

How to Say “Yes” to Children’s Ideas

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What do I have to consider about my own practice in order to say yes to children’s ideas? This is a question that I have sat with for a long time, and it has changed the way I approach my work.

While I always had strong relationships with the children in my classroom, there were many times during the day when the stress levels of both the children and myself were high. Children would have an idea, such as standing on furniture in order to reach higher. I would stop them because I perceived the idea to be a dangerous one. They would react by either getting upset or continuing to try and achieve their goal when I wasn’t looking. The resulting power struggle made me feel like I was spending my day policing, and I lost the joy in my work.

As I began to reflect more on my own practice, I discovered that I was saying no to children’s ideas without really pausing to consider the reason why. I recognized that there was a connection between the stress levels in the room and me saying no, and I began to wonder how I might relieve that tension.

As a preschool educator with London Bridge Child Care Services, I have access to many professional learning opportunities. One of these opportunities is a 16-month master educator course that helps educators strengthen reflective practices, build leadership skills, and deepen understanding of inquiry-based learning and emergent curriculum. One of the course requirements is to choose a question that is of interest to us, and to use the question to guide us through an action research project. This seemed to be a perfect opportunity to explore the question that had been lingering on my mind:

What do I have to consider about my practice in order to say yes to children’s ideas?

I embarked on my research with the hope of discovering how I might better support the children in my classroom. Throughout my journey I made some important discoveries that ultimately altered the way I interact with children. I discovered the following:

- To say yes to children, I must be present and genuinely interested in what they have to say.
- To say yes, I must try to fully understand the children’s ideas.
- To support a child in taking risks, I must first understand the thinking behind their idea.
- To say yes, there must be collaboration and negotiation between children and adults.
- To say yes to children’s ideas, I must first be honest with myself about the reasons why I say no.

To say yes to children, I must be present and genuinely interested in what they have to say.

As an educator, I spend a great deal of time trying to give visibility to children’s learning. Before I engaged in my action research project, I would take numerous photographs and compose many handwritten notes. I wanted to be sure that I captured what the children were saying. However, upon reflection, it seemed that I was putting more emphasis on capturing word-for-word dialogue than on

understanding what the children were actually trying to say. While I understand that documenting is a very important part of my work, I found that my approach was actually robbing me of opportunities to gain a deep understanding of children's thinking. As Drummond (2002) said, "The quality of the relationship with each learner depends upon the teacher's ability, not only to be present in the moment, but also to be present with integrity and authenticity" (p. 201).

As I began to explore my research question, I decided to make digital video recordings to help capture conversations with children. When I reviewed the videos I realized that they served a much richer purpose than merely being a transcription tool.

When I first began to record conversations I still kept a notebook nearby in order to write things down as they happened. I noticed that in doing so, I wasn't really focusing on the children and what they were saying. Although I was responding to their words, I was missing the subtleties of the conversation. My eyes were on the paper, not on the children. Also, I realized that I was doing the majority of the talking.

However, a moment arose that changed everything. I was engaged in a conversation with a small group of children. One of the children was describing a drawing she had done of a log. Another child questioned the drawing, saying, "Logs have holes. Where are the holes?" The question caused me to pause as I was writing down her words. I found myself suddenly curious about the idea that logs have holes. This is when I noticed a shift in my role. I put the notebook aside, and become fully invested in the conversation. Through our dialogue I came to realize that the child was talking about the knots in the wood. Capturing this moment on video enabled me to reflect back and understand the significance of what had happened.

I began to listen more to what the children were saying and my questions became about seeking to understand what the children's ideas were, rather than just responding. In turn, I noticed that the children became more engaged as well, and our conversation deepened.

Through reflecting on these videos, I began to change the way that I used video recordings in my work. While I still used them as a way to capture children's quotes, the videos became a tool for me to reflect on my practice and helped me to gain a deeper understanding of my role in these moments. Videos became a tool for reflecting on my own thinking, as well as the children's. When I viewed the videos later, I was able to reflect on the things I said and to consider what I might have done differently.

To say yes, I must try to fully understand the children's ideas.

Prior to beginning my research, I would often jump to conclusions and assume that I knew what children meant. My assumptions led me to say no to their ideas, or to guide them in the wrong direction and help them do something that they didn't want to do. Of course this led to conflict and made me miss out on the deeper meaning that is often hidden between children's words. I recognized that to fully understand what a child's idea is, I have to really listen to what they are saying. Understanding requires building genuine relationships and taking the time to have conversations with the children to clarify what their thinking is.

One of the ways that my colleagues and I try to build relationships and listen to children's ideas is through morning meetings. At the start of each day we gather as a classroom community, and both children and educators share their thoughts and ideas with each other. At one of our morning meetings, a conversation unfolded stemming from some work we were doing with mixing paint colours. A child shared how he was trying to make a precise shade of green, but was unable to get it exactly the way he wanted it. Another child suggested that he needed to start with red paint in order to make that green. I questioned the child's thinking, because through previous experiences the children had already determined that blue and yellow made green. He insisted that you had to start with red. I could have asserted my own understanding, but instead I respected the knowledge he had accumulated through his experiences and invited him to show me how his theory worked. We met at the art table, where he quickly began the process by mixing a small amount of red paint with larger amounts of blue and yellow, thus creating the exact shade of green that his peer was trying to create. If I had not paused and offered a way to clarify the child's thinking, I would have missed out on this valuable moment.

To support a child in taking risks, I must first understand the thinking behind their idea.

We live in a society where safety is paramount. Whenever I provide new experiences for children, safety is always a consideration. During the process of forming my research question, I recognized that I was inconsistent in my responses to any activities that I perceived as risky. Although I understood the importance of offering opportunities for children to challenge their bodies, I still struggled with concerns over their safety. However, as I began to clarify that the children were being thoughtful while taking risks, I found myself able to provide them with the time, space, and materials necessary to fill out their theories. In doing so I enabled children to deepen their thinking and take more complex risks.

For example, one morning the children had set out a number of chairs in a long row. They were climbing over the backs of the chairs and then jumping off the last chair. Rather than stopping the activity, I invited the children into the following conversation:

Me: *Guys, I'm a little concerned. I see that you are walking over the chairs. I'm worried that the chairs will tip over and that you will fall and get hurt.*

Child A: *If we make sure that all of the legs are on the ground then they won't tip over.*

Child B: *Yeah, and no pushing.*

Child A: *We need to take turns. One at a time.*

Child C: *Yeah, and hang on.*

Child A: *My sandals are kind of slippery. I will take them off and my bare feet aren't slippery.*

Child C: *Yeah! Then we'll be safe!*

Me: *That sounds pretty safe.*

This short exchange allowed me to be honest with the children about my concerns. They were able to come up with some strategies to help keep themselves safe, which in turn helped me to feel more comfortable with the amount of risk being taken.

When I embarked on this research, I primarily thought of risk as being physical. As the scope of my research broadened, I came across an online article that introduced the idea of not only physical risk, but also intellectual and social/moral risk. As Edgington (n.d.) states, "early years practitioners have a responsibility to ensure that they offer children all these opportunities" (para. 7).

In our classroom, we began to facilitate intellectual risk taking by inviting the children to draw their theories and ideas and then share them with each other at our morning meeting. For example, one of the characters in a novel we were reading was faced with the problem of helping their friend, who had been turned into a statue. We asked the children, "How would you help someone who was turned into a statue?" and invited them to draw their ideas.

As my coworker and I reflected on the children's individual drawings, we realized that to understand the children's ideas, we had to first think about their understanding of the challenge that was posed to them. For example, one child's solution was to "put it in the oven to melt it." This solution seemed illogical if the statue was made of rock. However, when you consider other comments that the child made while drawing, such as, "You have to put it in the oven because the sun will take a long time to melt it," you realize that their understanding is likely that the statue is made of ice, and therefore, the solution is perfectly logical.

When these drawings were shared at our morning meeting, we encouraged the children to question each other about their ideas. Often times, ideas were expressed that did not align with what we as educators understood to be true. We embraced these moments and supported the children as they took a social risk and challenged our thinking. Doing this has helped us to create a culture in our room where the children are confident in taking social and moral risks. They feel comfortable standing up for themselves and their ideas by questioning the thinking of both children and educators.

When children take physical, intellectual, and social/moral risks, they are vulnerable. They are opening themselves up to other viewpoints, criticism, and questioning. However, when children are supported in this complex way, the benefits of risk taking become visible. Children learn to help each other fill out their thinking in a respectful way, and as a result, they gain confidence in themselves and their abilities.

To say yes, there must be collaboration and negotiation between children and adults.

As early childhood educators, we rarely work alone. I work in a large centre with eight classrooms and over 100 children. In my class there are 16 preschool-aged children and two educators. During the course of a day, I interact with not only the children and my coworker, but with other educators, support staff, and parents. It is important to ensure that everyone is comfortable with the level of

risk being taken in the classroom.

According to Curtis (2010),

we all have different reactions to challenging situations and what we perceive as too risky. It is important for early childhood professionals to examine our views of these situations and make distinctions between our personal feelings and experiences, our coworkers' points of view, and children's strong desire for autonomy and competence. (p. 53)

Prior to beginning my research, when faced with a risky situation, my coworker and I often had conversations about what our comfort levels were. Through these conversations we were able to point out the children's competencies and ensure that we were both aware of, and comfortable with, what was happening. We also engaged in these conversations with other staff who entered our room, and with parents, to make sure that the balance of benefits versus risks was clear. However, we didn't include children in these conversations. As educators, we simply made the decision about what we determined to be a safe or unsafe risk and expected the children to trust our judgment. Not considering the children's input often led to moments of tension between the children and the educators.

When we began to try and support the children in finding an appropriate way to fulfill their intention while still maintaining the values of our classroom, we found that the tension dissipated. For example, the children in our classroom were very interested in making and flying paper airplanes. In the past, we had supported their interest by inviting a child who was a paper airplane expert to draw a set of instructions for how to make a paper airplane. These instructions have become a part of our room. However, we still struggled with having paper airplanes flying around the room during the course of the day. We found that some children were getting upset because they were being hit by flying planes while they were trying to engage in different activities.

We had multiple discussions about how we could achieve a balance between the children's obvious interest in flying their airplanes and our value that children should be able to engage in uninterrupted play. Together with the children, we decided to solve the problem by hanging several paper targets around the room. In this way, children who wanted to fly their paper airplanes had a safe area to do so without interrupting other children. As soon as the targets went up, the children were drawn to them. Not only did they serve the purpose of lessening anxiety from rogue airplanes, but they offered the children a new challenge as they attempted to aim and launch their airplanes through the hoops.

When we began to involve children in conversations about risk, we saw the children as competent in a whole new way. They were able to explain their ideas and engage in discussion about how to safely carry them out. We believe that the children became empowered when we valued and respected their opinions and included them in the decision-making process.

To say yes to children's ideas, I must first be honest with myself about the reasons why I say no.

There are many times during our day when we must tell a child no, often to keep the child safe. However, in considering my own practice and reflecting with my peers, I came to the realization that I use safety concerns as an umbrella, often covering a number of less flattering reasons why I may be saying no. For example, I might outwardly say that something is a safety concern, but internally I am concerned about the amount of time or effort that it would take to say yes, or I am concerned about the opinions of others. Other times a perceived safety risk could be eliminated if I were to place myself nearby.

At our centre we are lucky to have a large indoor space for more active exploration. There is a ramp that wraps around the room, connecting it to the main floor. The children in my class were very interested in climbing the railings on this ramp. My initial reaction was to say no. I was concerned about the height of the railings, as well as the hard flooring underneath. However, instead of simply saying no, I expressed my concerns to the children and engaged in a conversation about how we could satisfy both the children's desire to climb and my desire to keep them safe. We decided that as long as the children climbed one at a time and there was an educator there to catch them if they fell, then the risk was manageable.

As the children began to climb, we maintained a dialogue about how we were each feeling about the experience. Each child had a different comfort level, and some climbed higher than others. When a child climbed to a height where I no longer felt confident in my ability to catch them, I expressed to them that I was feeling a little scared. The child responded that they were feeling a little scared too, and began to climb down.

When I was honest with myself about the real reasons I was saying no to children, I was also able to find ways to overcome barriers, both

real and perceived, that stood in the way of saying yes. Through having conversations with the children, sharing my values honestly with them, and actively listening to their ideas, I was able to build strong, genuine relationships with them while maintaining my integrity.

As a result of my research, I now have a greater appreciation for the complexity of children's thinking. When speaking with children, rather than assuming that I know what they mean, I listen and ask questions to learn more about their idea and the thinking behind it. My inner narrative has changed as well. Rather than *allowing* children to do something, which puts me in complete control, I consider how I can *enable* them to work through their own ideas. Instead of asking "can they?" I ask "how can they?" Instead of worrying "is it safe?" I consider "how can we make it safe?"

I have witnessed the effect that a shift in my practice has had on the culture of our classroom. Language is a powerful tool, and changing my inner narrative has also changed the way I speak with children. It has enabled me to model how to be respectful, inquisitive, and kind while seeking to understand a different perspective. The children have begun to speak to each other in this same way, explaining their intention and engaging in dialogue with one another. As a result, the children respect each other's ideas more than in the past, and they are willing to give each other the time to explain their thinking. They have also become comfortable questioning each other and challenging one another's thinking.

The changes in my classroom didn't happen quickly. This kind of change is an ongoing process that requires an investment of time and energy. For children to feel comfortable enough to take such substantial risks, there must be a culture of mutual support, trust, and respect.

As I was working on building the culture of my classroom, I was also being offered support, trust, and respect by my pedagogical leaders. Throughout my research, I was linked with experienced educators and mentors who were genuinely invested in my growth. In doing so, I was able to draw parallels between the way my mentors interacted with me and the way I was interacting with the children.

In the same way that children become vulnerable when they take risks, engaging in active research required me to step outside of my comfort zone as I evaluated my practice. I was offered a safe environment where I was able to take risks and be vulnerable without fear of judgment. I was asked questions to help me deepen my understanding and given time to fill out my thinking. It was because I was supported in this way that I was able to support the children. Thus, they became empowered and were able to support each other.

There were many times when I questioned myself and was uncomfortable with my decisions. These moments encouraged self-reflection and growth. They enabled me to make important discoveries that ultimately changed my practice and helped me rediscover the joy in my work.

References

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