

# Beginnings Workshop

Michael Gramling, Human Development Specialist and lifelong social justice advocate, found his professional home in 1979 when he discovered Head Start and embraced its values and its goals — particularly those of enhancing the dignity of families living in poverty and of supporting parents as the primary educators of their children. The body of work he has produced since then reflects his values, his academic training (M.A. in Human Development, Pacific Oaks College), and his real-life experiences as a Head Start parent, teacher, and manager.

In his current position as Human Development Specialist at T/TAS, Michael crisscrosses the country working with professionals in the field to develop more responsive approaches to the individual needs of children (particularly those of children who fail to thrive in typical early childhood environments) and more targeted in their support of parents and their decisive role in the success of their children. Michael is the primary author of the national 2003 Head Start Family Literacy Project training as well as the T/TAS publications *Positive Approaches to Supervision, and Positive Guidance: Making A Place for Everyone*. Most recently, he was honored to be a contributing author to the 2006 Zero to Three publication *Learning to Read the World*. With his wife and colleague, Teresa Christmas, he home schools his two youngest children, Magnolia and Amelia, (now in their teens) and welcomes their company on his travels and their assistance at his training sessions.

## what's the risk of no risk?

by Deb Curtis

The boys in this photo were engaged in a serious experiment. They were working together to figure out how to get the gray tub to slide straight down the roof of the house without tumbling over and bouncing off. Some of the boys climbed up to the top of the roof to balance the tub on a wooden plank. They tied a string to the tub and threw the string down to the boy at the bottom, who is pictured in the midst of trying out the experiment.

Study the story and photo above. If you were the adult on this playground and saw these four-, five- and six-year-old boys at play, what would your initial response be? Would you:

- Stop them immediately because you think someone might get hurt?
- Remind them of the rules about no climbing on the playhouse roof?
- Ask them what interesting ideas they are up to and how you might help?
- Other...

In the child care program where I worked for 10 years the staff had very different reactions to situations such as the one described here. A number of us were continually fearful that children would get hurt; others were concerned that if children didn't learn to follow rules they would have a hard time following the rules when they got to public school. Some were worried about parent concerns and legal actions. And still others loved to join in and even help create the adventurous ideas and risky activities that children regularly pursued.

For a long time we didn't openly discuss our differences and there was an undercurrent of tension among us. Of course, because all of us wanted to keep the children safe, usually the most fearful teachers ended



PHOTOGRAPH BY THE AUTHOR

up persuading us that we should enforce the rules. Things started to change when a new director was hired for our program. She immediately picked up on the divisions among the staff and was determined to have us air our differences and come together as a team. She wanted us to think through our ideas and define some shared agreements about what we thought was important. Just stopping children's risk-taking behavior and robotically following the rules were not options in her mind. She also advocated that children deserve and benefit from challenges and adventures that include risk. Their self-esteem grows, along with their physical and mental abilities as they negotiate risks appropriate for their personality and development. She wanted us to keep children safe, but insisted that it was just as important for us to guide them in becoming thoughtful decision-makers, able to one day assess and safely negotiate risky situations on their own. Her favorite saying was: "What risks do we take if we don't help children to negotiate risks?" She also truly believed that all of the teachers' perspectives were important to ensure children stay safe as well as help them develop and thrive. She led staff meetings where we:

- Discussed our life experiences and how they impact our reactions to these challenging situations with children.
- Talked about the children's and families' points of view and what they deserve from us.
- Reviewed the most current information from licensing and best practices for risk and safety in child care programs.

It was a long and sometimes bumpy process, but it really helped us come to respect each others' ideas.

For example, in the situation above we agreed that the children were capable of climbing the play house and negotiating this experiment, but the area wasn't designed as a fall zone so it wasn't a safe situation to let happen without adult supervision. We came to an agreement that for this particular situation we would support the children's valuable collaboration and experimentation by making sure an adult was there to supervise the climbing and to ensure that the area below was clear and safe. The children had a great celebration and new feelings of camaraderie within the group when the experiment was successful.

By studying situations in this way, our staff came to value the children's ideas and competence. We listened to each other and worked together to make sure activities were safe, while still encouraging rich learning opportunities for the children. The following outlines the elements that I've discovered help with this process.

### Know your disposition toward risk

We all have different reactions to challenging situations and what we perceive as too risky. It is important for early childhood professionals to examine our views of these situations and make distinctions between our personal feelings and experiences, our coworkers' points of view, and children's strong desire for autonomy and competence. There isn't one right answer in these situations. Some of us may be too fearful and keep children from the opportunities they deserve and are capable of, while others of us encourage or allow risky situations that may not be safe for all children. It takes acknowledging our own disposition and working together with our colleagues to ensure children are safe as well as appropriately challenged.

### Ensure your own comfort and engagement

Teachers should be able to feel comfortable and engaged with what goes on in their work environment. Being asked to supervise activities that are outside our comfort zone isn't useful for us or the children. Also, having to stifle our excitement about offering new challenges for children creates a tense work environment. If we are feeling nervous or resentful about something that is going on, we should be able to acknowledge our disposition and need for support so our feelings don't negatively impact the children and each other. In the child care program described above, we successfully negotiated a situation like this

to support everyone's comfort level and help children take appropriate risks for their skill and development.

Several of the older children in the program were eager and able to climb the smaller trees in our yard. A number of the teachers were very fearful of this and others really thought it was something that these children deserved to have as a part of their childhood, just like they did when they were young. We decided that to keep the activity safe, the children needed supervision and guidance when they were climbing the trees. So we agreed that the children had to be able to climb the tree on their own, a teacher would be right there to supervise, but no teachers could lift children up. Also, if children wanted to climb a tree they had to alert one of the 'tree-climbing' teachers (those who were enthusiastic about supervising and able to support and keep the activity safe). If none of those teachers were available, then children had to wait until they were. The children easily accommodated these rules and came to respect all of the teachers' points of view.



PHOTOGRAPH BY THE AUTHOR

### Examine your view of children

Oftentimes we react from our own fears and stop children from negotiating a new challenge without

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taking into account their skills, competence, and determination. When I first began working with toddlers, I often stopped them from doing things I thought were too risky. Unconsciously I saw them as fragile babies, not really aware or capable of negotiating the world around them or the situations they got themselves into. This photo of Shaelyn finding a way to reach the bar reflects one of the situations where I had this view. The playground was not designed for my 18-24-month-old group. Some of the equipment was too tall or too big for their smaller bodies and strength. This didn't stop the children. They regularly wanted to try out the equipment, finding ways to accommodate the challenges.

The strategy the children discovered for getting up to the bar was to move a chair underneath it, so they could climb up and suspend themselves above the ground. I immediately stopped the children from doing this and moved the chairs back to the table where they belonged. I noticed that I was stopping this chair-climbing many times a day, so one morning I decided to stay close to intervene if necessary, while observing and assessing Shaelyn as she negotiated this challenging task. It took her a great deal of effort to move the chair and careful coordination of her body to get up on top of the chair and avoid bumping her head on the bar. The hardest and most exhilarating part for her was holding on to the bar and lifting up her feet. It took all of her strength as well as her courage. After a few seconds she let herself drop back to the chair and grinned from ear to ear with her accomplishment. Studying her body



*An engaging environment for toddlers can prevent accidents*

language, I could see that she was quite capable of negotiating this challenge and the determination on her face told me she knew it!

The more I spend my days with these very young people the more I have changed my view of them. I have discovered that the children usually pursue only the challenges that are within their abilities, using caution and remarkable problem-solving strategies. I have come to see that if I stay close to intervene if necessary, observe to get to know individual children's

dispositions and skills, I can make sure I keep them safe while supporting their instinctive drive to challenge themselves and gain new competence. There is great reward in watching the children's unwavering determination and seeing their elated faces when they accomplish something they have worked so hard on.

### **Inform yourself and practice risk management**

There are numerous resources in the early childhood profession as well as in the larger world to help us learn about risks and how to prevent serious accidents in our programs. Most of these resources make the distinction between a risk and a hazard. A risk is something that is possible to negotiate and may be appropriate for particular situations and children. A hazard is something that is inherently dangerous and needs to be remedied, such as a climbing structure with sharp edges or loose boards that could seriously injure children if they play on it.

There are also distinctions between risks and hazards that can result in serious injuries and even death, and those more common childhood accidents that cause bumps and bruises such as skinned knees and cuts and scratches from prickly bushes. When these common accidents occur, children benefit from knowing that there are caring adults and other children to soothe their feelings and ease their pain with caring words and a colorful Band-Aid®. A useful resource for studying these distinctions is *The Risk Pyramid* in Margie Carter's and my book *Designs for Living and Learning* (2003).

### **Engage families in conversations about challenge and risk**

Families have strong feelings and concerns about their children's safety, and rightly so. The director of our child care program believed in the importance of involving families in conversations and decisions along with the staff about everything, including the approaches we developed for challenge and risk. She held meetings where families worked with staff to study children's developmental tasks requiring challenge and risk. She formed a safety committee whose role was to help create policies and monitor the risk and safety issues in the program. Often staff and parent committees formed to help think through the benefits, risks, and rules for new programs, activities, or equipment that might involve unfamiliar challenges and potential

risks for the children, such as installing a new outdoor climber.

### **Create an environment for safe and appropriate challenges**

The environment we provide for children is central to the work of offering children rich experiences while keeping them safe. We certainly must be vigilant about ensuring there are no hazards in order to prevent serious accidents. But we can also go too far in 'childproofing' with the result being that children have nothing interesting or challenging to do so injuries are more likely to occur. This was true in the first program I worked in with infants and toddlers. On behalf of keeping the children safe, the teachers had literally stripped the environment of almost everything except the furniture and a few toys.

I immediately began to add significantly more interesting materials in the environment for the children to use. At first the teachers were worried, but after a few weeks one of them said to me, "We used to have at least one accident report a day and now we rarely have any." Before, the only challenging activities in the environment for the children to do were to climb on the furniture or bump up against each other, so injuries occurred more often. Engaging the children's minds and bodies by enriching the environment helped focus their energy and instinctive appetite for exploration and interactions which resulted in fewer falls and scuffles. Remember, you are there.

When our concern for safety leads programs to eliminate anything that might be a challenge for children, we diminish the role of the teacher. I have heard this referred to as 'teacher-proofing' the curriculum. It doesn't matter who the teacher is or what she does, because there is a rule or prescribed way to do everything. I believe this leads to teachers taking a less active role in thinking through safety issues as well as supporting children's learning.

I remind teachers that the children are not alone in the room. We are there, too! It is our job to supervise children's safety as well as provide for their curious minds and active bodies. When I show teachers the unusual activities and materials I offer children they often say to me, "Won't they break it?" "Won't they put it in their mouth?" "Won't they get hurt?" I always respond, "I'm right there doing this with them, so I won't let them get hurt." We should never offer children experiences that

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*Toddlers earnestly learn to use scissors. They won't get hurt because the teacher is right there to supervise and coach them.*

need supervision if we aren't going to be there to support their safety, as well as their learning processes. We must take steps and be respected as competent professionals who are responsible for the safety, care and education of the children we work with.

### **Provide challenging alternatives**

Keeping children safe is paramount to the work we do every minute when we are with children. We must always stop or prevent situations that threaten children's well-being. But when we do intervene on behalf of children's safety, we can do it with the understanding that life has many challenges and risks, and children deserve experiences and tools to learn to negotiate on their own. The saying, "With few risks there are few rewards" is very true. Learning involves risk. Relationships involve risk. Feeling competent and confident in the world requires meeting a challenge and working to overcome it.

When children are involved in a situation we think is too risky or dangerous, rather than just stopping them we can offer alternatives that keep them safe while preserving opportunities for them to develop to their fullest potential. This work requires that we pay attention to the children's perspectives, use our power thoughtfully, and act responsibly. We can ensure that children have a childhood where they feel exhilaration, while still being protected and supported by adults and their friends. We can support them in learning that determination pays off, and they can become competent decision makers, able to assess risks, contribute to the well-being of others, and reap the rewards of their efforts.

### **Reference**

Curtis, D., & Carter, M. (2003). *Designs for living and learning: Transforming early childhood environments*. St. Paul, MN: Redleaf Press.