



Patience or Understanding?

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Patience or Understanding?

Nancy Weber-Schwartz

Ryan has just solved the problem of who will play with the kindergarten's only boy doll by punching 5-year-old Nicky in the stomach.

Does Ryan's aggressive behavior try your patience? Is patience a desirable attribute for success in teaching young children? Will it help Ryan's teacher successfully deal with this situation? Just what does it mean to be patient?

Colleagues and the parents of my kindergarten students have often commented on the tremendous amounts of patience required to teach young children. "I'd never have the patience to work with little children." "Where do you get all that patience?" I found myself feeling increasingly uncomfortable with these compliments because I've never considered myself a very patient person.

Gradually, as I heard patience extolled by other teachers and in graduate courses, and saw it on attribute lists in teacher preparation textbooks, I began to question the concept of patience as a virtue. My discomfort with the concept of patience as an attribute of good teaching was explained when I looked up the term in Webster's Dictionary.

Patient is defined as "bearing pains or trials calmly or without complaint; manifesting forbearance under provocation or strain; steadfast despite opposition, difficulty, or adversity."

Patience is associated only with unpleasant situations and is not even considered in a pleasant context!

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Because I find teaching the young very pleasant, I now believe that patience is an *undesirable* teacher attribute; its presence (in large amounts, at least) indicates a teacher who finds teaching unpleasant. I see myself as a successful teacher with very little patience. *Visitors to my classroom had mistakenly believed that I exhibited patience with young children, when in reality they were witnessing the behavior that results from understanding.*

pa-tient (pā'shənt) *adj.* Capable of bearing affliction with calmness.

The American Heritage Dictionary. (1972) Boston: Houghton Mifflin.

The teacher who understands the developmental level of the child does not need to "bear pains calmly." This teacher will accept behavior as developmentally appropriate and will not see the child as an adversary, because the child will be viewed as innately *good*, though inexperienced. Teachers who understand young children will see themselves as children's partners in learning and will not view the child as opposition. The adult will approach the learning situation and the child as a pleasure rather than a trial. The child's intuitive reaction to this approach will be positive and will create a positive learning experience.

A teacher's perceptions determine whether or not a particular circumstance requires patience. In my view, Ryan is not a naughty child, but a child with limited social skills. The aggressive behavior is understandable. To deal effectively with the situation, I must accept the physical aggression as appropriate to Ryan's level of development and social experience, but work to teach him other socially appropriate and effective behaviors. I might place my arms around both children



Donna Chick

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while explaining (rather than reprimanding) that people must feel safe in school. "We may not hit people or hurt them. Next time use words to tell Nicky that you feel angry and want the doll back. Then Nicky will know what you want." *My perception is not that Ryan is interrupting my teaching, but that he is offering me an opportunity to model problem-solving skills, to create classroom discipline, and to encourage self-discipline.* This classroom scuffle offers me an opportunity to act as a learning enabler by helping Ryan and the other children learn how to meet basic safety and esteem needs. I do not want to depend on patience in order to act effectively, because each new circumstance will draw on my reserves. If I rely on patience, there is a danger of it running out, resulting in inappropriate teacher behaviors. If I rely on understanding, and this understanding is based on sound developmental theory, it will never run out.

Teachers who expect the kindergarten child to sit quietly while working, to form letters correctly, or to

"keep your hands to yourself" will require patience because of a lack of understanding. Inappropriate demands create tension within teachers, within their young students, and between teacher and child. The teacher may demonstrate patience while calmly but tersely reminding, "Ryan, for the last time, take that pencil out of your mouth." Ryan may feel humiliated for unconsciously performing an act totally appropriate for a teething 5- or 6-year-old. If I understand, I will ignore the behavior or substitute a more suitable chewing material to satisfy the child's need. Nothing in my tone of voice, body language, or overall demeanor will indicate any tension of impatience, because I will not feel it. I understand.

Patience implies disrespect to the child because it is a condescending view that the patient person is somehow superior to the "opposition." It assumes that young children's behaviors provoke, oppose, and strain. This attitude contrasts with the developmental point of view of respect for the child's orderly, predictable development. Patient teachers perceive the aggressive child as the opponent, and are liable to set up an adversarial relationship in which they feel justifiably provoked into action against the child. In these power struggles, the teacher is the winner and the child always loses. The result may be the antithesis of the developmental point of view in the midst of a so-called "developmental" classroom: A child may be controlled instead of guided. She or he may be bullied into conformity rather than encouraged to develop uniqueness within social parameters. This teacher does not understand the child's needs and therefore cannot consider them. Impatience results when teachers are dominated by their own needs and cannot adequately take into account the needs of the child.

Teachers who understand young children know that they are not time-efficient. These teachers take time to trust in the natural growth process, to listen attentively, to respond descriptively and appreciatively. They take time to listen to what children are *unable* to say, as well as to expand upon what they *do* say. Such teachers make time to allow children to discover their world and build their reality through interactions with objects and people. When I understand, I accept that each child is worth all the time she or he needs. Because I accept what *is*, I put my energy into effective teaching, not into struggling against the reality that children are children.

A teacher who understands children's needs encourages growth. When basic physical and security needs are met in an accepting environment, children are able to risk growth and experience success. When love and belonging needs are met, the children are able to de-

velop competence and self-acceptance. The satisfaction of esteem needs precludes acting out to gain the acceptance of peers and attention from the teacher. When I understand these needs, I search for ways to help children meet them. I encourage freedom, sharing, conversation, movement, risk-taking, and spontaneity—the natural characteristics of childhood. Children will struggle to use these capacities regardless of my attitude. They act to satisfy *their* needs, not the needs or goals of the teacher. Therefore, the teacher who works to satisfy the children's needs will be comfortable and successful in the teaching role. Children will feel comfortable with their natural, necessary activities and will not be subjected to feelings of inferiority imposed by an endlessly patient teacher.

Can a grit-your-teeth-and-bear-it teacher be truly effective?

Teachers rely on patience when their own basic needs are in conflict with the needs of their students. For example, children may need activity to meet basic physiological needs, but this may conflict with the teacher's physiological need (to avoid excessive noise), safety need (for a positive evaluation from an administrator), or esteem need (for peer approval). Meeting the children's needs is more likely to become the teacher's goal when she or he understands the developmental characteristics of early childhood. It is to be hoped that the teacher will then stop looking to the children for the satisfaction of too many of her own needs too much of the time and will concern herself with the attainment of appropriate goals for each of the *children*. As an understanding professional, her own natural egocentrism will less likely interfere with educating the children, and she will be accepting of *their* egocentrism, an essential reality of very young children.

It is important for teachers to have mature, healthy personalities because young children are very vulnerable and their development requires focused and sensitive nurturing. Teachers who have gone into early childhood education with their own basic needs unmet, or who feel oppressed and burdened, may inadvertently draw excessively from the children to meet their own basic needs. This preoccupation with concerns of their own precludes an understanding of children, and therefore makes *acting* upon this understanding impossible. Healthy teachers will look to their students for the fulfillment of self-actualization needs


to enhance their lives *above and beyond* basics. This ensures an enriching interdependent growth experience for both.

An understanding professional values such attributes as organizational skills, problem-solving abilities, a broad knowledge base, and a thorough understanding of child development, and participates in activities to further these qualities. Graduate courses, membership in professional organizations, and consistent reading of professional journals will increase a teacher's understanding and implementation of current early childhood educational research and theory. Adult expectations will be appropriate to the developmental capabilities of the children and will encourage learning. Teachers will not define their own teaching abilities with unproductive terms like *patient*, but will articulate their role as professional educators in a legitimate field of study. While the patient teacher is likely to see herself as a martyr, struggling through days of adversity imposed by the children, the professional will celebrate *with* them the process of growth. Enthusiasm and joy can result as understanding teachers welcome student behaviors that patient teachers find irritating.

As early childhood educators work to validate their role as viable professionals—viable in the eyes of sometimes skeptical communities: administrators, upper-grade teachers, and parents—they must dispel the myth that patience is predominant in their success.

Parents and colleagues marvel at the early childhood teacher's patience *and* understanding. They misunderstand. Teachers possess patience *or* understanding: Patience is rarely necessary when one is understanding.

For further reading:

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