**My Teaching Career**

I was recently asked by a fellow teacher for some advice on caring for children; she also finds my experiences fascinating, so I have decided to write some of them here. Later, I decided to put this online and went back to add some additional information I think parents should know. As one of only three male preschool teachers in the entire state, I have a unique perspective. We like to think of our culture as civilized, that we have won equal rights for all genders, races, and sexual orientations, but there is one place which is still *highly* prejudiced: if you are a male working with small children, you will face extreme problems. I earned two associate degrees and most of a bachelor’s in early childhood development before I was forced to retire yet, despite all this schooling, it was my philosophy which had the most impact.

Most of my philosophy can be viewed in my book, but I’ll list a few pertinent ideas as they come up. Firstly, I do not believe there is any innate difference between boys and girls; any distinctions are pushed on them later by the culture in which they grow up. For this reason, my favorite age is three-year-olds. They are so curious and eager to learn but have not yet been tainted by society. Not only do I treat boys and girls the same as one another, but I treat them the same as any other person. Most adults look down on children but, to me, they are people and deserve the same respect as any adult. I build rapport with them. I take an interest in their lives. I also learn the personality of each child and treat them as an individual. So, they behave for me because they want to, not because I punish them when they don’t.

Anyway, let’s start near the beginning of my career as a teacher. I was the general manager of a restaurant. But my passion was caring for children, so I spent several months putting out resumes. However, every school and daycare had a requirement that I have six months experience to be considered. But how was I to get any experience if no one would hire me? So, I kept lowering my standards and expanding my radius until I found a terrible preschool in a horrible neighborhood which consented to give me an interview.

The director started by giving me a tour of the facility. It consisted of a main room ringed by classrooms and restrooms. When we arrived at the three-year-old classroom, the teacher asked the director if she could take her break. The director consented and the teacher left. A few minutes later, the director got an urgent phone call and she too left, leaving me all alone with a room full of children who didn’t know me! This was the first of many red flags. Anyway, I made the best of it by playing some games with them. Eventually, both women returned and the director took me back into the main room to sit down and interview me. She had me take a seat in the very corner of the room with my back to two walls and a large table in front of me. Then she sat next to me so I was completely boxed in. Next, she tells me how she was molested as a child and now doesn’t trust men at all. Not even her husband. She says whenever he is alone with their daughter at home, she peeks around the corner to spy on him to make sure he isn’t doing anything bad to her. I was astonished at how inappropriate this all was. Then one of the little girls from the classroom I had been in comes out to use the restroom. When she recognizes me, she runs over, completely ignores the director, squeezes behind her to get to me and gives me a big hug. At the time I remember thinking how uncaring this woman must be and how desperate the children are for attention that they would come to a complete stranger rather than the staff who work there. I also thought this probably sealed my fate and I had no hope of getting the job. Yet somehow I got it. It wasn’t until I had been working there for about a week that I learned the little girl who had hugged me was the director’s daughter. I was appalled to realize she had pushed past her own mother to get to me that day!

This place did not pay me enough to live on, so I had to keep my restaurant job. Since I was the manager, I was able to give myself the overnight shift. I woke up in the morning and spent 8 hours at the preschool. Then I went home and slept for 3 hours. Woke up in the evening and worked 8 hours at the restaurant. Went home and slept for 3 hours. Repeat. This was my schedule for six months! It was the only way for me to get that experience required to be a teacher. It would have been completely impossible if I wasn’t so passionate about children. They rejuvenated me even better than sleep. I found caring for them to be calming and relieved stress. It just felt right. It was where I belonged.

As I said before, this school was very poor and bad in every way. Most of the parent’s did not care about their children and used the school as a way to get rid of them. If the children were lucky, they were ignored. The others were mistreated. They would come to class with bruises or worse. One boy was sexually abused so was unable to be left alone or he would act out what happened to him on other children. I even had a child who had been a crack baby; he was five now and still had been unable to learn to talk. For some of them, I think I might have been the only person in their lives who cared about them.

And it wasn’t just the parents that didn’t care, but the other teachers and administration too. Each of the teachers was assigned closing chores; since I was the new guy, they gave me the worst one: cleaning the restrooms. But one of the other teachers always traded with me. Every afternoon she would have me take her class outside to the playground while she cleaned. I never understood it. She would rather clean the toilets after dozens of toddlers than to have fun with them. At least that was innocent enough. What the administrators did was downright illegal. By law, there are adult to child ratios which must be maintained for safety. But to them, more children meant more money so they never turned anyone away, even if it would violate the ratios. Consequently, I *always* had too many children. It started with an overfull class of four-year-olds. After I fed them lunch, I would lay them down for naptime. Right then, all the school age children who went to public school for half days came in and joined my class. Keeping them quiet enough for the little ones to sleep in the same room was futile. So, for the rest of the day, I had not just one, but two classrooms worth of children, all by myself. And there was nothing I could do about it. Whenever the state came for an inspection, the assistant director or someone else from the office would join my class and pretend to be a teacher so it looked like we had the correct ratios. To be honest, while it irked me that they were breaking the law, I enjoyed the extra children; having those other ‘teachers’ there only made things worse for them.

Somewhere along the line, the other teachers noticed how well the children listen to me. They decided to leverage this by sending any children who weren’t behaving from their class into mine. I became the school disciplinarian. Again, I didn’t mind. My style was to talk it out in a lightly philosophical manner and teach them what they did wrong rather than punish them, so I knew they were better off being corrected by me than someone else. It did have its awkward moments though. The director wasn’t the only staff member to have her own child in the school, so when I saw other teachers sending their offspring to me for discipline, it felt weird. I don’t understand why they wouldn’t want to deal with their own child themselves. Those teachers weren’t the only ones to notice the situation however: children are very clever. They started to get in ‘trouble’ on purpose so they could spend time with me. So now I had a class of four-year-olds, a class of five-year-olds and all the school’s ‘troublemakers’.

Are you familiar with the expression, “I have more power in my little finger than you do in your entire body?” For me, this was literally true. One afternoon, the director came to me and said they needed me to help the assistant director. When I entered the room, I saw her sitting on the ground with a child in her lap. She had both arms and both legs wrapped around the child, who was screaming and struggling in the middle. They had apparently been like this so long that she was getting tired and expected me to take over. Wordlessly, I walked over and reached my hand out. She let go and he grabbed my finger like a lifeline. He stood up, stopped crying, instantly calmed himself and walked peacefully with me into the next room.

It was very rare that I had any interaction with the parents at that school, so when one pulled me aside to chat, I was curious. But she started asking me very odd questions, nothing at all to do with her child. As the conversation continued, the questions became more and more personal. It soon became clear she had an agenda. Eventually it came out that she was trying to convince me to turn gay. She was molested as a child and thought, if I was gay, I’d be less interested in molesting her daughter. If you look at the police records, you will discover that significantly more female teachers molest their students than male, but public perception is against men.

There was one other parent I remember from that school. A single mom asked me to babysit for her daughters who were two and four at the time. Their mother was rather self-centered, putting her own desires above the needs of her children; she also liked to party so, after I said yes, she was quick to take advantage of my kindness. It wasn’t long before she was dropping them off at my house every Friday after work and not picking them up until Sunday night. This lasted for more than three years. Those two days were pure happiness. We spent every moment we could together, literally. I’m not one of those babysitters who ‘plops the kids down in front of the tv’; on the contrary, they never once watched tv and didn’t miss it. Instead, I took them to concerts, waterparks, carnivals, special events, or even just a playground. It didn’t really matter what we did; I had a talent for turning anything into a teachable moment. Even something as mundane as grocery shopping became a glamourous adventure in their eyes.

A quick tangent about tv: there is research showing that at a certain age (younger than kindergarten), a child’s brain is still forming in ways which will last their entire lives. During a typical television program, there is 10 minutes of show, 5 minutes of commercials, 10 more minutes of the show and finally another 5 minutes of commercials. But this is not how a young child interprets this half hour. To them, they watch 10 minutes of a show, then 5 minutes of a different show, then 10 minutes of a third show (they do not connect the second half of the program back to the first half but see it as separate), and finally 5 minutes of a fourth show. If this process is repeated enough times, it hardwires their brains to *need* a change of topic every 5-10 minutes; it gives them an artificial form of ADD which has no cure. They will struggle with it for the rest of their lives.

After living together like this for several years, many magical behaviors had emerged. At night, when the younger one would get sleepy, she had an idiosyncrasy where she would unconsciously twirl her hair around her finger. But, if I was nearby, her fingers would attempt to twirl *my* hair instead. Even though my hair was too short to twirl, her fingers would go thru the motions anyway. I’ve never heard of such a personal mannerism being transferrable to another person before; it was fascinating. So, I would tell them a story and tuck them into my massive queen-sized bed, which absolutely dwarfed them with all the space it had, then I would squeeze myself onto a tiny couch. But every morning, the room on the couch had shrunk even smaller as, sometime during the night, they had joined me there. Waking up with sore muscles never felt so good.

Occasionally, while we were out having one of our adventures, either me or one of them would stop and say, “Do you know how much I love you?” This was my cue. I would hold my thumb and index finger an inch apart and say, “Do I love you this much?” She would move her fingers and inch apart also, look at them and say, “No.” I would move my hands a foot apart and repeat, “Do I love you this much?” She would move her hands a foot apart, consider them and again answer, “Noo.” Then I would open my arms and stretch them as far apart as possible and say, “Do I love you this much?” She too would stretch as far as she could. With our arms finally in the correct positions, we would both shout, “Yes!” and wrap them around each other in a huge hug.

We grew so close we even shared a face. The younger one always wanted me to carry her wherever we went. She would press her cheek against mine with a bond nothing could break. No matter what was happening behind us, she would never turn her head away to look; instead, I had to rotate my entire body so we could both see. I was their father in every meaningful way, or rather, since they were Hispanic, they asked if they could call me papi. Their mother even asked if I would be willing to legally adopt them. I eagerly agreed of course, but she ended up being too lazy to follow thru with the paperwork.

Over the years, I babysat for many other families as well. I offered them a deal that I would take their children out to any event as long as they paid the entrance fees for *both* of us. Several parents accepted and I took their children to such places as zoos, aquariums, and art museums. But I was very good at finding free events too, so we never ran out of things to do. On a side note about single moms: most of them mistakenly thought I was being nice to their children so I could hook up with them and they hinted that they would be willing. Gross. The truth was quite the opposite: I wasn’t being nice to the children to spend time with the moms, rather I was being nice to the moms so I could spend time with the children.

Sometimes I would take care of children without ever even meeting the parents. There were two main categories of this situation. Once a week, I would volunteer at a domestic violence shelter. These were women with children who left their abusive husbands and had nowhere to go. The shelter was a converted motel. In addition to providing a temporary place to live, it had classes for the mothers to teach them life skills, such as how to get a job, so they could eventually become self-sufficient. While the parents were in these classes, I would read stories to the children. One Halloween, they had an event where the children got to trick or treat around the facility before I got there. After I arrived to tell them a story, they all tried to give me their candy. It was so heart-wrenching. These children, who literally had nothing, not even a home, wanted to share their precious treats.

The other situation in which I never met the parents was in my neighborhood. The children from a surprisingly wide radius liked to hang out at my home after school. I suppose previous generations would call them ‘latch-key kids.’ The school bus dropped them off but it was several hours until their parents were home from work so they would come to me for a safe place to pass that time. I would provide snacks and play games or help them with their homework. This was a very delicate situation because I had no authority. If they misbehaved, I could not punish them; they could simply leave whenever they wished. So how was I to maintain order? I’m being a little dramatic here to make a point; in truth, I never punished the students in my classroom either so there’s no real difference. But here are a couple strategies that are useful:

I’m a fan of being preemptive and avoiding problems before they happen. In my home or classroom, I can control the environment. This means I design it such that they cannot get into trouble. If there is something I don’t want them to play with, I move it out of their reach or lock it up. Problem averted. Then, the first time they come over, I very clearly explain my expectations to them. By choosing to remain in my home, they have implicitly agreed to follow them. Have you ever said, “Ok, it’s time to clean up,” only to hear groans, whining and “Nooo!”? A simple way to avoid this is instead to say, “Ok, we’re going to start cleaning up in 5 minutes.” This warning gives the children time to accept what’s going to happen so they won’t feel like you have unexpectedly taken something away from them and thus feel the need to protest. And finally, after they’ve done something you asked, **thank them**. If they feel appreciated, it won’t seem like a chore you ordered them to do; rather it’s more like something they volunteered to helped you with. Interestingly, these things do not have an age limit and work equally well on adults.

One evening, several of the regular children brought a new one with them: a seven-year-old girl. They said her mother would sometimes get so drunk that she couldn’t get home, leaving her daughter locked out and homeless for the night. So, they brought her to me because she needed a place to stay. She is the only child I’ve ever met who I would classify as a gamin (as described in the book Les Misérables). After I cooked dinner for her, it was getting late, so I made her a bed and turned down the lights. But she wanted them off. So, I turned them off. But still she complained it was too bright and made me close the curtains. She wanted it pitch black. It was so dark you couldn’t even see your hand in front of your face. To this day, including adults, this little seven-year-old girl is the bravest person I’ve ever met. Can you imagine spending the night in a complete stranger’s home but feeling so safe that you didn’t want any light? Not only was she brave, but she was blazingly smart. I have a variety of puzzles scattered around my home. Her favorite one was comprised of three-dimensional wooden blocks which must be arranged in just the right way to form a perfect cube. She solved it several times while I was cooking dinner but didn’t stop there. After the lights were out, she solved it one more time by touch alone! Brilliant!

Anyway, back to the teaching. I don’t know if you’ve ever been sleep deprived for six months straight but it’s horrible. I couldn’t wait for it to end. The very day of my six-month anniversary, everything changed. I quit both of my jobs, got a new full-time job at a different preschool and enrolled as a full-time student in college. The new preschool was the exact opposite of the first one I worked at. It was rich. The parents paid a huge amount of money for their children to go there and still there was a waiting list of several years. I was assigned to the four-year-old room. The ratio was amazing. Instead of me having triple the number of children as I should, there were triple the number of teachers: three of us for a single classroom! Naturally, this changed things a lot.

Firstly, the parents cared about their children! It was so wonderful! The children loved me, then they would go home and tell their parents what we did that day, so their parents loved me too. What I was unprepared for was how this would affect the other teachers. They actually got offended at me! Apparently, many women have a self-image that they are more nurturing than men, that they have “women’s intuition” or “mother’s instinct” and so are naturally better at caring for children. But I shattered this illusion. They realized the children preferred me. They became jealous. They shunned me like I was some sort of witch casting spells to enchant the children away from them. This same feeling followed me for the rest of my career, even into other schools. It got so bad that people started doing things to get me fired… or worse. Several attempts were made to have me put in jail. It didn’t matter that the allegations were completely made up; because of the atmosphere against men working with children, the legal system would rather put an innocent man in prison than let a child molester go free. Living for several years with this constant threat that I could be unjustly sent to prison at any moment was so stressful that my hair turned prematurely grey. Throughout this story, I am going to leave out *MOST* of the negativity from these other teachers because it’s depressing and you wouldn’t believe it really happened anyway; I will just include a few of the more important examples.

As I said, the children preferred me. If you’re not sure who that is, here’s a hint: when they fall down and scrape their knee on the playground, whoever they run crying to is the person whose comfort they want. Did you know children as young as three understand irony? When they came to me in tears, I would look at the scrape to make sure it wasn’t serious, then I’d clap my hands happily and say, “Yaay! That’s a good owie! Give me five!” Upon seeing an adult behave so contrary to expectations, they went from crying to laughing in about 1/3 of a second. Priceless. They’d give me five (or sometimes a hug for bigger owies) and I’d drive the point home with a sly grin saying, “Now go back and play… and get another owie!” They’d chuckle and say, “No!” but I knew this owie was a badge of honor to show they learned something today, even if that thing is only to watch their step.

It was fine for children to come to me at school, but it became a red flag if their parents were around. One summer I was babysitting a girl who was one and a half. On her second birthday, they invited me to the party. I was totally taken by surprise at what happened next, but I was later told it was the custom in their culture. They sang happy birthday, blew out the candles, then the mother came up behind the daughter and pushed her face right into the middle of the cake! I later learned they buy two cakes for each birthday so they can eat the other one lol. But in the moment, the daughter ran to me for comfort, trying to escape from whatever crazy thing her mother would do next.

I found that girl fascinating. She broke all the stereotypes. Her mother insisted she had a case of the ‘terrible twos,’ but I never saw it. I think this is a term used by uneducated parents who don’t know what the expected behavior at each developmental level is. I had long since learned that children behave differently for me than they do with their parents and this girl was a great example of that. I also noticed that children don’t cry around me and was pleasantly surprised to see this extend down to one so young. At two, she couldn’t talk yet. She was just learning a few words but was far from making full sentences. Most of her communication was still grunts and body language. I found that, to prevent crying, one simply needs to be attentive to their needs. If she reached her hand out for her sippy cup, I’d hand it to her. No crying necessary. What I found especially interesting is that she understood the concepts of personal property and impulse control. As most children do, she always insisted on sitting in my lap. This included during meals. There would be two plates of food in front of us, one for me and one for her. While she did eye my food, she never strayed or tried to take any of it, even though it was easily within her reach. I found this impressive for her age.

I expect I will digress a lot so deal with it :p Back to the school. Another example of other teachers getting jealous of things beyond my control: occasionally a child would come from another class to visit. Usually, the child had been in this class previously so the other teachers’ faces would light up thinking the child had come back to see them, but then turned sour when the child ran up and hugged me instead, even if I had never been their teacher previously. So, teachers from other classrooms started making up new rules for their students. First, they instructed them not to talk to me. This was doomed to failure. But in the process, it caused a lot of harm to each child’s psychological wellbeing. There was a lot of confusion as this rule did not make any sense to them, then there was guilt for breaking the rule and talking to me anyway. The other teachers knew this rule was shady and so had not told me about it. Thus, when I talked to the children, they were conflicted.

Another foolish rule was they weren’t allowed to kiss me. But the children wanted more than just hugs so they invented some new things to fill that void. First, due to our study of the jungle and, more specifically, boa constrictors, they started giving me ‘boa squeezes.’ Adorable. Then they invented bonking. This is where they would grab my head in both hands and press their forehead into mine. This was brilliant because, from the outside, it appears to be roughhousing. But, if you ever experience it, you will realize how very intimate it is. It spread to other classrooms but, when one child tried to do it to another teacher, she got very mad. The oblivious fool actually punished the child for trying to show her affection!

On the subject of rules, I have several of my own I should mention. **ALWAYS**. I kneel down and talk to each child at eye level. **ALWAYS**. This shows I value them and what they have to say. It is a sign of respect, similar to how I refer to them as ‘children’ and not ‘kids.’ Pro tip: in the process of kneeling down, put your back to the wall. This way, you can face out towards the rest of the classroom to keep an eye on things while keeping the child facing the wall and free of distractions.

Another rule I have is that I don’t initiate physical contact. I let the other person decide when they feel comfortable enough to touch me, hug me, etc. I give them all the power in defining what type of relationship they want with me. A hug is for the child’s benefit, not my own. I had this rule long before I was a teacher and apply it to adults as well. One time a friend of mine came along with me when I was taking care of a child. She kept trying to pick him up or force hugs on him, but it only made him struggle and try to get away from her. What happened? You guessed it: he ran to me and made me pick him up to protect him from her.

I see a lot of teachers (and parents!) invent rules solely for their own benefit, to make their *own* lives easier, regardless of how it affects the children. This can often hinder their development or otherwise be detrimental to them psychologically. So, I have a rule that I don’t give the children any rules unless I can explain to them how it is for their own safety. Then, when I explain how it protects them, they will follow it themselves, even when no one is watching; thus, there is no longer any need to make it an official rule in the first place. I value freedom and want to pass that down to them. I don’t want to place any unnecessary limits on their curiosity.

Speaking of freedom, this extends to thinking. I want them to decide things for themselves and not just blindly follow what an authority figure says. To this end, I frequently put them into positions where they are forced to disagree with me. Like the above example where I tell them to go get another owie. Or I’ll say something very silly, so they have to correct me. We’ll all be eating fruit for snack time; I’ll take a bite and say, “Mmm… tastes like chicken!” so they all have to say, “Nooo” and burst into laughter.

On the topic of thinking, toddlers have an interesting habit. They’ll point at something and say, “What’s that?” To the unwary adult, this is interpreted as the search for new knowledge and so they will tell the child what it is. But that’s not what is happening here. In truth, the child already knows what it is. I’m not entirely sure why they do this. Perhaps there is some insecurity in their lives, and this is an extension to the concept of object permanence they learned as infants. When they point and say, “What’s that?” I point right back and say, “What’s that?” This creates the opportunities for them to show off their knowledge and for me to praise them for being right. Self-esteem boost ftw~

While I praised my students constantly, it was never empty (so as to avoid making snowflakes). Rather, it was always tailored to each child and specific to something they had accomplished. An action or behavior. Thus, their self-esteem was tangibly linked to something they have control over: knowledge they can learn or a skill they can practice. NEVER did I mention their looks when complimenting them. If this needs an explanation, you shouldn’t be allowed near children. A couple more mistakes I commonly see is when teachers reward the students with toys and gifts. The introduction of bribery modifies the situation so the students start doing things for the prize rather than because it’s the right thing to do. Simple verbal recognition keeps the focus on their accomplishment and makes them feel good about themselves rather than about a trinket. A step further in the wrong direction is when parents reward their child, not with a toy but with candy. Using food as incentive creates overweight adults who feel psychologically compelled to go get dessert every time they want to celebrate an achievement. If you truly want to show they did a good job, it’s going to cost you dearly: from their perspective, the most precious thing you can give them is a little bit of your time.

There is one situation which is often overlooked but is probably the most important moment to praise a child. I once had a four-year-old who didn’t understand sharing. If he wanted something, he would hit the child who had it and take it. After I saw this happen, I curled my finger to signal he should come over and I asked him what happened. You want to avoid asking yes/no questions as much as possible with children; instead ask open ended ones so they must think before answering. It’s also more fair because they have the chance to include any mitigating circumstances you might have missed. He admitted to hitting the child and stealing his toy. So, I had one of my mini philosophical discussions with him. I tailor each one so it’s specific to the child and circumstances. A basic one for preschoolers might go something like this (but would obviously be expanded for older children):

“Is it nice to hit our friends?”

“No.”

“How would you feel if he hit you and took your toy?”

“Bad.”

“What should you do next time he has a toy you want?”

“Ask him if I can use it.”

“You’re right. Use your words. And what should you do right now?”

“Give it back and apologize.”

Then we walk over to the other child so I could make sure the apology was real. Most adults nowadays give **non-apologies** (see wikipedia) and incorrectly think it’s sufficient, so I make sure my students include a statement of what they are sorry for, a pledge that they won’t do it again and something to make amends like sharing a toy or giving a hug.

At this point most adults think the situation is resolved and done with. But no, the most important part is yet to come. I watch this impulsive child for the next time he wants something. I see him, on reflex, raise his hand to hit the other child, then pause with his arm in the air, then lower it. I curled my finger to signal he should come over and I ask him what happened. He tells me and then I praise him for making a good choice and give him a high five or a hug. Catching them in the act of doing something good is far more valuable than when they do something wrong. With the lesson firmly reinforced, there is never a problem again.

Back to the classroom. As I said, we had three teachers. One of them was very good at lesson plans and would make a different theme for each week. I tried to play into her theme but would also find a topic which interested each child on a personal level and bring in something to expand on it. For example, one of my students was the next Bill Gates; he was totally captivated by electronics. When the other children slept with a security blanket or stuffed animal during nap time, he slept with batteries. He’d carry a big D cell around all day and caress it like it was a teddy bear. Naturally, I brought in an old modem circuit board for him to play with. He loved it!

I spent a lot of my time after school on quests for things that a child had expressed an interest in. But I was poor, so I ended up at a lot of garage sales. When I told people I was a teacher and wanted their stuff (usually books) for my classroom, they almost always gave it to me for free. It was very refreshing to see so many people being so generous. It happened a few times at grocery stores too. This one florist would give me flowers for my classroom. And I would try to get exotic foods for them to taste so they could experience other cultures.

One of my favorite things was story time. The children could never get enough of me reading to them. Once upon a time, I had a book of about 100 fairy tales. As an experiment, each time I finished one, I would ask if they would rather hear another or go play outside. Four-year-olds are not usually known for their long attention spans or the ability to sit still so I was surprised when I was the one who had to end it when it was time to get them ready for their parents to pick them up. They had gone over an hour and still wanted more! So, I was constantly in search of new books. In addition to the garage sales, I discovered my local library had a wonderful program. Whenever they got a new book in, they would sell me the old one for 50 cents! Soon I had so many books, I was able to rotate them to give the children a new selection each week.

Besides the battery boy, there was an exceptional girl in the class. She was three years old but had a very rare temperament, akin to my own. Most adults can’t even do it (which is why we have all that impulse junk at the grocery checkout lines) but this tiny girl regularly practiced delayed gratification. She’s the only preschooler I’ve ever seen do it. In the mornings as they arrived, every other child would drop whatever they were carrying the instant they saw me and run up to give me a big hug. But this girl would lock eyes with me, as if reserving that hug for the future. Then she would hang up her coat, put her lunch box away, wait while her parent signed her in and, only after all the ‘chores’ were done, would she calmly walk up to me and give me that meaningful hug that had so deliberately been put on hold. Besides her personality, she was also special because she was so smart. She would regularly draw pictures for me of the two of us playing together. This was common and most children drew pictures for me, but she would sign her name at the bottom. This was quite a feat for three, but still not unheard of as a few others could do it as well. The thing which caused me to do a double take was when she moved her signature underneath the drawing of her like a label and then, under the drawing of me, she spelled out MY name! She’s the only one who ever took the initiative to do that. It was not a whim but a carefully planned project. She had gone home and made her mom teach her how to write my name, then she spent a week practicing, only at home so as to not give away the secret, so she could surprise me with it. Amazing!

Many of the parents became jealous of my relationship with their children as well, but it was a different sort of jealousy than the teachers had. The parents recognized that love is not a limited quantity. The teachers treated the situation like each child only had 100 units of love to give and, however much they gave me, left less for them. But of course, the parents know love is not something you can run out of; you can just make more and however much love their child gives me is unrelated to how much love they get. For example, throughout our adventures, I had given several of the children nicknames. I called one little girl Peanut. Her mom thought this was adorable and she tried to use it on her daughter too. But her daughter got hilariously upset and said I was the only one allowed to call her that. The mom was jealous but laughed it off. It brought us closer, and the mom eventually added my name to the contact list of people (usually family members) who were allowed to sign her daughter out. It caused quite the commotion the first time I took her. I made no secret of it and, in fact, went out of my way to tell every person I passed that I was taking her. All these spite-filled women thought this was a perfect opportunity to get me arrested for kidnapping, so they escalated the issue. Her paperwork was found, and they saw my name. But of course, they claimed I forged it. So, they escalated it again. Eventually the director got involved and called the mom to report that I had taken her daughter. I was sitting in the room when the call came. The mom couldn’t stop laughing. She had to repeat many, many times that it was ok and she had asked me to take her daughter.

The children often invited me to their birthday parties. One was rather unusual: it was a princess party. I kept asking, both the girl and her mother, if they really wanted me to go and they both insisted. It was on a Saturday, so I told them I had my girls that day and they said to bring them to the party. So, I dressed them up as princesses and we went. Because of their insistence that I go, I had assumed other dads would be there too, but no. I was the only one. A dozen little girls and their mothers… and me. Super awkward. But the moms all started to marvel that, when I said something to their children, they listened. No crying or whining. They just did it.

I believe there are several reasons for this. First, I build a rapport with them so they want to make me happy. Second, they trust me. They know I wouldn’t just say no out of hand, but I have a good reason for it. And third, a big mistake most parents make is to give in. Parents hate whining so will acquiesce just to make it stop. If you EVER do this, the child will remember that whining can sometimes work and will do it forevermore. Since they know it doesn’t work on me, they don’t waste their time. Also, I don’t give orders. I ask them if they would please do it for me. Your tone makes such a difference. And finally, I always do what’s best for the child and they can tell I genuinely care about them. I have a very vivid memory of the first time I had to choose between being their teacher and being their friend. I thought the child would hate me for telling him no, but I did the right thing anyway. To my surprise, about ten minutes later, he came up and gave me a big hug. This is when I learned certain boundaries are appreciated by them. Rather than harming our relationship, it made it stronger. If it’s something meaningful, it makes them feel safe and cared for to learn the limits of their environment. In case you missed it, the most important word there was ‘meaningful’; if it’s not, if it’s just a whim on your part, it will have the opposite effect, making them resent you.

Eventually, the other teachers made things so difficult for me that I moved on. This was only my first experience with the excessive prejudiced against men and I still had hope it was atypical. I had only taken that job because it was the first one to accept me when I was so eager get away from that awful first one. But it was very far away, and I wanted something closer to home.

Those first ones were for profit schools, so I decided to try my luck at a non-profit. I found one nearby that was affiliated with a church. At first appearances, it seemed very loving. The teachers were allowed to, not just hug, but kiss the children as well. Until one of the children did it to me. VERY quickly, a double standard was implemented. A flurry of new rules was created which applied only to me. Children weren’t allowed to be affectionate with men, only women. I was not allowed to kneel down to talk to the children face to face. During circle time and story time, I was not allowed to sit on the rug with the other teachers and children; instead, I had to pull a chair off to the side so I wasn’t so close to them. I was not allowed to say, “I love you” to them. There were a lot of other rules which I won’t bother listing.

But the children, the clever, clever children, did not accept these rules and found ways around them. Rather than saying, “I love you” in English, they said it in a variety of other languages, starting with Spanish but then I taught them others like Chinese and Russian. Instead of me kneeling down, they found things to climb on. One bold five-year-old went on strike. She wasn’t even in my class but, once or twice a week, she would have a sit-in and absolutely refuse to listen to anything anyone said to her. She wouldn’t budge until the other teachers called me over and told me to kiss her. The rest of the week she was perfectly well behaved.

Then one day, after I had been there several months, I noticed one of the children was very uncomfortable and couldn’t sit still so I asked her what was wrong. She replied that her underwear was too tight. I told her to tell her mom when she picked her up. At this point, I thought the matter was concluded and I moved on to something else. But the next day, the head of the school calls me into her office and hands me a letter which said she was accepting my resignation. At first, I didn’t make the connection because it was so insignificant to me at the time, but then she explained men are not allowed to talk about little girls’ underwear. I was flabbergasted. It was so obviously an excuse to fire me illegally. She didn’t even ask to hear my side of it; she didn’t care.

Because I babysat for her daughter, there was one teacher at that school who was friendly with me. When she heard about this letter, she felt it was so blatantly prejudiced that she threatened to quit in protest. But I told her to stay so I would have a witness if I was able to press charges. Then I went to the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission to report all the gender abuse the church had put me through. The EEOC employees made me feel very out of place; it was clear *they* thought their job was only to protect women and I did not belong there. To my dismay, this government agency, whose sole purpose is to protect people’s rights against such prejudice, sided with the church. They had no intention of helping me and so blew me off with a fake excuse saying it was my word against theirs and therefore unprovable in court.

I rallied my spirits and made one final attempt at being a teacher. I went out of my way to find a school as different from my previous ones as possible. The one I ended up with was unlike the others is four major ways. First, it was a public school. Second, it was a Montessori. Third, the school was vastly larger and included grades pre-k thru 8, each with several classes. And fourth, I’d be mostly working with middle schoolers in grades 3-5.

My first day was full of paperwork, orientation and familiarizing myself with the school. When it was lunch time, I went to the cafeteria and found a random empty table at which to sit. A few minutes later, I discovered it wasn’t a random table after all but was assigned to the kindergarten class as they all came over and sat around me. I asked their teacher if she wanted me to move but she said no. So I just sat there, eating and chatting normally with the children. But this teacher spent the entire time staring at me, hard. Afterwards, she pulled me aside and practically shouted, “What did you **do**?!” I had no idea what she was talking about but, with my recent history with other teachers, I braced myself for the worst. To my surprise, she wasn’t accusing me of something bad, but of something good. She explained that one of the children with whom I had been chatting… doesn’t chat. He had some sort of psychological trauma and she had never seen him speak before. But to me he was talking normally. Apparently, I was the only person who could get him to do this. She became my only ally in the school. From that moment on, every time her class was walking past me in the hallways, she would stop them and make everyone wait while I had a conversation with the little boy.

Working with older children took some getting used to. They have more complicated social structures and advanced interests. They all gave me quite a bit of homework. I’ve always gone out of my way to learn what my students do in their spare time and familiarize myself with it so I am able to relate to them through their own hobbies. When the children realized this, they all eagerly insisted I borrow their favorite books and CDs. The sheer volume of content was overwhelming. But as I absorbed their world, I was able to gain insight into how they think so I was better able to guide them. It also gave us common ground for discussions and enabled me to explain things more easily to them when I could reference something meaningful from these alternate sources. And finally, it bound us closer as I was the only adult in their lives who knew about these topics which they cherished so much.

One thing I was unprepared for was the level of affection they showed. I thought the hugging was a pre-school age thing, so I was startled that all these middle schoolers hugged me too. And these children were much bigger than I was used to; one girl hugged me so hard, she lifted me right off the ground! I don’t ever remember any of the children hugging teachers back when I was in middle school. But this seemed to be a need they had which wasn’t being fulfilled elsewhere and, since my job is to meet their needs, I saw no problem with it. On the contrary, I felt if they attempted to hug me and I was to turn them away, it would be deeply hurtful to their psychology. The other teachers, however, saw things differently. Even though they did it, I was forbidden from even *touching* the students. If you can believe the absurdity of it, I actually got in trouble for playing tag with the children at recess because I tagged a child’s arm! But the children craved interaction. I was proud to be the only adult I knew with enough energy to keep up with them. The other teachers could have at least made an effort; instead, they just stood off to the side doing nothing. I always felt they were the ones who should be reprimanded for *not* playing with them.

I later learned hugging was not limited to middle schoolers either but extended to high schoolers and beyond. Anytime I was in the role of a teacher and there was someone to appreciate my knowledge and effort, it inspired them to hug me. Parents often did it. And once, even one of my professors at college! I would often write about my students for my homework assignments, so they got to know my style rather well. At the end of the semester, one of these professors called me up after class and asked if she could hug me.

Speaking of college, in addition to those degrees, I had collected a hefty assortment of certifications and licenses along my journey. All the following required attending classes, passing tests, and paying fees so they are not trivial. First, I had a fingerprint clearance card. This is where the state coordinates with the federal government to run a background check on you to make sure you haven’t committed any crimes. I had a CPR certification. A first aid certification. There are separate certifications for adults and children; I had both. I had my food handler’s license enabling me to prepare lunch and snacks for the children. I also had the food manager’s license enabling me to coordinate the kitchens if needed. I had my commercial driver’s license so I could drive a school bus. I had my article 9 certification which allowed me to work with children with special needs. I also had many hours of continuing education credits from a couple government run organizations that tracked which lectures I attended. I think all this knowledge may have been partly responsible for the way the other teachers treated me. They were older than me and had been doing the same things for years whereas I kept myself up to date with all the current child development research. I tried to be a good role model, but it seemed to have the opposite effect; when they saw me doing something differently than the way they would do it, it gave them more reason to resent me. It’s a shame they never took into account the vastly superior results of my methods and the response it brought out in the children.

The article 9 certification was really neat. There is a government run program called respite care. This is where the government will pay the childcare fees for parents of children with special needs so they can go do errands like grocery shopping. I provided respite care for many families, mostly with autistic children. The laws protecting children under article 9 are much stricter than for other children. But to me, they all seemed like common sense, and I found myself upholding this higher standard with ALL children.

At one point, I babysat for two families whose children were the same age: a girl and an autistic boy. I decided both children would benefit from interacting with each other so, with permission from each parent, I arranged a playdate. The three of us started off playing some board games together. As we played, she noticed there was something different about him. Just as she was on the verge of feeling superior and about to look down on him, I suggested we play a math game. During the respite care I provided him, I would sometimes help him with his homework so I knew how smart he was. It startled her the first time he did a math problem. She quickly realized he was significantly better than she was. It caused her to re-evaluate him, to see him as an equal, thus paving the way for friendship to develop, which in turn enabled him to practice his socialization skills. It couldn’t have worked out better if I had planned it myself… oh wait, I had ;)

Back at the school, it was still recess. This was a communal event with every grade playing together on the same playground, so I was able to get to know the children from other classes. When recess ended, the school had a strange ritual. One lead teacher would stand at the gate acting as a judge. Then two other teachers would step up to form the heads of two lines. A dozen random children would get into each line behind them. Then the judge would look at the two lines and whichever one was quietest would be allowed to pass. It didn’t matter what mix of children I got, I simply looked down the line and smiled at each one in turn; this was all it took to quiet them, so I was always the line chosen to pass first. Other teachers tried whistling or waving their hands or various other things to get the children’s attention, never realizing it wasn’t an action which worked but my personal connection with each child that did the trick. This was such a trivial event, but it seemed to breed massive resentment in the teacher who got left behind.

Most of the other teachers made it clear I was intruding on their girls’ club. As the only man, they would try to do things to undermine me or make me look bad. One day, we were taking the school on a field trip. The person in charge assigned four students to each teacher. It was clear these assignments were rigged. All the other teachers got their favorite students. For me, they saved all the ‘difficult’ children. And instead of the normal number, I received twice as many as anyone else. It was an obvious attempt to make things hard for me and stress me out. Unbeknownst to them, what stresses them out is not the same thing that stresses me out. In all honesty, if I only had four children, I would have been bored so I would have *chosen* to get more had the option been mine. As for the ones I got being difficult, I did not view them that way. They were a bit more energetic maybe, but they weren’t bad. In fact, up to a certain age, I don’t even think it’s possible for a child to be truly bad. It’s important to make a distinction in your language: you never want to say the child is bad; it’s the action they did or a bad choice they made, but the child is still good. When the busses dropped us off at the event, we had about twenty minutes to wait before we could enter. So, I made a deal with my group that they could go off to the side and play, but they had to stay within sight of me and come over when I signaled them. I like to think of this as controlled chaos. The other teachers could only see the chaos though. They were clearly anticipating my grief when it came time for me to wrangle them over. When the time came however, I simply curled my finger, and they all immediately made a quiet line in front of me. I had held up my end of the bargain and so they held up theirs. One of the most important things is to treat children fairly and with justice, not just sometimes, but consistently. They need to know they can count on you to be impartial, to hear them out, and do the right thing.

Sometime later, the school had a Teacher Appreciate Day. There was a school-wide assembly where, one by one, they called each teacher up to the stage and presented them with an award based on their personality. When it was my turn, I could hardly make it to the stage because the children were all cheering and grabbing my arms as I passed; it was like being a rock star. Then they gave me the award for ‘Quietest.’ The room hushed in confusion. Afterwards, the children all came up to me and asked me to explain it. From their perspective, I was exactly the opposite of quiet: I was the ONE teacher who talked to them the most. This award made no sense to them. I didn’t tell them the other teachers were ostracizing me of course. I said my job was to take care of them and so I didn’t have extra time to socialize with the other teachers; thus, the other teachers thought I was quiet. Watching them try to understand this was so cute <3

One day, a group of about a dozen older girls from a class above mine came up to me and asked if they could talk privately with me. Of course, I agreed. Then they pointed to one girl in the middle of the group and complained that her shirt was too tight. They were all reaching puberty and growing breasts and needed help dealing with it. Had it been outside of school hours, I could have helped them easily, but I was trying to work within the double standard imposed upon me and knew what would happen if any other teachers found out **I** had this conversation. Thinking perhaps this was a spur of the moment issue that had just popped up and I was merely the closest teacher around, I asked if they would prefer to discuss this with their homeroom teacher. To my surprise, they said no. So, I asked if there was *any* other teacher in the school they felt comfortable with. Again no. Finally, I suggested the principal. No. It had to be me. It slowly dawned on me this was not an impulsive thing but had been carefully planned. Since they weren’t in my class, they had to learn my schedule, find a time we were all free, gather these girls together and deliberately come find me. This was important to them. I felt honored that they trusted me with this, and I told them so. I also praised them for not being prejudiced. I explained the situation honestly, that the other teachers have special rules just for me, one of which is that men are not allowed to talk to girls about their bodies. They did not understand this. They had grown up their entire lives being told men and women were equal, so this unexpected information did not fit into their world view; it made them very frustrated. They wanted to talk about it but there wasn’t anyone else they felt comfortable enough with. The system had failed them. Their needs weren’t being met. My heart went out to them. They wanted help but couldn’t find any. They had done everything right by coming to an adult; I found it a completely unacceptable injustice that they were being rewarded with disappointment. If I didn’t do something this wasn’t going to get resolved. Thinking quickly, I improvised a compromise. I told them they were so smart they didn’t even need a teacher. I would stand off to the side and just listen while they discussed it all by themselves. They agreed and began to debate. Wow! What I witnessed was extraordinary! I felt like I was in the boardroom of a fortune 500 company. Their arguments were all so intelligent and eloquent. I could easily imagine these girls would grow up to be CEOs. And I was right: my presence was all the catalyst they needed to figure things out on their own. They not only impressed me, but themselves as well. The experience had empowered them to take control of their problems without waiting for a teacher. I told them how proud of them I was.

That winter I was called into the principal’s office. She had me sit at a large round table which was absolutely covered with dozens of hand-written letters (who hand writes things anymore?) and asked me to read them. As I read, my stomach turned, and I became physically ill. Each multi-page letter contained three or four descriptions of child abuse. Far too detailed in describing the offense, but totally vague as to who the child was and when or where it happened. What kind of person would have an imagination that could dream up such vile things? It made me sick. And all these atrocities were meant to have been committed by me. Very nearly every teacher in the school had written one of these ‘eye-witness testimonials.’ It took me a really long time to force myself thru them all. I was utterly disgusted. There were letters from teachers who I didn’t even know; how could a stranger vouch for my character in this way? By the time I finished, my stomach was in knots; I wanted to vomit out all the darkness my eyes had just ingested. I said, “If even one of those things is true, you should definitely fire me.” I was thinking, not of myself, but to protect the children. While I had been reading, I noticed the allegations followed several themes. It was obvious these teachers had had meetings and discussed what they would say; this was organized. I could only think in helpless horror that these people, these evil people, were in charge of the educations of all these students. It now made sense why all the children would only go to me for help solving their problems. They knew. Clever children.

Despite her desire to do so, the principal couldn’t just fire me. It was a public school and I had a written contract with them. So, she gave me a choice: I could quit or she would initiate a formal investigation. Because of this, I realize she was part of the conspiracy. If you honestly believed someone was guilty of those hundreds of instances of child abuse described in those letters, you don’t give them the option to quit and escape justice; you call the police. Also, when I asked for copies of those letters, I was denied. Looking back, it now made sense why they were all hand-written: no digital evidence. I’m sure, as soon as I left that room, those letters were shredded. I knew I was innocent of course. And so would any outside observer who glanced at the situation. If a teacher *ever* sees child abuse, she’s obligated by law to report it immediately, not save a bunch of them up for a big reveal. Besides, there’s not a child anywhere who would lie and say I did those things. So yes, I could have fought it. And I would have won. But what was my prize? I would get to remain in this toxic environment with these people, these monsters, so deep in hatred against me that they are willing to perjure themselves in writing just to get me fired? Ergo, I retired from teaching.

I’m pleased that I am able to end this summary of my career so optimistically. Even though I was frequently forced into a position where I had to choose between doing what was best for the children or best for my career, I never considered this a real choice; my priority was always their wellbeing. Thus, my morals remain pure and I have no regrets. Over the course of those many years as a teacher, I was able to improve the lives of several thousand children. I protected and guided them so they will grow up to be a kinder, less prejudiced generation than their teachers. The future is bright.