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Bard Nursery School News
Carol, Frances and Allison

Learning Social Skills: For most children, nursery school is their first social experience. Our goal is to help each child make friends, develop a positive self imagine and become a caring member of a group. Social skills are at the core of all learning experiences. We know that children who develop positive social skills will have the greatest opportunity for success in school settings for kindergarten and beyond. Learning how to make friends, negotiate compromise, recover from disappointment, and express self appropriately happens over many years. Social skills develop along with language skills, impulse control and self regulation.

Once the year has gotten underway the children quickly make the nursery school their own and they are able to internalize the routines and the social expectations. They develop trust in their teachers and classmates. Our goal is to create a safe and nurturing environment while teaching social skills within natural interactions every day.

Making first friends is a joyous experience but it can also involve frustration and challenges. When conflict arises children may engage in typical preschool behaviors (hitting, pushing, and yelling). When this happens, we guide children towards appropriate social skills through discussion, conflict resolution and offering alternatives and appropriate responses to strong emotions. If these methods fail and a child is putting himself and others in an unsafe situation, we will gently remove the child from the area where he or she is struggling and offer a short break, time to settle down and gain control. Children are not isolated or given “time-out” – a teacher will stay close to support the child and help him or her express feelings while talking about how our behaviors impact other.

We use non punitive methods of discipline and guidance which are directly related to the child’s needs and behavior. Teachers never threaten, shame or ridicule. Teachers never use food (or withholding of food) to discipline children. Teachers model respect, care and listening. We accept the full range of emotions and help children learn to express emotions appropriately. We encourage authentic interactions and genuine friendships.

Positive Language

Positive guidance involves using positive language (telling children what they can do) and providing positive role models and supportive social coaching. Language used by adults is non threatening and non judgmental and focuses on the behavior and the impact of behavior – not the child.

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Principles of Positive Guidance

- Tell children what they CAN do (instead of what they can’t do). Focus on the DO’s instead of the don’ts.
- Offer children choices ONLY when you are willing to abide by their decisions.
- Change the environment instead of the child’s behavior.
- Work with children instead of against them.
- Give children safe limits and boundaries they can understand. Recognize their feelings without accepting their actions.
- Maintain your authority calmly and consistently. Notice the difference between a tone of voice that is clear, firm and guiding and one that is negative and scolding.
- Set a good example! Speak and act only in ways you hope children will speak and act.

-adapted from Jennifer Birckmayer
A Preventative Approach

We use a preventative approach to guidance and discipline – meaning that the environment and schedule is carefully planned to minimize problems and anticipate challenges. We know that when children are engaged in meaningful learning they are more likely to behave in productive positive ways.

Children make choices and engage in self-directed play: When children have the opportunity to make real choices and feel independent and in control within safe boundaries, they are less likely to struggle with being “told what to do”.

Routines are established and schedules are followed: A predictable daily schedule allows children to feel secure and to know what to expect. The carefully planned environment minimizes frustration, congestion and confusion.

Balance of activities helps children regulate activity: A balanced schedule alternates between active and quiet times, indoor and outdoor times, small group and large group times.

Keep expectations reasonable for the young child: Limit situations where children are required to sit, wait, or stand in lines.

Provide positive guidance: Ignore minor misbehaviors and offer positive alternatives and models whenever possible. Notice what children are doing to be helpful and productive. Use positive language – telling children what they can do (instead of what they can’t do).

Give clear boundaries and limits: Rules are simple, clear, and consistent and explained in a matter-of-fact friendly way. Teachers reinforce safe behavior with guiding and teaching tones.

Use a problem solving approach for conflict: View social conflict as a learning opportunity. Allow authentic expression of emotions and help children gain skills in conflict resolution through play, daily interactions and negotiations in the classroom.

Beyond Discipline to Guidance

By Dan Gartrell

Guidance is discipline without punishment – it is teaching rather than scolding.

Guidance is not permissive. It means using leadership skills that can be firm, but firm and friendly not firm and harsh.

The goal of guidance is not to keep children “in line” but to teach children life skills.

Young children who are learning social skills make mistakes. Learning social skills is a lifelong pursuit.

Adults can view children’s conflicts as “mistaken behaviors” rather than “misbehaviors”.

From The Power of Guidance and A Guidance Approach for an Encouraging Classroom.
Supporting Children in Resolving Conflicts: A problem solving approach:
The problem solving approach comes from the perspective that the social challenges and conflicts children face are opportunities for learning social skills. With supportive adults available to coach children during play, children can become successful problem solvers.

1. **Approach calmly**  Gently reach out to the children who are upset or angry. Use a calm voice to communicate a neutral attitude. Stop any hurtful behavior by placing your body in between children and using words to describe the behavior. “Pushing has to stop – pushing hurts”

2. **Validate emotions**  “You both look very angry about this!”
Children really need emotional validation before they can move onto solutions. This “emptying out” is an important step to being able to think clearly and move on. Use words that reflect the intensity of the emotion “I see you are very very upset about pushing and I see you really want the shovel back.” If there is an item such as a favorite toy causing anxiety – the adult can hold the item and keep it neutral while helping children talk about what happened.

3. **Gather information**  What’s happening here? – it looks like we have a problem.
Ask open ended questions that describe the details of the actions that have transpired rather than questions which are too abstract such as “why did you do that?”

4. **Restate the problem**  “I hear that Sam took the yellow shovel from you and you are angry about it and so you pushed him. Is that what happened?”
Check with the children to see if they agree that you have identified the problem
“Is that right? Sam wants the shovel and you want the shovel too”

5. **Ask for ideas and solutions to the problem**  Respect and explore the children’s ideas. Help children work out details to make the solution reasonable. For example, if a child says “we should share” the adult might suggest ways to share such as finding another shovel so the children can play side by side or setting a timer for 5 minutes so the children have a concrete way to take turns. Use the children’s ideas as much as possible.

6. **Give support and follow up as needed**  Make simple statements to support the children as they enter back into play -
   “It looks like you’ve solved the problem”
   “Next time we’ll remember that hitting hurts – we need to keep our bodies safe while we play”
   Check with children to see if the problem has been solved, especially children who have been very upset and may need an adult to play along-side them for awhile and offer coaching to help them enter back into play successfully.

*Adapted from Supporting Children in Conflict: Betsy Evans*