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seeing children

by Deb Curtis

If we are not fully ourselves, truly in the present moment, we miss everything. When a child presents himself to you with his smile, if you are not really there — thinking about the future or the past, or pre-occupied with other problems — then the child is not really there for you. The technique of being alive is to go back to yourself in order for the child to appear like a marvelous reality. Then you can see him smile and you can embrace him in your arms.

— Thich Nhat Hahn

The daily reality of working with a group of young children presents many demands for adults in early childhood programs. There are the ongoing chores of caretaking and cleaning up, planning and providing an engaging curriculum, communicating with families and coworkers, and the ever-growing pressures for outcomes, assessment, and documentation to prove that children are learning when they are with us. These pressures compete for our attention, making it difficult to keep the child at the center of our work. Most of us went to work with young children because we love their view of the world and wanted to share it with them. Yet, with all of these preoccupations and problems, how can we possibly stay truly present in the moment and really see children as Thich Nat Hahn suggests above?

In my work with toddlers, I continually remind myself that although I may feel the challenges and pressures of regulations and outcomes, I am the one in the room with the children making decisions about what to pay attention to and how to respond. I essentially do have the power in every moment, with every interaction to be present and truly see children.

Learning to see children takes time and practice, both when I am with them and when I take time to reflect on my work. The extra effort is worthwhile as it is

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much better to share in children's insatiable curiosity, deep feelings, and pure delight than it is to be the toddler police, focusing only on fixing behaviors, teaching to outcomes, or checking boxes on official forms. How useful or authentic are assessments without the child being fully present in them? To learn to see children and keep them at the center of my work, I have adopted the following practices as a regular part of my daily life.

Notice and suspend adult agendas

It was lunch time and I was very preoccupied rounding up the ten one-year-olds I work with to get hands washed, bibs on, and everyone in chairs ready to eat. Through the chaos and noise I had been practicing suspending my adult agenda, even for a just a second, to look closely and delight in the many moments unfolding before my eyes. I carry my camera in my pocket to record and revisit the moments when I have



more time. When I saw Hannah looking at herself in the mirror, I snapped this photo.

In the midst of this busy lunch routine I was reminded of the deeper significance of my work. As I study the details of the photo, I can see that Hannah sees herself and this moment in her life as extraordinary. Her own image reflected back to her in the mirror brings her absolute pleasure. When was the last time you looked at yourself in the mirror this way? Can you remember why you stopped? If we still looked at ourselves and each other in this way it could transform how we live together.

We can only see through our own eyes and hear through our own ears and relate to what is unfolding through our own experiences. It is mostly impossible to be objective as we walk around in our own skin, especially with all of the demands pulling on us. The most useful way to see outside ourselves and our adult agenda is to be aware of our own perspective as we relate to children and the daily challenges of our work. Once we are aware of it, we can choose to put our adult agenda aside to really see children. Doing this brings so much richness to our lives, inspires us to slow down, and enables us to truly acknowledge the children in our lives.

Study photos to see more

With digital technology comes an abundance of opportunity to take photos. For a while I was taking so many photos I didn't know what to do with them. I decided to use the photos to tell the stories of the children and their work. While contemplating which photos to use for the stories, I discovered that if I studied them carefully I could learn so much more about the children's ideas and points of view.

I've since been re-focusing the photos to highlight aspects I want to see more clearly. I crop the photos, cutting out the background and then enlarge the elements I want to emphasize. The example here of the two children outdoors exploring the hole helped me see the details of textures, shapes, and shadows the children appear to notice as they use their hands to explore. I understood more powerfully the appeal of the dark opening surrounding the utility cover, appearing as a mysterious, deep hole with the promise of a surprise if you reach inside.



I also crop photos to highlight what the children are doing with their hands or looking at with their eyes. I discovered when I study their intent in this way it is impossible not to take what they do seriously. When you examine these elements, you can clearly see the intelligence, skill, and serious intent that children bring to their work.



Try out what you see children doing

A few years ago when I was teaching preschool I discovered that I could learn to see the children's perspectives in very powerful ways if I observed them closely and then tried out what they were doing. I had been frustrated with a group of boys who had taken to zooming the small cars off of block ramps that they

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Beginnings Workshop

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built. They would fling the cars across the tilted ramps, watching them fly through the air, hitting the ceiling, the windows, and sometimes people. I spent a lot of time trying to stop their behavior, but to no avail. After the boys left one day, my co-teacher and I decided to try out the cars and ramps ourselves. Much to our surprise we had a blast! We experienced the excitement and challenge as we built the ramps and zoomed the cars. With this new perspective, we approached the children's work in a very different way. We offered the boys challenges to build their ramps more carefully and control the speed more accurately. They took up our suggestions and the activity became a focused, complex learning experience for all. Since then, trying out what they are doing has become a regular practice for me to see children more clearly.



See children's strengths

As she got absorbed in her play, Wynsome dropped her binkie and forgot about it until she saw the one that T'Kai had in his mouth. She went up to him and yanked the binkie out of his mouth and put it in her own mouth. T'Kai began to complain loudly. My first instinct was to launch into the conflict resolution techniques that I have learned over the years. Instead, I decided to practice seeing more details to help me find the deeper meaning underneath this incident for the children.

After spending many days with these two children, I have come to understand that Wynsome and T'Kai share a strong connection around their binkies. They know firsthand how important binkies are and I think they associate their own feelings with each other. I've

seen them offer a binkie to each other when they are playing side by side. I also think that sometimes taking the binkie from the other is about trying to get closer by climbing inside each other's experience. It seems that Wynsome wants T'Kai's binkie rather than a binkie or *her own* binkie. Rather than seeing this incident as evidence that the children needed help with social skills, I see it as an indicator of their desire to be in a relationship.

With this in mind I wanted to find a way for the children to work together. I invited T'Kai to go with me to find Wynsome's binkie so he could have his binkie back. T'Kai accepted this idea readily and we searched the play area together. When we found Wynsome's binkie, I suggested that we go to the sink to wash it off. Wynsome, listening to this exchange, eagerly joined us at the sink, bringing T'Kai's binkie with her so it could be washed, too. Wynsome willingly gave the binkie back to T'Kai and with the binkies in their rightful owners' mouths the children spontaneously gave each other an exuberant hug. The children's eager participation with my suggestion showed me that I was on the right track. I marvel at their sweet connection with each other and see that sharing experiences is really what the children are looking for. I've discovered that my daily practice of seeing and taking action on behalf of children's strengths helps them live in their own competence.

Meet up with children's minds — not their behavior

I immediately knew from my previous observations of the children that they would love the plastic, sparkly bracelets I found at the Dollar Store. As I observed them with these materials, they were absorbed in using them just as I predicted. They focused intently on putting the plastic rings back into the cups and carefully putting the lids on. I'm always so intrigued by how seriously toddlers take this kind of work.

When I saw Kiran deliberately throwing the bracelets, my initial reaction was to jump in and stop this behavior. One of my ongoing goals is to help the children see how to care for our materials. Fortunately, before I jumped in, I stopped to look at the situation from his perspective. What I realized is that Kiran had discovered that if he threw the rings just the right way, they would spin around and around like a top and then slow down and stop. I was thrilled to learn this new

A Thinking Lens for Reflective Teaching



Knowing yourself

How am I reacting to this situation and why?
 What in my background and values is influencing my response to this situation and why?
 What adult perspectives, i.e. standards, health and safety, time, goals are on my mind?



Examining the physical/social/emotional environment

How is the organization and use of the physical space and materials impacting this situation?
 In what ways are the routines, adult behaviors and language undermining or strengthening the children's ability to demonstrate their competence?
 How could we strengthen relationships here?



Seeking the child's point of view

How do I understand the children's point of view in this situation?
 What might the child be trying to accomplish?
 What developmental themes, ideas or theories might the child be exploring?



Finding the details that engage your heart and mind

What details can I make visible to heighten the value of this experience?
 Where do I see examples of children's strengths and competencies?
 What is touching my heart and engaging my mind here?



Expanding perspectives through collaboration and research

What other perspectives could enhance my understanding of the meaning of this situation, i.e., perspectives of families, co-workers, colleagues?
 How might issues of culture, family background or popular media be influencing this situation?
 What theoretical perspectives and child development principles could inform my understandings and actions?



Considering opportunities and possibilities for next steps

What values, philosophy and goals do I want to influence my response?
 How can I build on previous experiences of individuals and the group?
 Which learning goals could be focused on here?
 What action should I take from my teaching repertoire and why?

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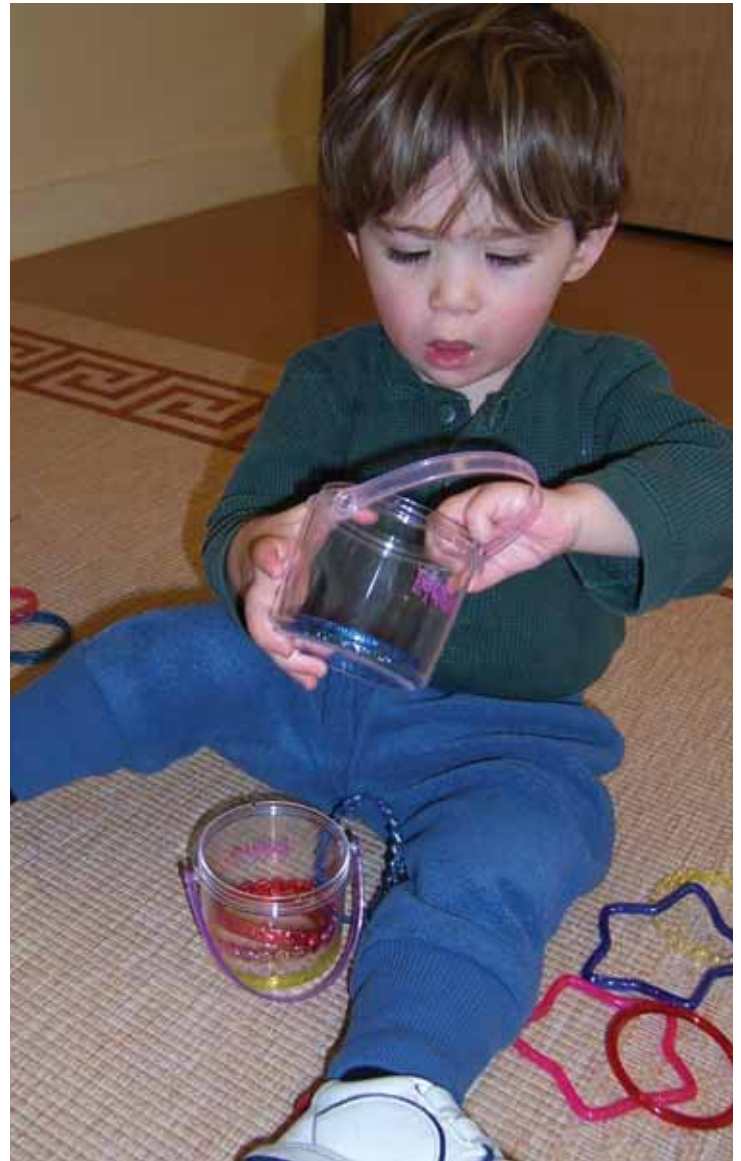
Slow down, observe, delight, and practice every day, for being with children in this way is not just a way of working, but a way of life.

way of exploring the bracelets, and called the other children's attention to Kiran's idea. I was just amazed that he figured this out; he's only 14 months old! His discovery is now a part of the learning games we play with the bracelets, and the children are getting quite good at controlling this small aspect of the science of physics.

I'm so glad I stopped to see what was on Kiran's mind rather than just stopping his behavior. Meeting up with children's minds has become a regular approach I use to see children. I've come to believe that I don't have behavior problems in my group, because I focus on what is on the children's minds rather than their behaviors.

Use a thinking lens

To deepen the practice of seeing children, Margie Carter, Ann Pelo, and I developed what we call a Thinking Lens for Reflective Teaching. The lens with questions for reflection serves as a tool for utilizing the practices described here. Use the lens to notice your adult agendas, share in children's perspectives, and see their strengths. Slow down, observe, delight, and practice every day, for being with children in this way is not just a way of working, but a way of life.



Using Beginnings Workshop
to Train Teachers
by Kay Albrecht

Photos — a window to a child's mind: Collect photos of children at work and play in your classrooms and try the strategies suggested in this article. Start by seeing which of the strategies is a good fit with the situation, then move on to seeing how many different strategies could be used to add information to 'seeing' children.

A road map is provided!: When teachers come to you with a problem, try using a thinking lens for reflective teaching as a process for understanding what to do next.

Which one?: One idea for determining how to really 'see' children is to divide teachers into five groups — one for each strategy suggested in the article (excluding the thinking lens). Ask teachers to sort through their classroom photos using the strategy assigned to their group. Debrief the experience to find out what teachers learned.