

# **Good Falling: How One Childcare Professional Invites Positive Self-talk in Preschool Children**

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*What children say to themselves about themselves is a powerful predictor of self efficacy and self esteem. The development of this "internal dialogue" is impacted by how others evaluate them. Using an invitational theory perspective, this paper describes and explains the invitational techniques, beliefs, and practical applications that one daycare provider has incorporated into her daily interaction with the children in her care.*

## **Invitational Learning**

Invitational learning is a component of invitational theory, which is centered around four basic propositions (Russell, 1984):

- (1) People are able, valuable, and responsible and should be treated accordingly;
- (2) Education at its best is a cooperative activity;
- (3) People possess untapped potential in all areas of human development;
- (4) This potential can best be realized by places, policies, and programs that specifically invite development

The focus of invitational learning is on the quality and quantity of formal and informal messages that bid children not only to see themselves as valuable, responsible, and capable of learning, but bid them also to behave accordingly (Purkey & Schmidt, 1984). These messages form internal dialogue, what children say to themselves about themselves. Purkey (2000) calls this dialogue the whispering self, and describes it as being vitally important in understanding the development and maintenance of self-concept, self-esteem, and self-efficacy.

Children's self-evaluations derive directly from the evaluations made of them by others. Such evaluations are embedded in both verbal and nonverbal language, including looks, touch, and tone of voice. Because children tend to believe what significant others say about them, the impact that other individuals and their comments make in the child's early environment can be significant (Purkey, 2000).

Purkey (2000) suggests that structuring an invitational environment for childcare starts with a focus on the "Five Powerful P's":

**People:** How do childcare professionals view children and the appropriate treatment of them? Additionally, childcare individuals must have a positive view of themselves as caregivers and teachers. This has the greatest impact on children.

**Places:** A welcoming environment says, "We care about you and we're glad you're here." The physical environment sends important messages to children.

**Policies:** The rules, regulations, and plans of an institution should focus on meeting the needs of children in a fair, encouraging, and respectful way.

**Programs:** The institutions activities should be for everyone's benefit and should not label or segregate children.

**Processes:** The pervasive methods of operations should communicate to the children that they are valuable and responsible, and are able to behave as such.

### **An Invitational Approach to Day Care**

At First Baptist Preschool in Greensboro, North Carolina, day care professional M. Kay Smith is intentionally inviting, making certain that the children in her care believe good things about themselves. From September to May, Ms. Smith and an assistant care for ten children who enter their class before their second birthday and begin the "transitional twos" while in their care.

Before the children arrive Ms. Smith and her aid have begun the inviting process by preparing themselves for the class. They have concentrated on being personally and professionally inviting (Wong, 1998) honing their attitudes to act with specific purpose and intention. Ms. Smith is

prepared to give the children constant and countless invitations (messages) that bid them to explore their untapped potential as valuable persons. Positive learning experiences are integrated into each and every activity, even into the simple act of walking through the door in the morning. She greets the children cheerfully by name and makes them feel welcome and special. "I'm glad you're here," she tells each one. Before anything else takes place, she teaches them that they are valued.

As their parents or guardians leave, the children say good-bye to them. In fact, the children are taught to say hello and good-bye to anyone who enters their room during the day. In doing so, the children learn that leaving is a natural part of life, not something negative they should fear, and parents feel good about not having to sneak out!

After the children say good-bye to their parents or guardians, they immediately wash their hands to reduce the spreading of germs they have brought in with them. This becomes a learning activity that promotes good feelings of accomplishment. Because state guidelines stipulate that washing hands should take fifteen seconds and drying hands should take ten seconds, the children build basic skills by singing the alphabet as they wash and by counting to ten as they dry.

Ms. Smith fills her room with interesting, age-appropriate activities for the children: puzzles, markers, and paper for developing motor skills, and rockers and slides for building strong bodies. During activity time, she and her assistant give attention to each child. They talk to the children about their activities; teach about colors, shapes, and skills; and try to help each child learn something positive about himself or herself and the activity. Afterwards, everyone cleans up together, sharing the responsibilities of classrooms. The activity time and subsequent clean-up time help the children say to themselves, "I can do this!"

Leaving the room to go outside to the playground or to the church's gym presents a unique opportunity to invite positive self-talk within the children. Because little ones can disappear quickly, Ms. Smith counts them before, during, and after the trip. The children eventually learn to count each other, and take great joy in learning such an important responsibility. Learning to stay with the group and to count one another

promotes positive internal dialogue that tells the children they can follow well and can accept responsibility. Every opportunity counts.

Throughout the day, Ms. Smith finds many ways in which to affirm the children. When children are performing tasks, she says, "I can help you do this, or you can do it yourself." The last thing the children hear is that they can do it themselves. Hearing this helps them to develop confidence, competence, and independence, and most of the time, they prefer to try things on their own. When they attempt a task, her response is, "Good job!" She does not say "good boy" or "good girl" because she wants children to focus on their actions and not to just see themselves as "bad" if a mistake is made or "good" if an action has the intended outcome. Ms. Smith never wants the children to be made to feel that they are not good boys or girls if they make mistakes or fail.

Inviting the children to feel respected is an integral part of Ms. Smith's approach to childcare. She teaches them to take turns, to help each other up when they fall, and to speak in civil tones to each other. She makes certain that her requests are always made in a positive way; "Don't stand in your chair," for example, is replaced with, "Thank you for sitting in your chair." The children hear positive, courteous requests that help them understand exactly what is expected of them. She maintains that if the last words the children hear describe the desired activity, then they are more likely to follow directions than if the last words they hear describe undesired activity. Consequently, the child is more likely to receive praise for following directions well.

### **"Good Falling!"**

On the playground, it is inevitable that accidents will happen. When little ones lose their balance and hit the ground, Ms. Smith responds with, "Good falling!" The first time she says that during the year, it elicits strange looks from staff members who cannot resist questioning such an unorthodox response.

"Good falling!" is an acknowledgement that upsets occur on the way to success. Little tumbles occur frequently in the lives of toddlers, but instead of receiving responses of too much sympathy or too much com-

forting from Ms. Smith, her response of praise allows them to see falling as an adventure. She cautions that "good falling!" is not appropriate if children fall when being disobedient, or if falling results in a serious injury. However, during "normal navigation," falling can be just as productive as learning to run, to jump, or to do any other activity; they learn how to run or jump, but they learn how to get up and try again without feeling frightened. The children are empowered to choose messages of accomplishment over messages of fear, and Smith believes it is never too early to learn to make good choices.

"Good falling!" results in self-affirming, positive behavior. Smith recalls an incident when a child fell and began to cry. She tended to him and told him, "Good falling!" When the child fell a second time, he looked at her and whimpered, on the verge of tears. "Good falling!" she said. The third time the child fell, he looked at Ms. Smith, said, "Good falling!" aloud, and got up without crying.

"Good falling!" is a pint-sized lesson with important life applications. In all of life's "falls," not just the physical ones, a temporary loss of balance can become a learning experience instead of a catastrophe.

### **Conclusion**

Any child care facility can be as positive as First Baptist Preschool if day care professionals keep in mind five basic building blocks upon which positive self-talk is built (Purkey, 2000):

- (1) children define themselves according to how significant others define them and act towards them;
- (2) children's internal dialogue will determine their success or failure;
- (3) everything in the childcare facility (or environment) impacts children's self-talk;
- (4) changing the way children talk to themselves necessitates changing their entire care environment;
- (5) child care facility experiences should minimize negative self-talk in children and invite them to define themselves positively.

Taken together, the "Five Powerful P's" and the five basic building blocks of positive self-talk can be used to transform any childcare facility into a welcoming, inviting place where children thrive in an optimal way. Like Kay Smith, day care professionals can learn to be intentionally inviting to the little ones in their care. They have the power to make a difference!

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