



This second of a two-part series

examines using physical and/or psychological force to impose one's will on another. Part 1 highlighted which is using force as a survival reaction to protect oneself. The first article explains how children under stress see situations as threatening and react with a fight-or-flight response mediated by the amygdala, part of the limbic system within the brain.

Chronic stress leads to both reactive and instrumental aggression, but instrumental aggression is a learned response that becomes a coping strategy for the child. The intentional nature of instrumental aggression makes it particularly challenging for teachers. Fair-minded early childhood teachers understandably have a hard time with the injustices children like Mazie inflict on others. In all of her years as a teacher, Robin could not recall a child who showed more instrumental aggression than Mazie. In contributing background for the case study, Robin at one point reflected:

Most of the times the other children give in to Mazie's demands in fear of her retaliation. [The teacher feels like doing the same at times.] It is a daily challenge to always be close by to intercede and help ensure a safe and happy environment for the other children. I have noticed that the other children are becoming leery of her and keep their distance.

In working with children like Mazie, teachers may be tempted to let things go and mark off days on the calendar, or discipline strictly "to shame the child into being good"—an outdated and discredited practice (Gartrell 2006a, 105). As Mazie and her family experienced, when providers run out of patience and strategies, the ultimate punishment is often expulsion (Gilliam 2005). The challenge for teachers is that young children who do not learn alternative strategies to instrumental aggression may suffer continuing mental health problems (Kaiser & Sklar Rasminksy 2007). Gilliam phrases the problem this way:

About 8 percent of all preschoolers (children age 3–5 years) exhibit behavioral problems severe enough to warrant a psychiatric diagnosis. Behavioral problems in preschoolers

have been associated with later behavioral problems and poorer peer social standings during kindergarten. Furthermore, it has been demonstrated that behavioral problems during the preschool years are associated with decreased educational achievement test scores. (Gilliam & Shahar 2006)

Class meetings

Two teachers in one program used class meetings to teach the preschoolers direct responses to use when they felt threatened—like holding up a hand and saying “stop” or “help, teacher.” The teachers had the children practice the responses and actively encouraged their use. They found that the signals helped keep conflicts from escalating and facilitated resolution. These teachers taught the concept of classroom as an encouraging community and modeled the need for all—children and teachers—to keep it that way (Gartrell 2006b).

Conflict mediation

When children have a conflict, after calming them down, teachers often use mediation that helps the children work out the problem together (Gartrell 2010). Conflict mediation does not have to be done perfectly to reduce the child's aggression, which is reinforced when a teacher uses traditional discipline that “comforts the victim and punishes the perpetrator” (Gartrell 2006a). Robin used conflict mediation often, but had to work hard to keep Mazie engaged. Onlookers as well as participants gain when teachers use mediation; the whole class benefits from its use.

Comprehensive guidance

In this case study (as well as in the “Comprehensive Guidance” January 2008 Guidance Matters column), Robin uses comprehensive guidance to address Mazie's repeated serious conflicts. Comprehensive guidance includes an Individual Guidance Plan (IGP), which teachers most often develop and implement with families. IGP's can be used formally or informally. When staff and families cooperate, as in Mazie's case, the plan is more likely to be successful (see Gartrell 2011).

Meeting with the other parents

A difficult challenge for any early childhood teacher is communicating with parents when their child has been

harmed. This situation is one reason why the teacher first builds relations with families when they enter the program. While respecting the privacy of individual children, teachers need to meet with parents to help them understand the program's guidance policy and the steps staff are taking to ensure safety. These sessions need to be dialogues so that parents can express concerns as well as gain understanding. One father's attitude softened when he recalled that he too had shown aggression in his early years at school.

Work with outside professionals

As part of comprehensive guidance, with the family's permission, outside professionals can be enlisted for referrals, special services for the child, advice, and staff support. This strategy is not always possible—and like the others not a guarantee of success—but a combination of these strategies helps prevent the dreaded ultimate discussion of whether a child should continue in a program.

Conclusion

In his 2005 study, Gilliam identifies a