

CHAPTER 6

The Pivotal Skill

Expressing Strong Emotions
in Nonhurting Ways

SUGGESTED GOALS FOR READERS

1. Take an informed position about managing emotions as opposed to regulating impulses in relation to children progressing toward DLS 2.
2. Explain typical similarities and differences in the Level Three strong unmet-needs mistaken behavior shown by children struggling with DLS 1 and children making progress with DLS 2.
3. Explain how practices of developmental and intervention guidance can help prevent young children working on DLS 2 from becoming stigmatized by their mistaken behavior.
4. Form a statement regarding how start-up communication practices with families help build reciprocal family-teacher relations.

DLS 1

Finding Acceptance as a Member of the Group and as a Worthy Individual

DLS 2

Expressing Strong Emotions in Nonhurting Ways

DLS 3

Solving Problems Creatively—Independently and in Cooperation with Others

DLS 4

Accepting Unique Human Qualities in Others

DLS 5

Thinking Intelligently and Ethically

Starter Notes

Many interpretations of developmental brain research emphasize “the neuroscience of self-regulation” (Florez 2011; Galinsky 2010). **Self-regulation** refers to the ability to control thoughts, feelings, and behaviors “to appropriately respond to the environment” (Florez 2011, 46).

Among others who have researched this topic, Blair and Diamond (2008) find that “children who engage in intentional self-regulation learn more and go further in their education” (Florez 2011, 46). They cite the famous marshmallow study in which an examiner put a marshmallow in front of individual preschoolers and told them that when the tester left, they could choose to eat the one marshmallow or wait 15 minutes (!) and get two marshmallows (Blair 2002). According to their findings, the children who regulated their impulses and waited for two marshmallows did better educationally in the long term than those who did not wait (and probably had not eaten much breakfast).

Management, More Than Regulation

So why didn’t I phrase DLS 2 “self-regulating strong emotions”? After all, the term has an established place in developmental science (Blair & Diamond 2008; Florez 2011) and a tradition in the emphasis on self-discipline, deep rooted in many religions for thousands of years. The developers of Tools of the Mind, a research-based early childhood curriculum, argue that a part of self-regulation parallels Vygotsky’s concept of self-talk emerging into intentional thought as the child develops and is helped with emotional-social scaffolding (Bodrova

& Leong 2007). Galinsky (2010) explains how self-regulation is an essential process in developing executive function. These points are all well taken.

From the millisecond a child perceives threat, or an opportunity for personal gain, the neuropsychological response is not simply to either give in to or suppress strong impulses. In agreement with Elliot (2003), I think the term *self-regulation* is too basic to describe the instantaneous flood of perceptions, emotional interpretations, reaction formulations, response tendencies, behavioral manifestations, and resulting self-evaluative messages that happen within the mind and body of a developing child.

Here goes, my one rant. Maybe because impulsiveness is a part of my temperament, I have always been uncomfortable with the marshmallow study. Young children are working hard to grow out of developmental egocentrism. What kind of an experiment manipulates preschoolers by putting them in a position where they must fight temptation? It is hard enough for us *adults* to fight the devil’s favorite tool. I know just what my own reaction as a young kid would have been: (1) eat the first marshmallow; (2) try to convince the examiner that someone bigger than me took the first one, and since I was a victim, I deserved the other one! (Had to do something to fill in the 15 minutes! See what my nursery school teachers and family had to contend with.)

To illustrate self-regulation, Florez (2011) mentions a child who sits on her hands rather than hit another child who has pinched her. In my experience, children rarely react to being harmed by sitting on their hands (and perhaps gritting their teeth). Angry children who might want to hit back, but do not, find another way to express their turmoil: they might complain loudly, cry, bury their head in their arms and yowl, bang on a box with blocks, call for the teacher to help, or show any combination of such responses. Proudly, some of us have observed older preschoolers call for negotiation: “You’re not supposed to pinch; you’re supposed to use your words!” In an instantaneous mental process, their brains channel the strong emotions into other actions; they *manage* the expression of the impulse—deciding what to do instead—rather than simply regulate the impulse.

For me the issue is deeper than what a child does or does not do when another grabs a favorite marker or pinches. It goes back to the legendary dispute between Freud and Alfred Adler that resulted in Adler breaking from orthodox Freudian psychology (Ansbacher & Ansbacher 1956). Freud argued that human behavior—especially in the child—is the product of an ongoing, largely subconscious struggle between the id, the strong motivation of the pleasure principle, and the superego, the moralistic mental regulator of pleasure-seeking impulses.

In contrast, Adler’s thinking was that conflicts happen as the developing self of the young, with prosocial proclivities, comes into conflict with external authorities that mistakenly try to direct, control, and perhaps oppress that development. The consequence, in a term Adler originated, is the *inferiority complex* (Ansbacher & Ansbacher 1956). Adler’s position was similar to Friedrich Froebel’s before him: it is other people in children’s lives who misinterpret their rambunctious but mostly innocent behaviors as inappropriate, and in “correcting” that behavior, convince children that they are unworthy.

In the Adlerian perspective—and later, that of psychologists like Maslow and Carl Rogers—mental health isn’t about continuous self-regulation to repress internal negative impulses. Mental health is the ability to manage ever-changing thoughts and feelings to figure out what is the best thing to do, given the influences of significant others and the developmental status of one’s own dynamic brain.

For most young people as they grow, no wonder that even approaching a state of mental health is difficult. Without the benefit of fully developed executive functioning, they are trying to manage feelings and thoughts in the face of increasingly complex, sometimes oppressive, social influences—which any individual at that moment can only partially understand. And yet, even young children attain DLS 2 and make progress toward DLS 3, 4, and 5. For me, this is a miracle of human life, and our hope for democracy.

As individuals mature—needing less reliance on supportive others—mental health shows in increasingly proficient intelligent and ethical decision making. For Adler and Rogers, especially, a natural expression of mental health is in being a creative, contributing citizen. Education for democracy sustains democracy.

So, in guiding for DLS 2, teachers work to assist children toward reframing hurtful impulses into more mindful courses of action, a brain process not so much focused on regulation—stifling impulses—as on **managing emotions** amid a mix of possible responses. The child is only at the beginning of this most challenging lifelong human endeavor.

In education for democracy, the matter comes down to helping children express strong emotions in ways that don’t hurt others and don’t harm themselves. Through relationships with a child and family, TT members understand something of the child’s circumstances. They respect the young child enough to believe that they can learn not just what *not* to do, but what to do *instead*. Through being “unrelentingly positive” (a term I once heard teacher educator and author Marian Marion use), the teacher helps the child learn alternatives to stress-caused, stress-producing mistaken behavior. Management of feelings, rather than regulation of impulses, remains for me the path to civil functioning in democratic society.

Notice the phrase “in ways that don’t hurt others *and don’t harm themselves*” above. One common reaction in young children to perceived rejection by significant

others—such as by punishment—is to internalize feelings of abandonment in the momentous self-message: “I am unworthy.” This danger exists for children in the face of overt and covert rejection by teachers no less than family members. Some children externalize the resulting mix of negative feelings by acting out against others. Other children react by internalizing negative feelings, contributing to **early childhood depression** and associated mental health issues. The dynamics of fear of and resentment at perceived abandonment can play out in the internal manifestation of self-doubt and depression—hurting oneself—as well as by outward aggression.

An authoritative article (for me at least) is “Early Childhood Depression,” by Joan L. Luby (2009). The author manuscript version is available through US Health and Human Services Public Access with this link on the National Institutes of Health (NIH) website: www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3184299.

Anecdotes and Reflections

As young children gain a grasp of DLS 1, they have the emotional resources to begin to venture out in the program. In their efforts, though, they often experience conflicts, and they may react with dramatic outbursts—challenging for any early childhood professional. Again, the conflicts and reactions are due to being only months old and likely dealing with different degrees of adverse life experiences.

Anecdote 1: Reactive Aggression

This anecdote began as a video. It consists of two parts: a conflict scenario involving three children and a large group meeting addressing the topic of the conflict. These two scenes did not actually occur back to back as presented, but I have included the *intervention* large group meeting to illustrate how teachers can use a meeting to address conflicts that affect many or all the children.

In teacher Deb’s Head Start class, preschoolers had been using props introduced through stories in the dramatic play area. Earlier in the week another adult had made several magic wands from cutout stars stapled with ribbons

Children’s most serious conflicts are when they show Level Three strong unmet-needs mistaken behavior. Like children struggling with DLS 1, much mistaken behavior by kids working on DLS 2 is also due to strong unmet needs. Kids who have progressed to working on Skill 2, however, have gained enough of a sense of belonging and self-worth that, as mentioned, they participate more in the program. I sometimes say that a distinction between working on Skill 1 and working on Skill 2 is that the Level Three mistaken behavior of children struggling with DLS 1 is sometimes tumultuous, while the Level Three mistaken behavior of children who are tackling Skill 2 might “only” be disruptive.

Illustration. Meredith leans toward the blank far corner of an almost finished (“loaded”) finger painting and is accidentally bumped into the picture by another child. When struggling with DLS 1, Meredith (with paint-covered arms and hands) might have screamed and grabbed the “offending” child. When making progress toward DLS 2, Meredith might scowl at the kid, but scrunch up the paper, shove it on the floor, and yowl. A teacher who has a relationship with Meredith will view the second reaction as definite progress—given the probability of the child’s earlier reaction.

on heavy-duty straws. Boys and girls had been playing with the wands, and on this day, Deb discovered that only three wands were still operational. All three were in use. Hallie joined the children with the wands and asked if she could play with one. Deb nodded and smiled sympathetically. She helped the children understand that Hallie was asking to use a wand when they were finished. They agreed, and Hallie, looking sad, sat on a bench to wait.

Anya, holding her wand, went into a special cardboard play area. Jolie, holding her own wand, looked at Hallie and followed Anya. She returned with both wands and gave one to Hallie. Anya stormed out after Jolie and said, “Hey, I wasn’t done with that!”

Jolie turned to Anya and said calmly, “Well, you put it down. And when people put it down, it means they are done.” Anya shot a glance at Deb, who nodded in agreement with Jolie, as this was a policy the group has decided on at an earlier developmental group meeting.

Anya dramatically held up both fists, glared at Jolie, and shouted, "I'm not playing with you ever again!" Anya lamented, "I wasn't done with that," and went back into the play area to crawl under a table.

Deb followed, knelt by the table, and said, "Anya, you sound very upset." Anya tearfully said, "Jolie took my wand and gave it to Hallie." Deb asked in a low voice, "Did you lay it down?" Anya nodded. Deb continued quietly, "When you put it down, Jolie thought you were done."

Hallie and Jolie came into the play area with their wands to see what was happening. Deb said, "Hallie and Jolie, look at Anya's face. She looks sad. She wasn't quite done with that wand. When you are done with your wand, can you give it to Anya?" Hallie and Jolie both nodded and left.

Deb turned back to Anya, who stated, "I want the gold one." Deb told her, "You'll have to wait," then added, "You know what? We can make one. We could trace a star and cut it out and find a stick to put it on."

Anya perked up: "I have an idea." She moved quickly out from under the table, past Deb, and sat down at the art table. She looked for the star stencil and yellow paper. Deb made sure Anya had the materials and watched as Anya made a new wand. Deb assisted with the ribbons and stapling.

Later Deb saw Anya and Jolie playing together and smiled. Sharing translucent pegs and deciding with very friendly exchanges where the pegs would go on the light board, the two played together for more than 20 minutes.

Observing a general problem with sharing and taking turns, the next day Deb and the TT held a large group meeting with the children. Deb reviewed the meeting guidelines the group had previously agreed to that were posted at child level (making it a functional literacy activity):

- Take turns talking and listening.
- Be kind to each other.
- Be careful about using names.

Deb: I want us to talk about playing together, but first Tilly Bear, Tommy Bear, and Frisby Frog are going to give us a play.

On a homemade stage, Shane and Loretta, two TT members, have on three sock puppets. Tommy and Tilly are playing. Frisby asks to join. The bears in unison say, "You can't play, you're too small." Frisby crumples up and looks sad.

Deb: Frisby looks sad. (*Pauses*). You know how in our group we always try to let other kids play with us. What can we tell the bears?

Anya: Let the frog play 'cause he can hop.

Carlos: The bears don't got room. They are too big.

Boone: They should get Teacher!

Deb: (*Smiles; she can often count on Boone.*) You guys have some good ideas! Let's see what Frisby does.

Frisby: I'm not too little. I can hop. (*A long sock puppet, Frisby does some amazing hops.*)

Tilly: Ho, you can really hop! (*The three cavort together on the tiny stage, then bow, and the group claps.*)

Allyn (*a true country kid*): But Teacher, bears eat frogs!

Deb: (*Smiles; replies quietly.*) You are right, Allyn, but not our bears at Head Start. (*Says with her large group voice.*) I wonder what we learned from the puppet play?

Ellie: Let kids play.

Boone: Get Teacher?

Deb: Every time or just when there is a problem?

Jolie: Just if there is a fight.

Deb: (*Thinks but doesn't say that Jolie might someday be a teacher.*) Yes! Get Shane, Loretta, or me and we will help you make the problem better, okay? (*Kids nod.*) The sock puppets and stage will be in the dramatic play area if you want to use them.

Reflection. During the conflict, Anya displayed *reactive aggression* in a way that kids making progress with Skill 2 often do. In my discussion with Deb, she mentioned that when Anya started the program, she got very upset easily and often. Deb said Anya seemed less stressed recently. In this

situation, Anya's shouting, gesturing with her fists, and running under the table were understandable to the teacher. Anya felt hurt and betrayed by Jolie. Anya managed her impulse of reactive aggression in a way that did not solve the problem, but also did not physically hurt her mate. It did not help Anya's feelings when Deb chose to reinforce the group's established policy rather than to mediate in the situation. (Perhaps on that day Deb judged that reinforced guidelines and their consequences was a lesson Anya could benefit from.) So, Anya went under the table.

The bottom line in guidance is to support each child's feeling of acceptance as a member of the group and of worth as an individual. Even as TTs guide children toward progress with Skill 2 and beyond, they work to sustain the gains they have already made. Deb supported Anya's gain of DLS 1 here by looking beyond the child's outburst and recognizing the progress Anya had made with Skill 2—how hard the child was trying to balance her strong feelings with the nonhurting expression of them. Deb also recognized that Anya had a right to her feelings and understood that anyone might feel upset in a similar situation.

By acknowledging Anya's feelings and explaining them to the other girls, the teacher demonstrated acceptance of Anya. Through reinforcing the classroom policy with the child, Deb also helped Anya recognize that there was a reason behind Jolie's action, and that everyone is expected to follow class guidelines.

In the next day's large group meeting, teachers Deb, Shane, and Loretta worked as a team to encourage the children to problem-solve play conflicts. Notice that they did not single out the three children who had the conflict. The objective was to teach about cooperatively resolving play conflicts going forward, not to return to conflicts of the past. When there is a future conflict, the TT can now refer to the group meeting to remind children about the inclusive guidelines for playing and, if needed, mediate.

Anecdote 2: Instrumental Aggression

This anecdote has appeared in my writings before. It is a consolidation of a couple of observations from child care programs in urban settings.

In early childhood education, puppets are magic, and they can be helpful in teaching to resolve conflicts. With young children, the adults do the puppet role playing and guide the follow-up discussion. Young children take weeks if not months to get the hang of large group meetings (Vance 2014). Puppets can help—as long as the bears eat mostly blueberries and are friendly to the amphibians.

Kayla, 58 months, liked to shoot hoops with a favorite ball, but today Shoggie (long o, hard g), 46 months, had it. Kayla approached Shoggie with another ball, but the smaller boy wouldn't trade. Kayla told him, "That is the ball for big kids," but Shoggie shook his head no. Frustrated, Kayla knocked the ball out of Shoggie's hands. She grabbed it and started to shoot hoops. Shoggie sat and yowled. Teacher Jasper calmed Shoggie and looked at Kayla, who came over holding the ball. "Shoggie wouldn't trade," she said.

"I think we have a problem here," Jasper said. "Let's sit down, get cool, and work this out." Kayla and Shoggie both knew Jasper was going to mediate, a common practice with the group. They sat down. Shoggie followed Jasper's lead and took deep breaths with the teacher. Kayla watched and waited. Jasper put an arm around Shoggie: "Let's hear from the youngest first," Jasper said. "Shoggie?"

As Shoggie shared, Jasper guided Kayla not to interrupt. Then Jasper gave Kayla a turn to share. Jasper repeated each child's account, and the children nodded that Jasper had it right. Jasper then said, "So how can we fix this problem?" Realizing that she was not going to be punished, Kayla became less defensive. "Maybe Shoggie could get a short turn, and then it is my turn." Shoggie agreed and soon gave the ball to Kayla. Jasper stayed near and thanked Shoggie for giving over the ball. Before Kayla started shooting hoops, Jasper had a private guidance talk with her and nudged the child to use a better response for next time.

Reflection. Jasper and the TT had been teaching the use of conflict management and guidance talks from day one, starting with developmental large group meetings. Jasper had built a relationship with both children outside of conflict situations—which helped Shoggie again feel worthy as a member of the group, and Kayla to realize she would not be stigmatized by punishment.

This anecdote provides an illustration of how mediation and individual guidance talks work. As part of the process, Jasper gave clear support to the child who needed it, Shoggie. But, by not using conventional discipline—comforting the wronged child and punishing the instigating child—the teacher was also working to prevent a bully-victim dynamic between the two children. The mediation helped each child feel they were worthy members of the group who could solve problems together. When used together, the practices teach kids like Kayla that they can continue to learn to express strong feelings in nonhurting ways. By the successful mediation, Jasper sustained an encouraging early learning community for all (including the onlookers—other children in the group).

Often in older, veteran preschoolers who are between Skills 1 and 2, teachers see the type of intentional aggression that Kayla showed—imposing her will on Shoggie to get the ball. The unmet safety needs for Kayla seemed to me to be aggravated by her “senior” status in the program—perhaps also due, perhaps not, to the home environment. These veteran preschoolers know the ropes. Especially if they have been in the program for more than a year, some of these kids become accustomed to the point of being bored with the same old daily routines, materials, and activities. They need new experiences appropriate to their age and status. In my view, in particular in multiage programs, the veteran preschooler issue should be studied more. (We return to the discussion of addressing the needs of older preschoolers on page 99.)

Communication Practices for Building Relationships

Acknowledge and Pause

A common use of the technique of acknowledge and pause is to lead into a contact talk. Instead, in Anecdote 1, in a quiet way, Deb uses it to move into a guidance talk with Anya when she says, “Anya, you sound very upset.” Anya tearfully says, “Jolie took my wand and gave it to Hallie.” Deb again uses acknowledge and pause: “Did you lay it down?” Anya nods. Deb continues quietly, “When you put it down, Jolie thought you were done.”

Give Encouragement: Private to Individuals, Public to the Group

Deb then privately encourages Anya to keep the child from having to wait: “You know what? We can make one. We could trace a star and cut it out and find a stick to put it on.” Anya says, “I have an idea,” and moves quickly out from under the table, past Deb. The child sits down at the art table and looks for the star stencil and yellow paper. Deb continues nonverbal encouragement by making sure Anya has the materials; she assists with the ribbons and stapling. Later, Deb smiles when she sees Anya and Jolie playing together—a gratifying act of reconciliation taken by the children themselves.

Levels of Mistaken Behavior

In this section we continue our investigation from Chapter 5 of Level Three mistaken behavior.

To reiterate a key idea regarding mistaken behavior, if during conflicts TTs focus on the level of mistaken behavior, they are less likely to be affected by moral issues in the conflict and less inclined to punish. They are in a better position to guide and teach. To illustrate in Anecdote 1, teacher Deb recognized that Anya was still showing strong unmet-needs mistaken behavior—but had made progress in how she was expressing her strong emotions. With this understanding, the teacher did not focus on the inappropriateness of Anya’s outburst but on how to guide Anya toward further progress in her emotions management.