

## To Intervene Or Not To Intervene:

My first week at Patchwork

by Kerry Cerelli

Late afternoon on day four of the new school year at Patchwork, two little girls are outside on the back stoop, lounging in the shade and experimenting with water. They are scooping water out of a large bowl with measuring cups and then dumping the water back in, over and over and over again. They are completely enthralled with the process. “What are some words to describe water?” I ask them as I scoot beside them on the stoop, somehow hoping to follow their fascination and encourage deeper investigation. One three year old girl looks up at me with a furrowed brow, disengaged now from the kinesthetic learning with which she was so deeply engaged, and trying to make this cognitive shift that I - not so smoothly - interjected. She stares at me for half a minute and then says, “Water.”

I nod my head. “Yes, water is certainly a word for water.” Well, it *is* only my fourth day as a teacher at Patchwork, anyway. She returns back to her much more exciting task of pouring, touching, splashing, and feeling the water – essentially learning about water in the way we learn best, by doing.

Just then, the older girl – a five year old who is equally as fascinated by this never-ending task of water in a bowl exploration – looks up at me and says, “Liquid.”

“Yeah, water is liquid. What else do you know about water?”

“It’s wet,” she replies quickly.

On the verge of feeling like I may actually be a teacher, the next question begins to form in my head. I want to help them connect descriptive language to their tactile experience of water, so I am just about to ask them the perfect question...

“Hey!” yelps the three year old girl. While I was formulating the perfect question, the five year old had grabbed the measuring cup from the three year old and hid it behind her back. There is no more play. The younger one turns to me, lip trembling slightly, brow more furrowed than before. “She...she...she TOOK my cup.”

The five year old stands up with one hand on her hip and the other hand still gripping tightly both her measuring cup and the one she just snatched. She looks down at the three year old and says in her most grown-up voice, “Well you had two cups and I only had one. And whining won’t get anywhere with me.”

Ah, conflict.

Nothing can stop a moment in its tracks quite like a fresh upwelling of conflict in the midst of interactive play. The younger one is still staring at me, wanting me to do something, to help her, to make things right. The learning and exploring is done and the teaching moment is gone...or is it?

Is it my job as teacher to set right what went wrong? To inject justice in a clearly unjust situation? To be the bottom line of fairness?

When conflict arises at Patchwork – as it does hundreds of tiny times a day – what should we do? Since I saw the whole situation play out, I know exactly what *I* think about the situation. I think the older girl took something from the younger one and she should give it back. So I should make that happen, right?

I think about my own sense of justice and how it evolved. How did I learn about fairness? Messing around on playgrounds, being excluded from a club all the other cool third grade girls were in, getting grounded by my parents, watching high school teachers hand out Saturday detentions to class clowns, playing soccer with more than a few near-sighted referees, living abroad and feeling the burden of global inequities of power...

In other words, my sense of fairness evolved just as much from experiences of injustice as it did from witnessing justice. I learned just as much, if not more, when I saw a kid get bullied by another in the schoolyard and no teacher was there to intervene as I did when fair and equitable consequences were handed out by grown-ups for a fellow student's inappropriate behavior.

So, what really are we teaching a child when we intervene in a conflict such as the one that arose around the water bowl? What would happen if, every single time a conflict arose between children, some Big, Wise Adult swooped in, assessed the situation, and set things "right" according to a Big, Wise Understanding of Justice?

I think what might happen is that the child may quickly recognize a few things:

1. Conflict is a scary thing that adults protect us from.
2. An adult knows better than me what is right and what is wrong.
3. Whenever someone does something "wrong," I don't have to say it, because an adult will speak for me and take care of it.

And, perhaps most frighteningly,

4. It is not my responsibility to seek a solution.

If what we are trying to do at Patchwork is to fit children into our grown-up system of justice, we can do that. We can impose our ideas and our standards and, probably pretty quickly, the kids would pick up on our system and adjust accordingly. However, we must then ask the question: Is it more valuable for a child to learn to operate within an already established system of justice or for a child to cultivate her own inner gauge of what is fair, what is not, and what to do about it?

Though I think both are valid things to learn in this world, I tend to lean toward the latter. It is important, I believe, for a child to get a sense *in her body* of what it feels like when things are unfair. Equally important, I believe, is for the child to feel what it's like to be around conflict that resolves fairly. Only by experiencing these different points along the spectrum of fairness, will she begin to recognize, gauge, – and ultimately trust – her own sense of justice.

Additionally, she will get to try on different roles: what is like when someone takes something from me? What is it like when I take something from someone else? What is it like when I step in and defend someone? What is it like when I just sit by and watch? If we intervene in every small conflict, we deny a child the opportunity to play these different roles and decide for herself what roles she is most comfortable and uncomfortable with.

Furthermore, part of what makes Patchwork special is its emphasis on community – between student and student, between student and teacher, between staff and parents, between school and other organizations, and on and on. One cannot live in community without stumbling upon conflict. To truly live in community, one must learn how to live with conflict. If we protect children from all conflict, we are preventing them from creating true community with one another.

Getting back to the scene at the water bowl, I didn't really know what to do. I wanted to support the younger girl in telling the older girl what she felt was unfair. But truthfully, I had been too busy coming up with a stimulating "teaching" question to notice that she initially had two measuring cups to the older girl's one. I sat there for a moment, and then said to the older girl, "Well, it doesn't look like you're using the cups right now" for she was still standing there, clasping both with a hand still on one hip. She quickly handed the cup she had snatched to a two and a half year old boy who had been sitting by the bowl of water, watching intently all along, but not playing because he had had no cup for himself. The younger girl who had been wanting me to intervene looked at the little boy who was now cooing and giggling as he splashed with the cup, looked back at me, and then went right on dipping and pouring water with her one remaining cup.

It was a solution that hadn't even crossed my Big, Wise Adult Mind.