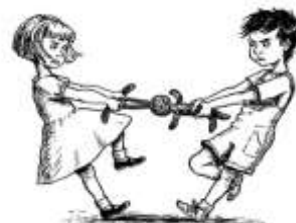


We Are Not ALL Friends But That's Ok: Reassessing slogans for social guidance

It's a busy day working with a group of young children. Social situations come and go – someone has taken a truck; someone is looking for a playmate; someone else is complaining that they didn't get a turn. Often in the busy reality of early childhood education, practitioners resort to "fast" ways to respond and provide guidance to young charges. And particularly in the area of social interactions, and the complexities that come with them, it can seem so much easier and productive to rely on slogans such as:

- "We are all friends here."
- "Sharing is caring."
- "Use your words."
- "You were playing together, you work it out."
- "That's the rule at kindy."



You won't be alone if you have heard these at your centre but it may be time to stop and consider whether these slogans are as useful as some might think or whether, if we are going to use a slogan or saying or rule of thumb, there may be a more appropriate and effective one to employ.

Here is a scenario to consider:

Brianna has just made a fairy game. She has a space in the play room marked out with pieces of material attached to posts. On her small mat she has arranged artificial flowers, a china tea set with glitter for food and small china fairies. Another child approaches Brianna's game and wants to play. As the educator working nearby what would your response be? What information might you need to guide your intentional teaching decision?

Initial responses for most people might be: ask Brianna if she is happy for the other child to play, support the other child to build their own game nearby if Brianna isn't happy to include them, or support Brianna to allow the other child to join in, or even to say "Brianna, sharing is caring!". However, on reflection, might our responses vary if we know that: Brianna always plays alone, or that her mother is currently very ill and in hospital, or that this is the very first time that the other child has asked to join a game, or that the other child always wants to take over when they see new materials being played with?

Would sharing be caring if Brianna's mum is sick and Brianna has built this small game as a safe space for her to care for herself in? Is it caring if the child who always wants to take over when they see what someone else is playing with, actually gets their way? Who wins in this situation? – certainly not Brianna who has HAD to relinquish her safe space and certainly NOT the other child who has just learnt that if they complain loud or long enough or if they look sad and despondent, they will get their way. No support was given here in helping them to inhibit responses and to problem solve what else they might do if they see something they want to play with.

Slogans can become simplified notions of what relationships entail. By accepting and perpetuating these views, we diminish children and their capacity to understand the complexities of relationships and to interact positively in a range of situations and with a range of people.

Here are some other points to consider:

The saying "We are all friends here" seems, on the surface, to demonstrate a well-meaning sense of caring. However, if we consider the issues of friendships from other angles we may decide that this is in fact not a useful statement to make to young children. Expecting everyone to be friends is not realistic in any group, or at any age. But it is realistic to expect everyone to care for one another or to be respectful of one another. Friendships are complex relationships and often young children have not reached a level of development to understand the reciprocity of friendship, and that this does not have to be an insular relationship. Taking away the pressure "to be, or to have, friends" can allow children the opportunities to experience a range of relationships.

Likewise, a reliance on "rules" can have some unintended consequences. In supporting the development of self-regulation, it is essential to link children's cognitive, language and emotional development. When children verbalise the reasons behind certain actions – "We won't run and jump off the fort because someone may be

underneath.” – they combine these areas of development, building understanding and thoughtful action. This experience is more conducive to growth than attributing an action to the fact that “It’s a rule at kindy”.

Similarly a comment such as “You were playing together, you work it out” will not be helpful to young children who have not yet developed the Theory of Mind needed to understand and predict another person’s mental processes, including their intentions, emotions, motives, thoughts. When we leave children to “work it out” it seems likely that the person who is loudest, strongest or fastest is most likely to have the upper hand.

Working with large groups of young children, early childhood practitioners are often faced with making “on the spot” decisions bearing in mind all that we know about the individual child and group dynamics. Relationships are complex and there are often no black and white rules. A clear long-term planning strategy for positive relationships can, however, provide a useful tool in clarifying goals and guiding responses.

In evaluating and integrating the current science of early childhood development, *From Neurons to Neighbourhoods* asserts that positive relationships require:

- Reliable support to establish confidence and trust,
- Responsiveness to strengthen agency and self-efficacy,
- Protection from harm and unforeseen threats,
- Affection to build self-esteem,
- Opportunities to experience and resolve conflict cooperatively,
- Scaffolding of new skills and capacities,
- Reciprocal interaction to build understanding of the give and take of sociability and
- The experiencing of mutual respect.



(Shonkoff et al, 2000)

From current brain research we know that “...overall neurological development which is arguably the cornerstone of cognition, emotion and all other aspects of development, thrives when parents and caregivers ...nurture an environment of healthy relationships” Responsive relationships have been linked with “stronger cognitive skills in young children, fewer behavioural problems, enhanced emotional and social competence, and long-term achievement in school.” (Nagel, 2012, p157)

Research also points to the importance of emerging executive function skills (including working memory, inhibitory control and cognitive flexibility) for a young child’s learning and development and the strong links between these skills and social and emotional growth.

“Children’s executive function skills provide the link between early school achievement and social, emotional, and moral development” and “...some researchers have hypothesized that the complexity of human social relationships, rather than the need to do higher math, is why the human prefrontal cortex is so large and our executive function abilities are so advanced.” (Center on the Developing Child, Harvard University, 2011, p5-6).

It is essential to remember that:

- Positive relationships are essential for children’s overall development and learning.
- Relationships are complex and require ongoing observation, reflection, pedagogical challenge, and the use of both overt and subtle supportive strategies.
- There is a need for an overall coherent long-term plan in supporting the development of positive relationships rather than a reliance on spontaneous responses to incidents as they arise.
- That such a plan, with a focus on developing positive relationships, can form the basis of curriculum planning, meeting the learning outcomes of the Early Years Learning Framework, and can (and should) inform the intentional teaching decisions that underpin planning for all parts of the day in an early education/care centre.

If, however, slogans remain a preferred option in a busy early education or care setting maybe it's time to consider some alternatives:

"We are all friends here."	"We are all practising to care for one another here."
"Sharing is caring."	"Let's think of ways to care for one another."
"Use your words."	"What words do you think you might say to...", or "Maybe you could try saying..."
"You were playing together, you work it out."	"Think about how you could solve this problem in a caring way. I'll be here to lend a hand."
"That's the rule at kindy."	"Why do you think this might (or might not) be the best thing to do?"

Relationships **are** complex, but when we remember that helping children to build attitudes and skills to navigate the complexities of relationships will in fact support all areas of their development, it makes the investment of time, patience, thinking, and energy so much more manageable.

Desley Jones

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