

When Teachers Face Themselves

Managing our Emotions when Children Seek Attention

by Tamar Jacobson

Not only are warm and supportive teacher-child relationships associated with higher levels of social and emotional competence, greater receptivity to the school setting, and better reasoning skills that result in higher achievement during school years, but there are indications that these important relationships can also play a part in buffering the adverse effects of stress on the developing brain (Lesley Koplow, 2007. Page xvi).

"This is one aspect of teaching that I hadn't thought of until now—the emotional power teachers have over children," Colleen (undergraduate student) (Jacobson, 2008).

Early one morning, at the conclusion of a national conference, I shared a taxi to the airport with another early childhood teacher educator. We talked about what I would be writing about in my next book. I shared that it was about how teachers' emotions affect their interactions with children, and especially with what they considered challenging behaviors. She was silent for a moment and then said reflectively, "I often think that people who work with young children have been emotionally wounded when they were children themselves. It is almost as if they have chosen the profession of early care and education because of that."

I thought about what she said and recognized that through the years as a teacher and professor I came to understand much about my own childhood experi-

ences through observing my interactions with children and their families.

It takes courage to face how the ways we were treated as children affect our disciplinary interactions, or relationships in general with the young children we teach. In many cases, it is not so much that this or that child has behavior problems. Often, it has to do with how we perceive those behaviors in connection with how we remember being treated as young children ourselves. We choose behavior management strategies that fit our comfort level. Our interventions in emotional situations are crucial in supporting children toward acquiring a positive emotional self-identity. If we are not aware of what causes us anxiety, or of our own emotional limitations, we might not be as supportive as we would like. We might unintentionally shame a child in the same way we were humiliated as children.

In a study about *scolding* in child care across the United States, Denmark, China, and Japan, Sigsgaard writes about why adults scold children (Sigsgaard, 2005). One of the reasons is simply, "... because the adults themselves were spanked or scolded as children." After reviewing the research about young children's emotions, Hyson summarizes several points including that emotions guide and motivate behavior "from infancy throughout life," and that all emotions, whether negative or positive are important for development (Hyson,

2004). She goes on to say, "An underlying message of all this research is that emotional development is too important to be left to chance. *Adults, including early childhood professionals, can make the difference, supporting positive development, being alert to possible problems, and intervening early and effectively*" (pages 9 and 10).

According to Hyson, "Whatever their beliefs, all adults who work with young children become genuinely angry at times," and it is helpful to identify which situations might be the cause of such feelings (Hyson, 2004. Page 79). She acknowledges that, "... modeling



Tamar Jacobson was born in Rhodesia, now Zimbabwe, and traveled to Israel, where she became a preschool teacher with the Israeli Ministry of Education. Jacobson completed a bachelor's, masters, and doctorate in early childhood education at the University at Buffalo (SUNY). As director of the University at Buffalo Child Care Center, she created a training site for early childhood students from area colleges including UB. Jacobson is a professor at Rider University, New Jersey, and participates on the consulting editors panel for NAEYC. She was chair of the department of teacher education at Rider University for seven years, a recipient of the 2013 National Association for Early Childhood Teacher Educators Outstanding Early Childhood Teacher Educator Award, and is a former fellow in the Child Trauma Academy. Jacobson is author of *Confronting Our Discomfort: Clearing the Way For Anti-Bias* (Heinemann, 2003); *Don't Get So Upset! Help Young Children Manage Their Feelings By Understanding Your Own* (Redleaf Press, 2008); *Everyone Needs Attention: Helping Young Children Thrive* (Redleaf Press, 2018); and edited *Perspectives on Gender in Early Childhood* (Redleaf Press, 2010), a collection of academic essays from a diverse group of scholars from around the United States and Europe. More information can be found at: <http://www.rider.edu/faculty/tamar-jacobson>

the expression of anger is a complex, difficult task. Although conscientious teachers avoid deliberately frightening children with excessive displays of anger, it is not easy to maintain a balance between allowing children to experience a model of honest anger and overwhelming them with inappropriate, poorly controlled emotion" (pages 78 and 79). So, how do we deal with the conflict between personal and professional when it does arise? In other words, I might understand what should be done and, even, agree with what I am reading or being told to do. However, at times my personal emotions become too strong, and I find myself behaving in ways that are inappropriate.

We all were children once, and, as adults, probably carry within us different ways of dealing with our desire for attention. Half the battle to understanding this very basic need would be to acknowledge it as important in the first place, at least giving ourselves permission for wanting it. When we remember what we did as children to be noticed and feel important to significant adults in our lives, it helps us to better understand and negotiate children's need for attention.

For example, I recently presented a workshop on the topic of children needing attention. I asked the participants to reflect on their own childhoods, and specifically about how they sought attention from their parents when they were little. One of the women shared that she sought attention by taking toys away from her younger sister. As we discussed the incidents further, she discovered that she was anxious and jealous of her younger sister, and that, in fact, she had taken the toys because she was hurting. I described to her an ideal scenario in which her parents, instead of admonishing her about taking away the

toy, might instead have held her in their arms and told her how much they loved her. I described them saying something like, "We do not expect you to love your sister until you are ready. We love her and you, and one day we are sure you will love your sister too—when you are more used to her being in our lives. We cannot allow you to take away her toys because that hurts her, but we love you nevertheless and understand why you are doing this."

We are not able to help children manage their feelings and behaviors without understanding our own.

The woman in the audience, who had shared her situation, began to weep. She said she realized that she always thought she sought out negative attention, when, in fact, she just needed to have her feelings validated.

"Attention getting" is a complex issue in our work with young children. I wonder how we are able to deal with children's needs, when we had to develop all kinds of weird ways of seeking attention ourselves? What makes us uncomfortable about desiring attention? Does it make us feel guilty or ashamed for even wanting it in the first place? One time when I presented a workshop for early childhood educators in Nova Scotia, I asked the participants whether they felt uncomfortable having the focus on them. The majority of the audience raised their hands. When I asked who liked receiving attention, a woman raised her hand cautiously to say that she enjoyed having the focus on her. She was one of two of three in an audience of 200 people, who raised their hands gingerly. I wondered, how might feelings of shame or guilt influence our giving or withholding attention from children? Do we see it as

children needing or deserving our attention, or *demanding* it? Do teachers and society prefer obedient, self-regulating children? For another example, on a flight from Philadelphia to Orlando last year, I heard a young mother apologize to the women seated next to her on the plane for the noise her 16-month-old child *might* make, even before her daughter had opened her mouth.

During professional development workshops that I facilitate all over the country, people share ways in which they were disciplined when they were children. Some of the punishments include being told they were bad or to "shut-up" when adults converse; given "the look;" spankings and beatings with hands, switches or belts; belittling with words such as, "How can you be so stupid" or being told that girls are not smart enough; mouth washed out with soap; having to kneel on rice for periods of time; being sent to their room; not receiving dessert or dinner; being pinched; and, slapped in the face especially for "answering back." Undergraduate students each semester describe similar experiences when asked about discipline in their childhood.

As attendees of workshops or students in my classes look at the list of punishments written up on the blackboard, or on screens, a silence invariably falls over the room. When asked what they see, without exception, they reply, "Child abuse." How do we imagine that disciplinary experiences such as these have not affected adult teachers of young children? Some might choose to do what was done to them because they believe it worked, and feel frustrated because discipline policies dictate different strategies. Some might decide to make changes in the way they set boundaries for children in the future. Whichever way teachers choose, I want to support them in understanding why they do what they do, specifically with regard to self-reflection and awareness of their own emotions. Teachers are not only dealing with subject content such as

mathematics, literacy or social studies. They also handle intense, emotional situations with young children moment by moment.

In my book, *“Don’t Get So Upset,”* I suggest undertaking an *“internal ethnography,”* in order to understand how we tick emotionally:

We can start becoming aware of the inner emotional life that we have developed since we were young children by observing our interactions and noticing the types of behaviors or emotional situations with children that make us most uncomfortable. Making a detailed and deliberate account of our inner-feelings is what I would like to call “researching the self.” In other words, I am suggesting we become observers of ourselves!

Researching the self is a deeply personal process. No one can tell you how to uncover your early childhood memories or which connections to make. There is no right way to do this, nor is there a correct amount of time it will take. Every person is unique not only in genetic makeup and life experiences, but in the ways we have chosen to develop survival skills or defense mechanisms (Jacobson, 2008. Pages 107 and 108).

In order to do this, I describe actions to take: writing about how we feel; interviewing family members to understand how it was when we were very young; reading books, attending workshops, participating in support groups and participating in therapy. The more we understand ourselves, the more likely we are to validate and accept young children’s emotions and become more comfortable in helping them express their feelings, instead of stifling them.

As a director of a large university child care center, I made sure to have boxes of tissues available for staff and parents. I tried as hard as I could to create a safe emotional environment for all the adults, who cared for our youngest children, so that they could genuinely share all those

complex feelings that rise up when we raise and educate them. To this day, I still write a blog as a journal of my developing emotions, and go to a therapist, who has helped me validate my own feelings and heal from my own childhood. It has helped me become more compassionate and empathetic to other adults, and certainly for young children (Jacobson, 2018).

Being a teacher of young children is the most powerful profession I know. It comes with an awesome responsibility, for it is up to us to offer children different options, new ways to solve problems, models of kindness and compassion, and relationships that will reinforce and develop a strong, positive emotional self-identity. So many times, I have looked into the eyes of a child who is angry, bewildered, frustrated, or who has given up the fight altogether, and I see myself, recognize those feelings, or remember the anxiety from somewhere deep in my childhood psyche.

Traditionally, teachers are taught management strategies as a way of acquiring some type of tool or “quick fix” to control children’s behaviors. My work is based on understanding our own emotions and biases regarding discipline in general, and, more specifically, how we react to children needing our attention. In other words, we are not able to help children manage their feelings and behaviors without understanding our own. Understanding our emotional selves helps us develop authentic relationships with young children and families. This is important because children’s emotional well-being is considerably influenced by the quality of our relationships with them. I wonder if instead of us saying, “She is just doing it for attention—ignore her,” we might instead say, “She is just doing it for relationship.” And then, would we have the option to ignore her?

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