

From Rules to Tools

After I had started working in a preschool classroom I had recalled how teachers in my childhood and teachers I had observed later in my life set up rules for their classes. In the 70's and 80's it was common to encourage the children to participate in making up the rules at least in the alternative schools I knew and read about. I tried this with a group of four year olds during the first week of the school year.

I asked, "Okay, we are going to have rules in the school, and you get to help make them up. What do you think the rules should be?" And they began:

"Don't hit, don't yell, don't take someone's crayons, don't take someone's toy, you have to share the Legos, you have to share your cookies, no you don't, yes you DO!" ... and I quickly realized they were very familiar with the typical rules, and creating them all over again with them would only waste a lot of time. It would also be somewhat of a pretense anyway, as I likely would add any rules I wanted, and eliminate any "bad ideas." You know how we adults feel we must correct children's ideas, not realizing they adopted many unworkable or incorrect ideas from us. I had thought this might help them own the rules, but how unimaginative and unworkable this was going to be! We would have ten pages of rules – to be broken. Overnight I thought a lot about what outcomes there might be, and for a while thought maybe I should set an arbitrary limit – like ten. I mean if God gave Moses ten commandments, we should be able to make preschool work with ten. If we let our young children make up the rules (adopting our adult thinking) we'd be dealing with something like the IRS Code.

But then I imagined everyone either following or not following the rules - and also realized I pretty much knew who would and who wouldn't. So now what? I began to see some common aspects to all of them, and I began to create my first List A, my list of what is really important to us as parents or teachers. What did I want the children to learn? What would they want to learn? I noticed then that I was assuming that we needed rules. Why? Well, that's a good question, and maybe I would find out something about their view and motivation if I asked them the following questions:

What kind of school do you want to be in? What do you like about being around other people? What don't you like? What do you want to learn about? How do you want other people to treat you? (These were "experienced" preschoolers and pre-kindergarteners - most four and five year olds.)

The more I thought about this, the shorter my list of rules became. And the more learning opportunities appeared. By the time I was ready to talk with the class, I had had another realization. The word "rule" itself already had some baggage. Today I would say we all have a *context* for rules - an attitude or a way we relate to them - and many of us may have similar ones. For example, that rules are made to be broken, or, we get in trouble or are bad when we break them. Just the word "break" the rules has a sense of wrongness to it. So what are they really? Why did I want to have rules, really?

I considered not having any. No one in my small preschool said we had to have them. I imagined not having any. Given the relationship I had developed with my children, it didn't seem like rules would add any benefit. I brought this "no rules" idea up to my preschoolers. "Yea, no rules!" They were excited, and I was sure I had made a mistake! So then I said, "Well, if we do this then anyone can do whatever they want. For example, Danny [the biggest and hungriest kid in the class] could go ahead and eat anybody's lunch he wants to whenever he wants to. And, you know how much I like cookies!" I came up with a few more examples, and enthusiasm

for 'no rules' dimmed. This led me to the question, what are rules for? What do they actually do?

We typically use them to try to make (or at best, encourage) the children to behave, or to keep order – but I saw something more useful. I began to think of them as *tools*. Tools to help us work together, to feel safe and secure, to encourage us, to appreciate each other and our work. Like a hammer and a saw, we could actually build a wonderful environment with them. And I really liked that the word 'tools' rhymes with 'rules' and the 'oo' sound is spelled differently (I discovered very early that inconsistency is always a great learning opportunity!). So I came back the next day prepared.

First I asked my questions – what did they want? What was important to them about how they would like others to treat them and their work? And I made sure they felt that having fun was a legitimate desire in school (just to undo some other possible example of previous inadvertent teaching).

They really did know what they wanted and didn't want, once I showed them it was okay to want and not want things to happen around me – and to say something about it. (And later I realized I had been assuming that without rules children wouldn't learn to be civil and responsible.)

Then I put up the list of twenty or so rules I had written down the day before. I pointed out “don't hit” and “don't yell at people” and said “these have something in common. I mean, if you don't hit someone and don't yell at them, you could say you are treating them with respect, right?”

They agreed. It did sound good but I asked them, “What does respect mean to you?” Many had something to say along the lines of “you don't yell at someone”, “you don't hurt them”, “you act nice”, etc. So I saw they already had some ideas about it – enough to proceed, as the discussion would actually define the word “respect”.

And then one said, “What about 'don't tease anyone'?” Yes, that too. Let's write down “Treat each other with respect. Now we'll cross out all the rules that we don't need anymore because they are part of that one, okay?” And we did that, crossing off most of them. Then we had “don't tear up someones picture”, “don't take someones crayons”, “don't wreck someone's Lego castle”. So I asked, “How about we add to this rule (about respect) and say 'Treat each other and each other's work with respect'?”. They agreed again. More rules were crossed off. A hand went up. “What about no spitting?”, Aaron asked. “Well,” I responded, “spitting can spread germs - and who likes people to spit at them anyway– anybody here?” No hands went up. “So if I was spitting at you, would that be treating you with respect?” “No.” So then I wrote “no spitting”, and then crossed it off as it comes under the respect tool.

We still had a list of rules about no wasting paper, cleaning up, not breaking this or that toy or classroom material, washing our hands before snack and lunch. So I asked, “If we had a tool that said 'take care of each other and our classroom', would that cover all these rules that are left? Let's see.” And we went down the list and crossed off all the ones we didn't need anymore. That really only left us with two or three from the day before.

One was, “Ask the teacher if you need to go to the bathroom”, and another was “Tell the teacher if someone is bothering you”, and a couple other similar ones. So I thought about this and came up with two tools for communication. One was, “If you want something, or you want something to happen, ask.” And I purposefully did not put in ask “the teacher” - so many times children will help each other, and as far as I'm concerned, that's more empowering than getting the teacher to help - one day they'll be out of school. In our discussion we saw that making something stop happening was the same as making something else happen (replacement) so we could use one rule for both. The other was, “If someone asks you something, answer.” This last one I came

up with as I noticed that how sometimes, particularly with certain children (and adults I knew), they could really control a situation if they didn't respond to someone asking for something (I also I remembered the times I had used that to avoid having to confront saying no to someone). So I started with, "If you ask someone something, and they don't answer even though they heard you – is that 'treating you with respect'?" They said "no."

I discovered they had quite a complete operational understanding of the word "respect" - they seemed to be aware of a kind of feeling associated with being treated with respect, and/or when they weren't. And I also noticed there were times for almost all of them when they were not treating each other, or each other's work, with respect. For example, once in while some would tease each other. Sometimes that was okay – they would be having fun going back and forth, and, sometimes the teasee would get upset. So now the teasee had a tool to stop the teasing: ask the teaser to stop teasing them, and the teaser has a tool to create workability - answer (but not have to say "okay" – they could say "I not going to stop", but that rarely happened). So here are the tools we came up with:

- 1-Treat each other and each other's work with respect. (Their "work" was anything they created)
- 2-Take care of the classroom and everything in it.
- 3-If you want something, or want something to happen, ask.
- 4-If someone asks you a question, answer.

Those four tools covered everything. When there was a complaint about something, either I or one of the other kids would ask the person, "Did you ask?", or "Was laughing at her picture treating her with respect?", or "Did you answer his question?" ... and then they would answer honestly. Asking, "Did you use our tools?", or, "Did she use our tools?" had them see how they could handle many more situations. And they began to notice that when they used the tools, things worked the way they wanted. And when they didn't, things didn't. And we all noticed that if something wasn't working and either one of them wasn't using one of the tools, it made perfect sense that there was a problem -their choice, and the solution was readily at hand. No need for me – a sign of workability. My job was just to ask, "Did you use the tool for that?"

It was from coaching and watching them use these tools that I saw how much they wanted their lives to work, and how willing they were to be honest with each other - much more than I had been with my peers after a certain age, and much more than most adults I hung out with. How did I deal with a child who refused to use the tools? It depends. There is no right or wrong way. No one way. But mostly I discovered that when a child was not willing to use a tool – that is, perpetuate an issue or problem - that they just couldn't see how they would 'win' (get what they wanted). But after imagining what it would be like if others didn't use the tool either, they could see that it was really the only way to get what was important to them. And of course, they are natural experimenters: "I wonder how long I can not use any of these tools?" And of course the answer would be, "As long as you want." No resistance.