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CHAPTER 2

"If You're Sad and You Know It": The Value of Children's Affects

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If you're happy and you know it, clap your hands
If you're happy and you know it, clap your hands
If you're happy and you know it, and you
Really want to show it
If you're happy and you know it, clap your hands
—Children's song

EVERY EARLY CHILDHOOD TEACHER will recognize the song above. It is a song familiar from our own childhoods, apparently received as eagerly by the current generation of children as it was years ago. Yet if we end the song here, we risk neglecting many of the children sitting before us whose predominant affects are not happiness but sadness, anger, fear, worry, and the like. If we conceive of childhood only as a carefree, joyful time, we may be denying the experiential and emotional realities of many at-risk children who enter our classroom each morning. Paradoxically, by letting these negative affects go unattended, we may be barring the children from an avenue of connection and learning that can increase their capacity for joyful sharing.

Clearly, denial of children's negative emotions is an occupational hazard. We use clowns to comfort hospitalized children; the hallways of children's homes and shelters are decorated with cheery-faced Disney characters. These attempts to "cheer" children may convey our own difficulty acknowledging, affirming, and tolerating a range of affects in young children, including those that communicate

emotional pain and distress. Unfortunately, adult denial of children's negative affects puts some children in the untenable position of having to join the adult in denial mode or risk emotional alienation, because they find no mirror for their affective states in the classroom.

The importance of an educational environment that reflects a child's experiences has been well documented by educators concerned with multicultural education (e.g., Derman-Sparks, 1989). We no longer populate our housekeeping corners with only blond-haired, blue-eyed baby dolls. We stock our bookshelves with stories that include children of all races and cultural backgrounds and depict urban as well as rural and suburban imagery. The support of diversity in the early childhood curriculum empowers children on many levels. On a cognitive level, these curriculums introduce children to symbols that are personal and that represent what is relevant and familiar to them. Hence, representational capacities are enhanced as children are better able to embrace the symbols as "old friends." On a social/emotional level, a curriculum that reflects diversity helps children feel culturally affirmed and prideful about what is their own. Each factor contributes positively to a young child's ability to learn.

It is this author's contention that affirming the value of children's diverse affects is similarly empowering. At-risk children need to experience their own affective expressions as understood, mirrored, and valued before they will be able to take in affective information from others. Research shows us that without experiencing this fundamental form of communication, which stimulates the development of multiple synaptic connections in the young child's brain, children may have difficulty moving toward more sophisticated forms of communication and learning (Greenspan & Wieder, 2006; National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2004; Shankoff & Phillips, 2000; Shore, 1997/2003; Siegel, 1999).

This chapter will focus on the process of affect development in the early years and suggest ways for early childhood professionals to strengthen the foundations for healthy affect development in at-risk preschool children.

THE BIRTH OF AFFECT

There is much evidence to suggest that infants are born biologically prepared to enter into an affective discourse with their caregivers. Indeed, affect may be considered to be the primary vehicle for communication between infant and parent. The baby's cries communicate his distress, invite the mother to share the distress, and motivate her to address its source. The mother's delight at presenting the baby with a new rattle is transmitted to the baby, who shares in the affective mood and is motivated to bat playfully at the toy. The infant's attunement to affects becomes increasingly evident at 2 months of age, when she appears enchanted with a responsive, social smile. The infant's ability to differentiate among maternal affects and inform her behavior accordingly has been demonstrated in studies involving

6-month-olds who checked their mother's faces before proceeding to crawl toward a situation that appeared dangerous (Beebe & Lachmann, 2002; Sorce, Emde, Campos, & Klinnert, 1985).

The infant's capacity to regulate affects evolves as she experiences herself as a social partner in a relationship where each makes adjustments in response to the affects of the other. This relationship must be strong enough to "hold" the baby's affective core, supporting her through the extremes of her emotional ups and downs but helping her avoid sustained distress by balancing these affects with pleasurable affective experience (Beebe & Lachmann, 2002; Emde, 1989). Nathanson (1986) postulates that the infant learns to evaluate experiences of intense affect by checking the affects of important adults around her, thereby determining whether an affect is originating within the self or is being elicited by the other. This process then allows the infant to take defensive measures to protect herself from affects that are overwhelming (Beebe & Lachmann, 2002).

Emde (1989) refers to the infant as endowed with an affective core that "becomes exercised within the infant–caregiver relationship" (p. 48). Certainly, the quality of that primary relationship and the nature of affective communication within it will impact on the growing child's differentiation and affect regulation. Because affect can be conceptualized as a primary organizer of a young child's experience, as a vehicle for communicating emotions, and as a marker of developmental integration, the child's overall developmental integrity is partially dependent on his affective core getting the right "kind" of "exercise." Children are biologically equipped for this affective activity, but they are reliant on the stimulation of a responsive adult in order to begin the affective dialogue (Shore, 1997/2003; Siegel, 1999).

One can imagine that a well-attuned baby will attend to the affective cues of her mother, but if the mother is ill attuned and misses the baby's cues, the communication is disrupted. The baby may continue her affective monitoring of the mother, but as a survival mechanism and without the sense of shared meaning that motivates joyful interaction. Difficulty with affect regulation may be anticipated in an infant such as this because the caregiver's lack of attunement will not convey a sense that affects can be contained or accommodated. One can also imagine that a constitutionally compromised infant who does not send distinct affective messages, or appear interested in receiving them, will affect the caregiver's responsiveness negatively (Beebe & Lachmann, 2002). Clinicians have found that mothers of such infants provide care in a way described as mechanical, since there is little feedback to sustain a more related interaction (Greenspan & Wieder, 2006; Solnit & Stark, 1961).

Beebe and Sloate's (1982) studies of psychotic mothers and their infants found that infants turn away from affects delivered in intrusive, overwhelming ways. Infants in relationships with disturbed caregivers learn to avoid affective information, thus impoverishing their own abilities for attunement (Beebe & Lachmann, 2002). Infants whose caregivers are active substance abusers, and who are therefore

exposed to intense, inconsistent, and abruptly shifting affects in adults, may have difficulty with affect differentiation and regulation, since these abilities are impaired in the caregivers whom they are monitoring for affective information.

The role of affect as an organizer of development and developmental integrator has been described in the literature. Sroufe's (1979, 1996) work suggests that stranger anxiety may be the 8-month-old's reaction to the difference in affective climate when in the presence of someone other than the primary caregivers. Emde (1989) notes the heightened affects and affective shifts that typically accompany developmental milestones and interprets this phenomenon as an emotional declaration that "adaptation is providing for integration at a new level" (p. 41). Thus the suddenly separation–anxious baby expresses distress that heralds the child's developmental reality, which is that separation has new emotional meaning for her. The ecstatic shrieks of the 12-month-old who has just begun to walk announce the presence of a toddler who will never again function like the baby he was only a week before.

Both positive affects (joy, interest, excitement, surprise) and negative affects (distress, fear, anger, disgust) are thought to be innate and can be identified in every culture (Eisenberg & Qing, 2000; Izard, Huebner, Risser, Mcginnes, & Dougherty, 1980; Siegel, 1999). We suppose that these affects are available to the infant for expression as well as for reception of affective messages in others. While the function of the baby's affects within the infant–parent relationship can be considered essential for communicating the baby's needs for engagement and care, the function of the adult's affects within the infant–parent relationship merits its discussion. We have referred to the function of the adult's negative affects as a danger signal to the baby to alert him if a feature of the environment is not safe. Adults often exaggerate their affects when communicating in this way (e.g., "Yuk! That's dirty!" or "Uh-Oh! Hot!"). On the other hand, when adults use negative affects to mirror a child's distress or anger in order to provide affirmation or empathy, the affective tone is often slightly toned down. This kind of affective mirroring may serve to communicate a sense that negative affects can be shared with and understood by adults, but they are not so powerful or adversive as to destroy either parent or child.

Negative affects expressed by an adult who is not part of the parent–child relationship but are demonstrated within the baby's perception are likely to interest him and, perhaps on some level, be retained.

Negative affects that are directed at the baby may constitute an assaultive or dangerous element to the primary relationship and cause the baby to withdraw for self-protection. Infants and toddlers who are overwhelmed with painful affects that cannot be ameliorated by primary adults are at risk for not being able to develop age-appropriate tolerance for painful affects as they grow older. Emde (1989; Emde, Oppenheim, Nir, & Warren, 1997) and others emphasize the role of positive affect sharing and affect exchanges within the parent–child relationship as necessary motivation for social interaction, as well as "food" for the inner

sense of emotional well-being. Without these social and emotional foundations, the play and learning capacities of toddlerhood and early childhood are compromised (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2004).

THE FUNCTION OF AFFECTS: PRESCHOOL YEARS

Affect will be defined here as the outward facial and postural expression of one's feeling state. In essence, affects communicate feeling states to others and provide them with a nonverbal means of assessing our emotional needs and responding accordingly. Thus, we can recognize a not-yet-verbal toddler's fearful expression when the noisy vacuum cleaner is turned on, and we can then offer comfort and reassurance.

The work of infant researchers gives us insight into the birth and evolution of affect as a language of feeling that develops within the intimacy of the infant–parent relationship. Affect initially serves a social function within the first relationship and later serves a similar function in the growing child's wider social milieu. Healthy affect development requires a young child to maintain a connection to her feeling state and at the same time reflect that state outwardly in pursuit of connection to others who might provide comfort, emotional affirmation, or emotional confrontation. In effect, the child's ability to express true affect prevents emotional isolation.

Consider the many ways that the healthy preschool child uses affect to engage other children. He may skip toward a playmate with an eager, smiling face and an inviting posture, holding out a canister of Legos on a nonverbal but effectively engaging play mission. The same child may later read an expression of dismay on a classmate's face as she discovers the lack of dessert in her lunch box and offer to share his own. He may begin to cry when another child inadvertently bumps a sore spot on his arm, ensuring that his peers treat him gently for the rest of the afternoon. Another child's face may redden in anger when she is pushed into the snow, alerting the teacher to the need for intervention before the angry little girl retaliates. In each of these examples, affect is the primary communicator, but verbal language will most likely be used to elaborate the affective messages and facilitate social interaction and conflict resolution.

The child who has a narrow range of affect, who projects false affect, or who is ill attuned to the affects of others is likely to experience constant failures in social functioning. Without the ability to project and read emotional messages, a preschool child is lacking the necessary tools for successful peer interaction, whether or not he is adequately verbal. Such a child may be equally ill attuned to his own emotional status, resulting in his inability to predict his own affective shifts. Therefore, this child may seem to have intense emotional outbursts that come "out of the blue," as no corresponding affects serve to inform self or others of the internal emotional distress that is brewing. Teachers and peers may both feel frustrated with these

children, whose emotional needs are difficult to anticipate and whose distress is difficult to manage.

Healthy preschool children display a range of affects during the course of a schoolday and receive a range of affective messages from others. Observant early childhood professionals can describe the interplay of affects, language symbols, and play symbols weaving intricate connections through the peer group. In addition to this kind of clinical evidence, there have been several studies inquiring into affect development in young children. The results of these studies may help to inform our thinking about what is normative for young, emotionally healthy children (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2004; Shankoff & Phillips, 2000).

Researchers have found preschool children to be capable of accurately identifying the affects of happiness, sadness, anger, and fear both in video characters and among peers in naturally occurring situations (Fabes, Eisenberg, McCormick, & Wilson, 1988; Strayer, 1989). The way that children's knowledge about affects informs their behavior has also been a subject of inquiry. Terwogt and Olthof (1989) show that children can regulate their emotional behavior before they are aware of what they are doing or before they are able to talk about it (Beebe & Lachmann, 2002). Experts on infant development see emotional regulation as a capacity that emerges within the parent–child relationships of shared affective states (Beebe, 2004; Beebe & Lachmann, 2002; Greenspan & Wieder, 2006; Lieberman, 2000). The adult's ability to mirror, identify with, elaborate, and contain the baby's range of emotional expression helps the baby to develop her own emotional ability to regulate emotions little by little.

Strayer (1989) posits that children's feelings and knowledge about emotions in themselves and in other people evolve as they mature cognitively and socially (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2004). She points out that newborn babies share affect in the nursery, responding to another baby's cry by also becoming upset. This level of empathy, born of the infant's inability to differentiate self from other, evolves as the child individuates and becomes capable of differentiation, language, and other mediational functions. While preschool children are able to recognize and identify a range of positive and negative affects, they seem to distance themselves from dysphoric emotions in others for fear of regression to more undifferentiated forms of empathy. The present author's work with emotionally disturbed school-age children who had not yet mastered self–other differentiation at age-typical levels found "epidemics of empathy" to be a regressive force in the group (Koplow, 1986).

The work of Fabes and his associates (1988, 1999) shows that preschool children understand emotional reactions in peers to be the result of social interaction within the classroom environment (Eisenberg & Qing, 2000). Children were more accurate in attributing situational cause and effect to anger and distress reactions in peers than to happy or sad reactions in peers (Cicchetti, Macfie, Toth, Rogosch, Robinson, & Emde, 1999). This discrepancy seemed related to the

children's perception of anger and distress as reactive to external provocation or frustration, whereas antecedents for happiness and sadness were more difficult to observe and more likely to be related to inner states (Favez, de Roten, & Bonvin, 2003; Roseman, 1984).

Fabes and his associates (1988, 1999) also found preschool children able to devise effective strategies for remediation of stimuli that produce negative emotions. He found that when children were able to recognize the source of a negative emotion, they could generate strategies to address that source (Cicchetti et al., 1999). Emde's more recent studies emphasize the role of co-constructed parent–child narratives in the development of the child's ability to regulate emotion and address complex emotional themes (Ontai & Thompson, 2002; Oppenheim, Nir, Warren, & Emde, 1997).

DILEMMAS FOR THE CHILD AT RISK

Research tells us that well-functioning preschool children are able to distinguish one affect from the other, perceive a cause-and-effect relationship between affect changes and social interaction, and generate remediational strategies to address negative affects in young peers (Cole, Michael, & O'Donnell-Teti, 1994; Fabes et al., 1988). However, we also know that young children have difficulty tolerating negative affects in themselves and others and become defensive when they feel threatened by overidentifying with another child's potentially contagious emotional state. These findings imply certain dilemmas for at-risk children and for the early childhood professionals who work with them. Clearly, children achieve social as well as emotional gains when they are able to show a range of genuine affect and to recognize and respond to these affects in others (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2004). Programs that invest in helping children to develop prosocial behaviors rely on the child's ability to process affective information and on the developing capacity for empathy. Yet these goals may seem out of reach when we consider emotionally fragile children whose experiences have not supported age-appropriate levels of self–other differentiation and are therefore vulnerable to regressed empathy states. Many such children have not had the crucial affective mirroring that allows the child to feel comfortable and contained when expressing negative affects. Neither have they had the ongoing dialogue of responsive parent–child interaction that allows for the birth of language and other symbolic capacities, thus limiting their ability to put feelings into words and play symbols (Ontai & Thompson, 2002). For good reasons, emotionally fragile and traumatized children often express a predominance of negative affects. These negative affect states are often healthy manifestations of the internal distress felt by children whose needs for nurture or protection have been frustrated. Nonetheless, the weight of these negative affects may feel threatening to children and their teachers. The threat that negative affects will

somehow "take over" may cause programs that include at-risk children to minimize opportunity for peer interaction and to give selective attention to children's happy affects. While this strategy of structuring and preventing affective events is understandable, it may deprive young children of opportunities to accomplish some essential precursors for the development of empathy and prosocial behavior; it may also diminish the child's potential to use his relationships with his teachers to improve object constancy. Preschools concerned about promoting affect development in their students must provide them with the following:

1. *Opportunity for connection with primary adults within a safe and stable environment.* While all preschool environments afford children with this opportunity to some degree, many are not conscious of the import of this program function. It is important to take into account the at-risk child's enormous need for teacher–child interaction when planning staffing patterns and classroom activities. Heightened opportunity for connection is necessary in order to promote strong attachments to classroom adults. Attachment may be "unfinished business" for at-risk preschoolers and is an important precursor for attaining the level of self–other differentiation needed to support receptivity to one's own affect states, as well as to the affect states of others. When children enter preschool with psychosocial histories that indicate that their attachment processes were disrupted by multiple separations, maternal illness or unavailability, or traumatic family events occurring during infancy, the preschool must create an intimate environment where children can safely "exercise" their affect development. Therefore, contact with classroom teachers and assistants cannot be limited to task-oriented interactions where adult responses are contingent on a child's performance. Teacher–child interactions must be open-ended, spontaneous, and genuine in order to facilitate emotional growth.
2. *Opportunity to receive empathic responses from adults.* This ensures that young children experience their affects as effective agents of communication and have even negative feelings affirmed in the context of social relatedness. If children feel less isolated with their emotional distress, there will be less need to surrender to emotional loneliness by either distancing from emotions or losing control.
3. *Opportunity for dialogue concerning affects and emotionally salient experiences.* Prior to attending preschool, many children may lack a consistent partner for preverbal and then verbal dialogues that identify, refer to, and explore affect states. Engaging children in dialogues about their affects and the affects of others may be done on varying levels. An adult may approach a toddler who has just fallen with an empathic expression and the words, "Aww, boo-boo hurt?" whereas a 4-year-old waiting for her mother to come is helped by the teacher's attentive words, "You look worried about not being picked up on time!" and comforting gestures. These kinds of dialogues communicate adults' willingness to share in and contain negative as well as positive affects, producing a kind of "holding environment"—described by Winnicott (1965) as an essential feature of the healing relationship. By initiating dialogue about affect and affect-related events, the adult implies her ability for tolerating and surviving the child's emotional pain. This helps him develop his own capacities for dealing with difficult emotional experience. In addition, using language to describe affect states allows the young child to mediate emotional experiences by employing ego strengths. Instead of drowning in emotion or evading emotionally charged situations, children who have developed a reciprocal dialogue with significant adults concerning affects will be more likely to use words, representational drawing, and symbolic play materials to elaborate affective themes and thus to go beyond the diffuse expression of sadness, anger, fear, and happiness.
4. *Opportunity for peer interaction.* During open-ended play periods, children are encouraged to focus on and interpret naturally occurring affective events. These opportunities give children experience in reading affect messages from peers in the classroom milieu, where teachers can help them interpret messages and provide protection from emotional content that may be overwhelming. If opportunity for open-ended interaction is limited to outdoor play periods, or to the beginning of the day, when teachers are occupied by facilitating entry, there will be a lack of the kind of teacher–child contact needed to make affect-laden interactions meaningful. This generally results in children acting out emotional distress and contributes to a chaotic environment.

PRESCHOOL TEACHER: MIRROR AND MODEL

This discussion of the value of children's affects has several implications for the early childhood professional. Teachers, assistants, and clinicians who care for and interact with children on a daily basis can play a significant role in helping young children comfortably show a range of affect and respond appropriately to affects expressed by others. To do this, adults must give children permission to feel and express sadness, fear, anger, worry, and loneliness as well as joy, delight, excitement, enthusiasm, and other positive emotions. This permission will be readily conveyed by the teacher's mirroring of children's affects, by identifying those affects, affirming them, and representing them in drawing, stories, and so forth (see Chapter 9). Emotional mirroring is important because it feels affirming to the children and heightens teacher–child connection, but its effects go beyond what is observable to teacher and clinician. There is evidence that emotional mirroring underlies the development of memory and higher-level symbolic thinking (Beebee, 2004; Greenspan & Wieder, 2006; Siegel, 1999).

In addition, permission will be conveyed by the teacher's use of modeling to express her own genuine affects when interacting with the children.

It is impossible for classroom adults to serve as healthy models if they are falsely cheerful, speak to children in an unnatural or forced tone of voice, offer empty compliments, or interact with children in an effusive and undifferentiated manner. Teachers who allow themselves to discretely express and verbalize the cause and effect of their own affects will give their students a valuable lesson in emotional life. The teacher who gasps in fear when a mouse dashes across the classroom can later say, "Do you remember how scared I looked before when I saw that little mouse run out of the closet? Did you feel worried when you saw my face? I was really scared for a minute. Do you know anyone else who gets scared when they see mice?" The teacher who becomes exasperated by a child's difficult behavior can later acknowledge her feelings. She might say, "I bet I looked pretty angry before when you were stomping on those crackers! I'm glad we're both feeling better now."

In general, preschool classrooms must be relaxed, interesting places where children and adults share the joy of discovery and creativity. The sharing of pleasurable experiences will infuse the environment with the social strength necessary to accommodate the expression of negative as well as positive affects. Instead of trying to minimize the expression of negative affects in the classroom, teachers might use naturally occurring expressions of affect to help children become better attuned to affects, to differentiate among them, and to develop strategies for affect regulation when necessary. A teacher who habitually advises children in her class to ignore a classmate who is having a tantrum might try instead to engage the other children in a dialogue about what the angry child might be feeling or about their own experiences of being so out of control. Children can create strategies for helping their classmates feel calmer.

THE AFFECTIVE CONNECTION

Teachers who allow the true affects of at-risk children to have a voice in the classroom may fear that negative affects will become pervasive and overpowering. While at-risk children may be "overflowing" with negative affects as the result of depriving and traumatizing experiences or of developmental disabilities, teachers will find that giving these affects a voice need not result in a depressing environment. On the contrary, children who are allowed to sing "If you're sad and you know it, you can cry" and "If you're angry and you know it, stomp your feet!" will sing with interest, energy, and genuine shared feeling. The preschool experience then becomes a true "holding environment," where children feel safe with all of their feelings and learn to communicate about themselves. The teacher then becomes an important link in the child's affective connections, enabling her to be herself while reaching out to others.

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