

GOT EMPATHY?

PLANTING THE SEEDS OF PERSPECTIVE-TAKING

by Julia Luckenbill and Trudi Schwarz

"I'm in the Marketplace parking lot, walking away from CVS, my two kids in tow. I'm on 'automatic pilot' as I walk to my car, thinking of the music lessons we have to get to, where my car keys are... Coming towards me is a full cart of groceries with two toddlers perched in the basket and a straining red-faced mom right behind. Our paths intersect. As luck would have it, the mom notices first and jerks her heavy cart to a stop. She is furious and spits out, *"It sure would have been easier for you to stop!"* Startled, I look up at the cart, the children, the groceries... Nothing comes to mind, and I keep walking, then comment, *"Have a nice day."* *"**** you!"* she calls back, extending her middle finger toward me as her wide-eyed toddlers and my school-age boys look on."

What can we learn from this unfortunate but not uncommon kind of interaction? At first, while experiencing it, it is easy to be blinded by anger and regret. It is tempting to strike back, to judge the mother behind the cart for swearing in front of the children, to feel wronged and misjudged. And then there are the four children looking on. What are they getting from this exchange? Adults, when faced with a social conflict such as the one above, often try to assess the situation: Was this an accident? Was she out to get me? We make assumptions, positive and negative. Those assumptions are deeply rooted in the things we see as children, and in how the world is explained to us when we are very young. This is our "lens of perception."

In this sea of emotions many adults have ready strategies to help re-regulate themselves. According to UC Davis psychology professor Ross Thompson, who researches emotional regulation, we divert our attention to safer things, seek help from others, reinterpret the situation, express our emotions in acceptable ways, or work to avoid such situations in the future. (Thompson, 1994). In this case, our narrator, as she walks away, has a diversion, her son. He says, *"Mom, why was that lady so mad?"*

"I think she's having a really bad day," I reply, and then say, *"Let's just let it be."* *"OK,"* he says as we walk to the car.

But how does our narrator find the emotional strength

to say this and walk away? How does she learn to calm herself down and then take the perspective of the young mother? This skill is not innate; it is learned. While young children have the innate ability to regulate their emotions by distracting themselves with a plaything, seeking adult helpers, changing the ending of scary plotlines, expressing sadness and grief, and leaving situations that are uncomfortable (Acredolo & Goodwyn, 2005), they do not yet understand the complexity of another person "having a really bad day." This key skill is one that adults can "scaffold" or coach for them.



This fall the CCFS staff is enjoying professional development on this very topic. We are reading and discussing a book, *Mind in the Making: The Seven Essential Life Skills All Children Need*, by Ellen Galinsky. Parents will remember being invited to read along in last spring's newsletter. We were also treated to a guest seminar with Ross Thompson, whose research in the area of social emotional development includes early empathy and perspective taking. Our staff has discovered that chapter two in the Galinsky book is the perfect guide to supporting perspective taking in young children. In this chapter, Galinsky says that even young toddlers can begin to think about other people's needs. This said, as she notes, *"it is far easier to want others to take our perspectives than it is to understand the perspectives of others."*(p.68)

Ross Thompson compared taking perspective to mind reading. He explained that it is challenging to guess what another needs, and that this skill takes practice. Galinsky's book supports this assertion, explaining that it "requires assembling our accumulated knowledge of that person, analyzing the situation at hand, remembering similar situations, putting aside our own thoughts and feelings, and trying to feel and think as another person must feel and think." (p. 71)

Galinsky notes that perspective taking requires three specific skills: inhibitory control, cognitive flexibility and reflection. Inhibitory control is the ability to suppress our own thoughts and feelings in order to consider the perspective of others, cognitive flexibility is the ability to view the situation in different ways, and reflection is the ability to

consider someone else's thinking in addition to our own. Who knew that mind reading was so complicated?

Thompson adds that this skill can be challenging for young children, not because they are not empathetic or able to take perspective (as researchers once believed), but because they are cognitively rigid in times of stress. Young children easily lose emotional regulation and with that, rational perspective taking. This said, most of the time (when they are calm) they have the ability to act in ways that show us that they do feel compassion and see other peoples' challenges.

It is exciting that young children are capable of taking perspective, and that adults can teach this key skill to children we once thought were too young to learn. Indeed, Gallinsky asserts that is essential that we do so, because "being able to take the perspectives of others is the platform to success." (p. 70) Gallinsky cites Ross Thompson's work here at UC Davis which echoes this finding, emphasizing that children who have had prior experience with perspective taking are better able to interpret social interactions when assessed at kindergarten entry (Ontai and Thompson, 2002).



So what can we do? Galinsky makes nine suggestions that teachers and parents can use to support perspective taking in children. They are:

- 1) **Practice what you preach:** take the time to really listen to children and to understand their perspective. This will help them learn to listen and understand others.
- 2) **View teaching children to be with others as equally important to teaching independence:** As a society we value independence and we spend a great deal of time and energy helping our children learn to be confident and independent. However, we spend most of our lives in communities with others, and learning how to function effectively in groups is equally important.
- 3) Understand that a **warm and trusting relationship** is the strongest foundation for learning perspective taking. Research has demonstrated that children who have a trusting relationship with their parents are better able to learn perspective taking later on.
- 4) **Help children feel known and understood:** Put yourself in the child's place and try to understand what the world is like from their point of view.
- 5) **Talk about feelings – yours and theirs:** Don't be afraid

to acknowledge your own feelings, but do so in a way that does not burden your children with your problems.

- 6) **Use everyday moments to talk about other people's perspectives:** Make conversation about how people are feeling a part of your everyday life. It is not necessary to give "lessons" on the subject, instead, look for natural opportunities to talk about it.
- 7) **Give children opportunities to pretend:** this gives them the chance to "try on" different roles and learn about what it is like to be someone else.
- 8) **Use other-oriented discipline:** Point out how children's behavior affects other people.
- 9) **Teach appraisal skills:** Teach children how to figure out other people's intentions and to react appropriately.



Clearly, if parents make teaching perspective-taking a priority they can have a huge impact on their children. Look for opportunities to teach these skills--at home with siblings and other family members, at the playground, and even in public places like the grocery store (or the parking lot!). As with any new skills, children need lots of practice before they internalize what they are learning. Patience and consistency will pay off.

Here at CCFS, we use and model all these tools. Students and staff spend a great deal of time watching children and asking themselves what children are needing and feeling in order to adapt to each child. We intentionally teach and scaffold social skills at all ages, even with our infants. We work hard to build relationships with every child, and use parallel and reflective speech to show children that we "get" what they are feeling. We seek out teachable moments as times for talking about perspective, intentionally design dramatic play areas, talk about the reasons behind rules, and guide children to reflect on challenges that happened in their days.

Let's look more closely at what goes on in the classrooms to see this theory in practice.

We can start at the very beginning, in the Infant Room, with children as young as seven months old. Each student caregiver works hard to establish a close relationship with her care group of two babies. As you enter the room you

hear the adults continually voicing what the babies are doing and feeling. If infant “Emily” is crying, caregivers will tell the other children, “*Emily is crying, she feels sad, she wants her daddy to come back.*” We also talk about children’s perspectives as interactions occur. For example, if Emily is seated beside infant “Tito” and Tito is reaching for Emily’s shovel, her caregiver will narrate, “*You are using the shovel, Emily. It looks like Tito wants one too. We can get him one, and he can dig in the sand next to you.*” This helps Emily know what Tito wants, and gives her a suggestion about how she could help him get his needs met, while keeping her toy. These narrations help the infants consider that other people have perspectives too. They guide the infant to see from another point of view. Finally, we talk about the reasons behind things: “*Stop. Biting hurts.*” By the end of their time in this classroom, many infants gesture to their caregivers “sad” when they see another child crying, and give gentle pats to sad peers. They cue their peers in social interactions, “*Gently!*”

As we enter the Toddler Room we hear adults continue to talk about what children are doing and what they are feeling, reinforcing the importance of perspective taking. Adults introduce more complexity to these statements, “When you took his toy, it made him really angry. I think he was still using it.” “*I hear you say that he is crying. I see that too. He is sad because mommy left.*” “*When you bang on the hamster cage it scares Walter.*” They are cued to reflect on ways they can help, “*Do you think he might want his family photo?*” The toddlers often comment in ways that show us that they are learning the language of empathy: “*Baby sad,*” and they make helpful suggestions to their peers for coping, “*Mommy comes back, pops and circle time,*” “*Need a teether?*” The toddlers even bring over pre-



sents such as the sad child’s special pillow or favorite doll from home. They also show us that they are ready to share their own perspectives, “*Mine! Find more!*” and that they are interested in other children’s feelings, “*Why is he crying?*”

In preschool, the process of talking about emotions and perspectives continues, again with increasing complexity. Circle time often includes activities and discussions that consider perspective in a wide range of venues. As a story is read, we may hear a teacher prompt, “*Why do you think the boy ran away? Do you think he was afraid of the bear?*” At circle time, a teacher might ask, “*Teacher Hannah is sick at home. What do you think we can do to help her*

feel better?” Circle time also brings votes, “*Tom thinks we should name the hamster Harvey, but Irene and Naomi think his name should be Hammy.*” This helps preschoolers see that different people have different opinions and ideas. Class meetings and puppet shows are also opportunities to talk about social situations and possible solutions.

Children’s conflicts are another opportunity for discussion in all our classrooms. We use the same set of conflict resolution steps in every classroom, adjusted for the age and capability of the children. Caregivers encourage older children to articulate “the problem,” how they feel about it, and what they think should be done. When each child has shared an idea, the children and teacher consider which ideas are ok with everyone, and together, solve the problem. As they grow older, the children become more capable of problem solving without adult help. The transfer of learning has occurred, and now they have the tools to negotiate social interactions while taking perspective.



In all these examples, we are intentionally teaching children at CCFS to consider that everyone has their own perspective. We are being mindful of teachable moments, and commenting on what we see in a way that shows empathy. We are guiding children to use reflective techniques through modeling and asking thought provoking questions.

So let’s put this theory into practice and return to the parking lot situation described earlier. Instead of perceiving it as just an unpleasant encounter to be endured, we can use it as a learning opportunity for the four children and for ourselves. That mother? Clearly she was having a horrible time. Perhaps her children wakened her at four in the morning and had been fighting ever since. She got the cart with the sticky wheel, heavy and hard to steer. Maybe she felt unnoticed, that nobody understood how hard it was to be her, and our narrator’s autopilot walk into her cart’s path just added to the misery, as did the chipper, “*Have a nice day.*”

What can we say to our children, if not on the walk back to the car, then perhaps over dinner? Sharing and reflecting together can be enlightening to everyone. “*I was really upset in the parking lot today when I nearly walked*

into that woman with the cart and she got so angry with me. I know that you boys were thinking a lot about it too. Let's talk about what happened." This direct conversation models to our children that the family is a safe space to discuss upsetting emotions and that, using problem solving, we may be able to prevent a repeat of the interaction. It also helps the boys to feel understood; this was a scary interaction to them, and it provides everyone with an opportunity to talk about feelings and perspectives.

While we all wish to shield our children from interactions such as the one in the parking lot, and from classroom conflicts, bites and collisions, it is possible to reframe these experiences from something to be shoved under the carpet, to a valuable happening. Children learn through experience, and we shape the lens that they use to see their world. If we are mindful of these teachable moments in the classroom and the home, and unafraid to talk about the

things that upset us, we can guide our children into becoming reflective and empathetic adults. Not only this, but by guiding our children to learn these skills, we can sharpen our own ability to mindfully interact with others.



Bibliography

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