

## **Laying the Groundwork for a Successful Year** by Jo-An Vargo

The Primary School has been a busy place during the past two weeks. Students are being introduced to new friends and teachers. Teachers are setting up classroom routines, behavioral expectations, and beginning to assess student skills. I see many successful teaching strategies at work when I visit the classrooms. They reminded me that some of the most important work our teachers and students accomplish during the Primary School years centers around helping children develop their social and emotional intelligence. That's a big job for young children, and it's a crucial skill for future success academically and in life. Some of the strategies we use are familiar to you as parents, but others might not be part of your parenting toolbox. Therefore, I thought I'd provide a description of a few for your consideration.

We all want children who can live up to the Primary School values of being friendly, helpful, respectful, and responsible. But just singing our school song and honoring each other at Community Meeting will not accomplish that goal. Furthermore, it's human nature for us to experience uncertainty, frustration, sadness, and resistance. Those emotions may pop up several times during the day. How does a teacher respond?

Our teachers want to create a trusting relationship with each student that will allow the child to depend on the adults for consistency in their responses. We also want to create a desire for cooperation as children navigate the structure of their school day. A **consistent daily schedule** helps establish the routines of the flow of the week's days.

We preview the day and let children know when a change in routine will occur. We practice certain routines with our youngest children, so they'll know our expectations about moving through the cafeteria line or how to behave during afternoon pick-up. One of the preschool teachers noticed a little one who found the arrival time and group time particularly challenging. There were instances when frequent redirection was necessary. So the teacher took a picture on her iPhone when the child was putting her backpack on a hook and sitting quietly at group time. Upon sharing these pictures and praising the child for her "grown-up" actions, the little one beamed and responded, "I really CAN do it!"

**Specific compliments or "catching" the right behavior and calling attention to it allows children to begin noticing the behavior themselves.** Education professors Katharine Kersey and Marie Masterson call this the "make-a-big-deal" strategy. They wrote in a recent article for the NAEYC publication *Young Children*, "When you give attention, thanks, specific and effective praise, and recognition for a job well done, children feel proud of their contributions and know their responsibility is valued."

We help children give up a less desirable behavior and replace it with a more appropriate one by **creating a situation where the alternative is so undesirable, they will naturally prefer the other.** Moving from one "specials" teacher's class to another takes quiet travelling, a somewhat organized line, and keeping one's hands away from others. When you remember that we're eager to get to the next activity, that can be a tall order. If a teacher notices that we're not travelling in an orderly and quiet manner, the adult will stop the group and remind them. If that doesn't work, I've watched a teacher turn the class around, bring them back to their starting point, and have them practice the routine again. That means the class has lost valuable time in their next activity. Staying calm, creating a clear expectation, not blaming individuals, and letting the children experience the undesirable alternative will ultimately have

the desired results. It usually doesn't take more than one to three times. But if we let the disorganized routine continue, classes are interrupted by noise, students get confused about where they are going and can even follow another group to the wrong class because they are not paying attention, and frustration about "cutting in line" or being pushed can occur.

Some students have learned that apologizing quickly or tears may stop the adult from giving a consequence. So when misbehavior occurs, their response might be to apologize and get teary in the hopes of a verbal warning and no real consequence. Unfortunately, real learning doesn't occur, and it's likely that the behavior may be repeated in the future. Our teachers recognize that this is the time to put a smile on your face, use a gentle tone of voice, and say, **"I'm sorry that you're upset, but tears don't solve our problem. What can we do?"** Then the teacher gives the consequence and sticks with the child to support her/him by acknowledging positive behavior during the consequence. "I can see that you're working carefully to pick up all the materials now. Our room will be ready for afternoon choice when we get back from the library. There's just a bit more to do. Do you want to race the timer?"

Years ago, I had the honor of writing an educator's commentary to a chapter written by psychologist Mark Greenburg, PhD. in Emotional Development and Emotional Intelligence: Educational Implications. His research shows that when teachers respond to children by teaching social skills with high expectations, consistent responses, and clear rules, there is an improvement in social cognitive skills. Children have better self-control and a deeper understanding of how to resolve conflicts, think before they act, and plan more effectively when solving cognitive tasks. Holland Hall's teachers know that it's worth the time and effort to lay these foundational skills at the beginning of the year and stay consistent when guiding students' social and emotional learning. As the year continues, I'll share a few more strategies that we know are effective and can translate into a child's home life as well.