A community is a place where individuals share common values, goals, and activities. It is a place where each member takes on roles to provide sufficient services so that the community’s goals are reached. In communities, everyone does not do the same thing at the same time, but groups work together to achieve common goals. A community is a place where social bonds are established and individuals can flourish.

—SUE BREDKAMP AND TERESA ROSEGRANT 1992

Most of us face a new group of students every year. They walk into our classrooms on the first day of school as virtual strangers. Our priority, along with academic achievement, is to help the children become responsible, self-reliant learners. We do this by building a sense of community where children make cooperative decisions and work together in collaboration and partnership. Before beginning the first Applied Learning project in your classroom, it is critically important to establish this sense of community—and to provide a range of pre-project experiences, discussed in Chapter 4.

We take purposeful steps toward creating a community of learners from the very first day of school. We begin to establish respectful relationships, orally modeling with I-statements, such as, “I noticed that you came to the group area for our meeting.” Children follow our lead in the language and tone of voice we use with them, such as, “Thank you for returning your marker to the basket. That makes it easier for other children to use it too.”
Classrooms as Communities to Support Project Work

During the first few weeks of school, we concentrate on creating a sense of community. We begin to develop this community by embedding the needed skills into our curriculum blocks—modeling desired behaviors, establishing routines to support those behaviors, and looking for strengths or interests in each child.

Modeling takes place throughout the day. We model respectful ways to respond to a request—“I appreciate you letting me know we are out of paper in the writing center. There is more on the back shelf if you’d like to get it.” We highlight children’s respectful responses—“Thank you, Cherrie. I noticed how politely you asked Sylvia for that marker.”

We establish routines to support the desired behaviors, such as listening when one person speaks—“When you are speaking, how does it feel when everyone looks at you? Do you want everyone’s eyes on you when you talk to the group? Okay, let’s turn our bodies so our faces look at the speaker.” During our shared reading, our initial lessons focus as much on listening as they do on responding to a book. In early math and science experiences, we focus as much on group dynamics as we do on learning content. In this context, the way children interact with each other is as important as the academic knowledge and skills that they are expected to learn.

These shared experiences help children begin thinking of themselves as a group. We also sing songs or recite poems together, with these becoming “our” class’s poem or song. For example, we read (and reread) Jack Prelutsky’s poem *The New Kid on the Block*. Each time we read that poem, we act astonished about the “bad” things that the new kid does and someone always comments that no one in our class would ever behave that way.

We know that “each child has strengths or interests that contribute to the overall functioning of the group” (Bredekamp and Copple 1997, 16), so we begin looking for those qualities. As Jimmy shows an interest in the science center, we name him the “science center expert” and refer other children’s questions about the science center to him. When Renee announces that her birthday is next week, she becomes responsible for locating books about birthdays to share. In everything we do, we reinforce the idea that this class has come together for important reasons—playing, learning, and caring for each other (Wolk 1998). And, because we know that we will be implementing Applied Learning projects in the weeks to come, we take this sense of community further, introducing the concepts of decision making, responsibility, and communication.

Characteristics of a Community to Support Project Work

Decision Making:

- Making and carrying out decisions relating to their work
- Sharing in the decision-making process
- Reaching consensus about group decisions
- Supporting their decisions with reasons

Responsibility:
- Cooperating, trusting each other and the teacher
- Depending on each other for help
- Accessing and returning necessary materials and supplies

Communication:
- Understanding the give-and-take of conversation, talking and listening
- Expressing genuine concern for their peers, making friends, sharing, and speaking to others respectfully

**Decision-Making Strategies**

As we help young children learn to make their own decisions, we teach them a variety of strategies to use. They may only know to “argue until they get their way.” It is our job to introduce different aspects of decisions—voting, individual decisions, and group decisions.

*From a Kindergarten Teacher . . .*

“That’s a decision you need to make,” comes out of my mouth several times a day. Young children are accustomed to having adults direct their behaviors, even about simple stuff that the children could manage themselves. Often a child will ask, “Can I put my sweater in my locker? I’m hot now.” And I respond, “That’s a decision you have to make.” Our class’s agreement is that sweaters go on the body or in the locker. Some children are in the habit of waiting for an adult to say, “Put that in your locker.” They don’t think for themselves.

From the beginning of school, children are involved in making decisions, sometimes as a group and sometimes as individuals. In Applied Learning classrooms, children quickly learn many ways to make group and individual decisions. Different strategies work best at different times and in different situations.

**VOTING**  Voting is one decision-making strategy that is introduced on the first day of school. This allows the teacher to quickly establish that decisions in the class will be made by the group, and to introduce the most basic decision-making method, voting. In Marta’s kindergarten class, she introduces the concept of “choice,” then offers two books for the class’s read-aloud. Both books meet the educational goals set for that day so either book is okay with her. She shows the books to the class and introduces a simple thumbs up, thumbs down way of voting
for the book to be read (see Figure 3–1). Then she reads that book to the class, re-
marking that she will read the other one later in the day.

Learning to make group decisions by voting can be difficult for some young
children. Those who are accustomed to making their own decisions at home have
difficulty accepting that their choice may not be selected by the group. These chil-
dren may act out, pout, or otherwise be uncooperative. Voting on an unemotional
issue, such as which book to read first, is an effective strategy that helps children ad-
just to this type of group decision making. When the children realize that both
books will be read and that the vote is simply to decide which one will be read first,
it is easier to accept votes that don’t go their way. This, in turn, helps to lead the
group further along the continuum toward consensus as a decision-making method.

GROUP DECISIONS Learning to make group decisions is important because
many decisions that guide a project are made in small groups. Likewise, knowing
how to participate as groups make decisions is a lifelong skill. An adult who par-
ticipates easily in the give-and-take of decision making has an advantage over the
person who has not learned this skill.

Not only do we encourage each child to make decisions, we also specifically
plan decision-making experiences for children in groups of two or three, as well as

Figure 3–1. Children Voting “Thumbs-Up, Thumbs Down”
at the whole-class level. For example, when Jorge gets out paint for his kindergarten class's art center, he asks two children for help in deciding which colors to offer that day. The two children discuss the colors and come to a decision, telling Jorge which colors to put in the art center. Likewise, he asks three or four children to listen to an audiotape of action songs and choose the next one to teach the class. On hot days, Jorge might present the option of having recess early in the day when it is cooler or at the accustomed afternoon time. In each of these situations, the children are introduced to consensus—a much more sophisticated style of group decision making. Note that teaching consensus is easier managed in a small group where each child has an opportunity to share his point of view.

**INDIVIDUAL DECISIONS** Another way we introduce decision making in a classroom setting is to allow children to choose their materials. For example, as we observe the children during Writers' Workshop, we reinforce the concept of individual decision making by commenting on their choice of writing tool—"Oh, you decided to use a pencil instead of a marker. So that's better for you?" By offering choices and reinforcing that they made an appropriate decision, we are taking the first steps toward establishing that, in this class, children make decisions about many facets of their learning.

We believe children need to be comfortable in making decisions. Some of the children's first decisions in our classrooms will be choosing which center to work in and which center materials to work with. This choice can occasionally be overwhelming for some children. If they have been in a previous group setting where they were directed, they may not know how to look at all the centers and make a choice. In this case, we narrow the available choices. We suggest two centers and allow children to choose from them. This generally increases the comfort level of the child enough to enable them to make informed choices.

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**From a Kindergarten Teacher . . .**

When a child can't decide on a center, I help him along. I often ask, “Are you in a building mood? Do you want to make something?” If the reply is yes, I point out the block center, the Legos®, and the Polydrons®. The child can then focus on those and pick one. If the answer is no, then I suggest centers like puzzles or Play-Doh®. Just asking about what they want to do helps them define which center to pick. Of course, teaching children to make choices takes much more time than it would if I directed, “Go to wooden blocks today.” I've come to realize that these little snippets of time that I spend with individual children help each child to become better at making decisions. So even though it does take more time, it is worth it, because as they become more comfortable, they become more independent.
While we believe that children need to make decisions about their work, we also believe that the choices children make should be within parameters we set. Bobbi Fisher (1998) confirmed our thoughts about children’s decision making well when she wrote, “I have decided that the children should read every day—a managerial choice. I plan time for reading and supply reading materials—books, magazines, newspapers—from many genres of fiction and nonfiction. Within this framework, the children choose what and where they will read, whether they will read alone or with a friend, when they will read” (11). When we make these kinds of general decisions for the class, we provide the boundaries the children need to make appropriate choices.

Responsibility

Developing children’s sense of responsibility is important to us. In our project-based classrooms, children’s responsibility extends to decisions they make about what to learn and how they carry out their research. Children are responsible for the final product, working responsibly with others to accomplish their goal. Before children can begin to be responsible, they need to feel competent. We find that many young children have developed a sense of learned helplessness. They don’t always view themselves as capable of making their own decisions or taking care of themselves. Often they have been taught to look to adults, first their parents and then their teacher, to tell them what to do. Our mission is to instill in children a confidence in their abilities and in the abilities of their peers. Project work can be difficult if children are hesitant to act independently, and we make every effort to instill feelings of competence and interdependence in our students. We accomplish this through creating experts in our classes, directing children to other children, and teaching communication strategies.

Creating Experts

Children feel competent when they are successful at what they do. In Applied Learning classrooms, children come to depend on each other for answers and help. This is not something that happens automatically. It is something we orchestrate as we build our community. We have found it particularly helpful to identify, in every child, a strength that can be publicly announced as an area of expertise.

One thing we do is hand routine tasks over to our students. For example, in Charlotte’s kindergarten classroom, she realized that tying shoelaces somehow became her job (and one she didn’t like). She considered her options. She could either continue to tie shoes, or she could use this situation as a springboard to build interdependence and positive peer modeling in her class. Charlotte noticed that Sarah and Dontell were particularly adept at tying shoes, and she asked them if they would like to be the class’s “experts” in tying shoes. The children were happy
and she was free from shoe tying. Moreover, Sarah and Dontell were given the chance to shine in front of their peers.

Other children become class “experts” because of some knowledge they bring to the class or a specific skill they know or learn. A child who has had pet hamsters for several months can be presented to the class as the expert on how to pick up the hamster without chasing it around the cage for several minutes. Another child can become the listening center expert. At least half the time when the listening center is not working, it is because the pause button has been hit accidentally. In a matter of minutes, we can teach a child to recognize this problem and fix it. With some close observation and several “training” sessions for individual children, we find ourselves doing fewer routine classroom tasks and our students taking more responsibility for these things. It may be hard to find an “expert” position for every child in your class, but we think it is worth the time invested. The children who are asked for help from their peers feel valued and important. Over time, these feelings develop into feelings of competence.

DIRECTING CHILDREN TO OTHER CHILDREN

Beyond referring children to class experts, we search for ways to get children to ask each other for help. This helps the children to relate as peers and to see each other as resources in the class on many levels. Here are some examples:

- “Cynthia, I know you can’t hear when it’s a C or a K. Kate has been working on words that start with C. Check with her or see if Joyce has the word “cookie” in her writing dictionary.”
- “If you want to write the date on your journal entry, perhaps you could ask Carlos to help you count down on the calendar to find today’s date.”
- “Hmmm . . . , I wonder if Amy could help remember how to play that math game. She was playing it yesterday, I think.”
- “You need the stapler? Check with Sarah. I think she was using it a minute ago.”
- “I’m not sure. Who have you already talked to?”

When we direct children to other children, we are modeling language they could use to ask for help or for information. Learning appropriate ways to talk with each other is an important part of building a community of learners and a necessity for successful project work.

Communication Strategies

As early childhood teachers, we recognize that talking to each other is fundamental to young children’s learning, as they learn best by talking and doing in a social
context (Fisher 1998). As children verbalize what they are doing and question each other, they are extending their learning.

We do not expect young children to come to school understanding the complexity of the give-and-take of group discussions. We teach appropriate behaviors for talking and listening in group situations, model these behaviors, and create situations for children to rehearse the behaviors. We teach children behaviors such as:

- Listening to one person at a time
- Looking at the speaker
- Restating the speaker’s position for clarification—“Regina, did you mean to say . . . ?”
- Building on what was last said—“What you said reminds me of . . . ”

Adults use a variety of strategies when they communicate. While young children may come to school ready to talk, they don’t always possess a repertoire of communication strategies. So we teach children to look at the speaker, ask for clarification when needed, or check for understanding by restating what was said. Additionally, we teach children to make connections with what was said, personalizing the information.

For example, at the beginning of the year, we might lead a group discussion about what it looks like when a person is being a good listener. A simple brainstorming session occurs, and we record the children’s ideas on a large chart. We select one of the more concrete behaviors, model it through role-playing, and practice it as we listen to each other.

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**From a First-Grade Teacher . . .**

I use chart tablets to record what goes on during our group discussions. That way we have a record of the discussion—even if it is in my sometimes messy printing. I tell the children that I am not using my best writing because I’m trying to get the ideas down—just like they do in their first-draft writing. I can flip back through the pages to find a rubric or list that we have previously made. The need for those lists keeps popping up all through the year. If they are on chart paper, you don’t have to keep recreating the list, just add to it.

These kinds of conversations about “the way we do things in our class” continue throughout the year. We present an issue to the children, involve them in the discussion, clarify a point or two, and then involve the children in putting the agreed upon behavior into practice. These conversations help clarify social expectations and can be used to reach group consensus about classroom issues.
From a First-Grade Teacher . . .
It is December and the room parents are anxious to plan the winter party for the children. This particular year, they tell me that they want to bring a plain cake, let the children decorate it, then serve it with punch to drink. I remind them that it is really the children’s party and they make their own decisions. During a class meeting, I brought up the parents’ suggestion. Instead, the children wanted cubes of cheese, raw carrots, chips, pretzels, and Ranch-style dip followed by “fancy, decorated cookies.” Three volunteers wrote a letter explaining the class decision and sent copies home with all the families. The children declared it the best party ever! They learned about ways to get what they wanted. The room parents were impressed with the children’s planning and happy to help implement that plan.

As we plan lessons for the children, we build in situations for the children to practice these communication strategies. For example, the important part of the learning sometimes takes place after the task is complete—in the class’s review of what was done. In Joy’s first-grade class, she brings the children back together to review what they learned about a particular topic. She leads the discussion, asking each group to explain how they shared the work, tell how it went, and describe any problems or successes. As the children make their reports, she begins a list of “Good (and Bad) Things to Do When Working in a Group,” as in Figure 3–2. This
list evolves for a few days with items being added or changed. Over time, it becomes the basis for the class’s rubric for group work. Joy is creating a situation in which children must communicate with each other, and she is teaching them how to communicate most effectively.

**Shared Experiences**

As teachers, we strive to develop the feeling that “we are all in this together” over the first few weeks of school. We specifically plan learning experiences and activities that involve everyone in the class, in order to directly support the sense of community among the children (Kohn 1996).

**Classroom Routines**

Predictable schedules create a routine that the children learn and come to expect. For example, in Wesley’s class, children know that they will choose their own learning center after the morning read-aloud and that lunch comes right after they share poems. In Sarah’s class, the children use a pocket chart to set the routine for the day. Sarah arranges sentence strips labeled *reading*, *writing*, *math*, *lunch*, *center time*, etc., in the order they will occur for that day. The children refer to this chart, reinforcing that there is a daily schedule.

Within the daily routine, the academic subjects also follow a predictable pattern. Writers’ Workshop always begins with a minilesson by the teacher, then each child states what they hope to accomplish for that day. Independent writing follows with the teacher circulating through the room, holding conferences with individuals and small groups. The time period culminates as the children publicly share their work in the “Author’s Chair.” Even within this routine, children follow response group and “Author’s Chair” procedures. Likewise, math instruction begins as the children gather in the large-group area for a shared lesson. After the teacher’s presentation, they divide into smaller groups to play games that reinforce the learned skill. Other procedural routines include how the children access their lockers, sharpen their pencils, or get books to read.

**Shared Rituals**

Rituals also contribute to the children’s greater sense of community. Sometimes rituals simply emerge from the life of the class. Kevin plays soft music as his students arrive each morning. He wants to establish the feeling that this classroom is a relaxing place to be and different from the hall or the room next door. The class enjoyed the music he was playing and began to bring tapes and CDs to share. As a group, they decided to play soft music at writing time and to play loud music dur-
ing clean-up time. Playing different kinds of music for different activities became a ritual for Kevin’s class.

Just as this ritual emerged, others can be planned. As Becky thought about rituals and the morning lunch count, she decided to change the way the children did the count. One morning she whispered to the class, “Today we are going to do something special. Let’s get very quiet.” Becky turned out the lights and retrieved a flashlight from a nearby cabinet. She then whispered, “If you are getting your lunch on a tray today, stand up very, very slowly.” Silently, twelve children rose to their feet. She pointed the flashlight at the child nearest to her and whispered, “One,” and indicated that child should sit down. Moving the light to the next child, she whispered, “Two,” continuing until all the children were counted and had sat down again. She continued asking children to stand for: white milk, chocolate milk, baked potato, or salad, the other cafeteria choices. The lunch count ritual was established—from that morning on the lunch count was taken in the dark with a flashlight. Over time, the children took over the role of holding the flashlight and filling out the lunch count form.

We believe that rituals are important in the process of building a community of learners. We also value the way teachers and children go about accomplishing their work (Denton and Kriete 2000). It is not a matter of finding the “right way” to conduct Writers’ Workshop, prepare for afternoon dismissal, or choose a center in which to work. We consider the physical arrangement of our classrooms, observe our students, and strive to create routines that make sense for the children and ourselves. A group of children sharing routines and rituals becomes a community of learners over time.

Guiding Children’s Behavior

The teacher’s response to a child’s behavior makes a difference in that classroom. The teacher who asks rather than tells, suggests rather than demands, or persuades rather than controls avoids power struggles while encouraging children to be self-regulating (DeVries and Zan 1994). This idea of self-regulation, or self-control, is integral to successful project work, as well as essential to success in life. We spend a great deal of time helping children understand self-control, but believe the time invested is worth it in the long run. One way we guide children’s behavior is through discussions during class meetings.

Class Meetings

Class meetings are an important part of guiding children’s behavior. Essentially, class meetings are times to talk—a forum for students and teacher to gather as a class to reflect, discuss issues, or make decisions about the ways they want their
class to be. Our role is to create an environment in which children’s learning, opinions, and concerns are taken seriously. The students’ role in these meetings is to participate as valuable and valued contributors to the classroom community (Developmental Studies Center 1996).

During the first few formal class meetings, we work to establish respectful guidelines. We lead conversations about how to treat each other, engaging the children in discussion, and translating it into guidelines such as:

- We let one person speak at a time.
- We listen to each other.
- We can disagree with each other.
- We respect other people’s opinions.
- We tell the facts of the problem.

From this starting point, we have regular class meetings, at least one every day. Some days the class has several meetings, ranging from a twenty- or thirty-minute planning meeting to a five-minute problem-solving meeting. Often a planning meeting is held in the morning to outline the day’s work, several problem-solving meetings are interspersed during the day as needs arise, and an end-of-day evaluation meeting wraps up the day’s activities.

Class meetings take different forms as the needs of the class change. At the beginning of the school year, many meetings focus on agreement about class norms or behaviors expected from the children and the teacher. Appropriate and inappropriate behaviors are discussed frequently. One day we might select the block center and discuss what self-control would look like in that center, or talk about behavior that would be appropriate in the cafeteria.

We always practice behaviors that are agreed on in a class meeting. We use specific examples of what the rules mean. The children role-play, pretending to have a problem. For example, when getting the children’s attention was a problem for Linda, the class decided that she could “clap in a pattern” when she wanted the class’s attention. So all the children spread out across the room, pretending to be writing. Linda walked around the room, pretending to hold brief conferences. Then she quietly said, “Oh, I need to tell everyone this,” and then she “clapped in a pattern.” The children practiced zooming their eyes to her, each trying to be the first to stop what they were doing to look at her. In other situations, practicing with puppets or flannel board figures can help young children understand the rules they are setting.

**Designing Rubrics for Behavior**

As the school year begins, we work collaboratively with the children to create simple rubrics that define desired behaviors. Issues are introduced during class meet-
ings—“We have to walk from our room to the cafeteria. How will we organize ourselves to do that?” Children’s background knowledge of “how to walk in the hall” often elicits answers ranging from, “Walk directly behind the person in front of you with your hands clasped behind your back” to “Make a line” to “Just walk there.” As we lead the discussion, children might offer additional solutions—ask other classes how they walk in the hall, observe other classes as they walk in the hall, ask the principal what he or she thinks is good hall behavior, and so on. If they don’t, we use the strategies of pondering, reflecting, and wondering aloud to elicit them. As these options are explored, children identify qualities of good “hall walking.” Noting these and contrasting them with undesirable qualities begins the structure for a rubric. The qualities are listed in a “Yes/No” (happy face/sad face) format. We revisit this rubric as often as is needed, depending on the behavior.

The evaluation of desired qualities and rubric making extends to other facets of the school day. Other behaviors—in the cafeteria, on the playground, and in the rest room—can be defined, while desired behavior for group or individual work can also be outlined.

**Self Control**

Self-control involves two aspects of behavior—how children conduct themselves during the day and how they respond to another person or idea. Young children tend to respond impulsively. They don’t evaluate possible responses or think through consequences. Emphasizing self-control puts the responsibility for choosing a response with the child.

We establish what “being in self-control” means while brainstorming ways to act in a self-controlled manner. For example, during a class meeting about “pushing,” we would list children’s suggestions about “what to do when you are pushed.” We want them to see alternatives to retaliating impulsively. Children role-play situations in which self-control is important. Reminders to “use self-control” and individual discussions are ongoing. We believe that anything we can do to instill a sense of responsibility for behavior is beneficial to the children.

**From a Second-Grade Teacher . . .**

I was walking down the hall to go to the office and here comes this small child running straight toward me. As he neared me, I knelt down so I would be at eye level with him. I put my hand on his shoulder and in my most serious voice, I said, “Excuse me, are you in self-control?” He looked down at the floor, then back up to me, and responded, “No, I’m in kindy-garten.” It was so hard not to laugh. I reminded him that our school had a rule that everyone had to walk inside the school building. That incident reinforced for me how important it is to help young children learn exactly what we mean by the words we use.
Respectful Language

In order to respond to conflicts appropriately, children must learn respectful language. We begin by teaching the children simple I-statements to use to express their feelings. For example, when one child bothers another child, the latter child says something to the effect, “I don’t like it when you ________.” This kind of I-statement clearly defines the behavior that the child does not like and lets the first child know exactly what is annoying. A child might inadvertently bother another child and this simple statement clarifies any misconceptions. The first child’s response acknowledges the second child’s statement. Often children reply, “Okay, I won’t do it anymore,” or “I didn’t know you didn’t like that.” Apologies are usually not called for, but the misunderstanding is cleared up in a respectful way. When children have not used words to solve problems, the language may be foreign to them. Other effective I-statements include, “When you __________ I feel ___________” or “I feel ___________ when you ___________.”

Talk-It-Over

“Time out” where children are sent away from the group for breaking a rule can be punitive and humiliating. But offering time to “talk-it-over” is encouraging and empowering. This is another strategy we use in resolving conflicts. We often designate two chairs in the room as the “talk-it-over” chairs. After a conflict, the two children sit in the chairs and face each other while working out a compromise. For the first couple of months, we sit beside the children and suggest specific language they might say to each other or ask questions to lead the conversation. When David accused Tara of pushing him, Charlotte knelt beside the talk-it-over chairs and listened for a moment. It was clear that the children needed support to work out their problem. Charlotte said, “Tara, David says you pushed him. Did you mean to do that?” When Tara shook her head, Charlotte said, “Then maybe you need to tell him that it was an accident.” Tara did not respond, so Charlotte repeated her question. Then Tara looked at David and used Charlotte’s words. We teach the skills necessary to carry out this procedure, helping the children practice listening to another person’s side of the story, telling his or her side, and arriving at a compromise. We lead class discussions and the children role-play how to “talk-it-over.” We follow up by facilitating conversations between children. This occurs frequently at the beginning of the year, but we have found that within a few weeks, most children are talking-it-over without our help. Figure 3–3 shows Terri helping three of her students to solve a problem.

Bringing the Disruptive or Reluctant Child into the Community

The misdirected behavior of some children constantly interrupts the work of the class. As well, children who avoid work on a regular basis present a challenge. We deal with these situations in a straightforward manner.
We begin by looking for the underlying reasons for the misbehavior, tailoring our response to best meet the child’s needs (Nelsen and Glenn 1996). For example, if a child seems to be seeking undue attention or acting out, she might be seeking approval or only feel important when noticed. Then we tailor our response to this underlying reason for the misbehavior, perhaps recognizing the child’s accomplishments in front of the class, giving that child a special greeting every morning, or asking that child to take on a special responsibility in the class. By responding in a proactive way, we head off possible disruptions.

Because of the interactive nature of projects, the misbehaving child can be even more disruptive than normal. Referring to the class-created rubric for behavior during project time helps to focus the misbehaving child’s attention. It often includes behaviors related to voice level, appropriate responses, being a serious worker, etc.

We use a predictable series of steps to deal with misbehavior. An initial warning about or redirection of the behavior sometimes solves the problem. If subsequent misbehavior occurs, we talk privately with that child to explain that perhaps he or she needs some help with her (or his) self-control. We ask that child to look around the room and choose a place where he or she can be self-controlled. We help that child articulate appropriate behaviors for that area of the room, with
words such as, “Okay, you’ve selected the listening center. Can you tell me what I will see when you are in self-control there?” If the behavior continues to be inappropriate, we typically say, “It seems to me that you really do need help with your self-control, so I am going to choose where you will work until ________ (lunch, shared reading time, etc.).” This third step gives us the flexibility to help meet that particular child’s needs. Some children calm down when they are running their hands through sand, so asking them to work in the sand center makes sense for those children. Other children are calmed by listening to soft music, sitting alone in a private place (reading a book or drawing pictures). And, some children need to be close to us, so that our physical presence and/or quiet reminders support the child’s emerging self-control. If a child is truly out of control, we might even suggest that he or she work in another classroom. We would have discussed this with the other teacher ahead of time and identified a student in that class to work with our student.

The child who avoids work or consistently repeats the same incorrect answer presents another challenge. Sometimes we pull these children into smaller, more focused groups where our teaching is tailored to reteach needed skills. These children often feel inadequate. They avoid work that they do not believe that they can do. Small-group work allows us to target those skills a child needs to practice. Because the same academic skills are repeated in project work, we constantly support those children who need extra help.

Some days, a child simply is reluctant to work with friends. When that occurs, we apply the same kind of “help with self-control” approach. At the third reminder, we might ask that child to work alone or near us. Whatever the decision we make about disruptive or reluctant children’s behavior, we try to ensure that our actions do not embarrass or humiliate them.

Summary

Establishing with the children a respectful community of learners based on decision making, responsibility, and communication begins on day one. Classroom “experts” are developed and celebrated. Children depend on each other and collaborate. Through shared experiences, we teach, model respect and responsibility, and foster children’s social and academic achievement. Group decisions are made during class meetings as children learn compromise and mutual concession. Conflicts are solved by the people involved using resolution techniques, including collaboration, respect, and listening. All young children benefit from learning these types of behaviors; however, this sense of community and responsibility is especially important for Applied Learning projects.
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