

Affect Meets Cognition: Building a Curricular Bridge

LESLEY KOPLOW, VIRGINIA HUT, AND JUDITH FERBER

THE THERAPEUTIC CURRICULUM is an indispensable feature of preschools that heal. While a predictable schedule, open-ended play periods, and relationship-oriented teacher-child interactions are all essential components of the therapeutic preschool, the content of curriculum itself must be meaningful and highly motivating in order to promote ego development in at-risk children. Certainly, curriculum must meet the preschool child's need for stimulation and mastery. A therapeutic curriculum must also allow children at various cognitive levels to address unresolved developmental issues that are precursors to academic learning.

A therapeutic curriculum, also called an emotionally responsive curriculum (Koplow, 2002), is distinctive from a conventional curriculum in many ways. It is designed to help children bridge the gap between their internal and external worlds. On the one hand, progressive early childhood educators may have evolved curriculums that correspond to the demonstrated interests of well-developing preschool children, but teachers may have difficulty applying these curriculums to students who seem highly disorganized and dependent on teacher input. On the other hand, more structured, conventional curriculums tend to emphasize the accomplishment of specific tasks without regard for the child's own agenda. This often requires children to detach from compelling internal experience in order to focus on external inputs. When children are unable to do this, it is frustrating for children and teachers alike. For example, a separation-anxious child who cries throughout the teacher's lesson loses access to her ability to learn and is disruptive to the group.

A therapeutic curriculum does not leave learning completely in the hands of needy and fragmented children, nor does it encourage children to abandon their inner experience for the purpose of maintaining an external focus. Rather, a therapeutic curriculum seeks to strengthen the connection between affective and cog-

nitive domains, helping the child to make sense of her own experiences as a basis for broader conceptual development.

EMBARKING ON A THERAPEUTIC CURRICULUM

Where does a teacher begin if she wants to embark on a therapeutic curriculum? The answer is threefold: First, she looks at the themes expressed in the children's spontaneous play; then she looks at the children's behaviors for manifestations of unresolved developmental issues; finally, she looks at the children's life experiences. An in-depth exploration of each of these areas will clarify the purpose of the teacher's threefold inquiry.

Spontaneous Play Themes

In Chapter 7, several play scenes involving emotionally fragile preschool children are recorded. A myriad of themes unfold in these anecdotal accounts, giving us insights into both the developmental and environmental realities of the participating children. For example, it is likely that Darryl had some real experience with adults purchasing drugs and some firsthand opportunities to see police at work. Most likely, Peter's father had lost his job or had feared losing it. It is probable that Bianca had a frightening experience in a stuck elevator. As these and other themes repeat themselves in the children's spontaneous play, the teacher makes note of the children's apparent interest in the topics. She looks at these specific, experientially motivated themes in the context of a broad range of compelling play material. For instance, while Bianca is the only child playing about problems with the elevator, several of the children are playing about themes related to breaking and fixing or injury and healing. The use of spontaneous play to express concern with themes regarding injury indicates receptivity to curriculums focusing on this theme. Indeed, injury is a developmentally salient theme for young children who are preoccupied with their own body integrity during the toddler period.

If the teacher concludes that Bianca's emphasis in her play scene was the experience of being alone in the elevator and thus separated from her adult caregiver, certainly a curricular theme organized around separation issues will be relevant to Bianca as well as to many of her peers. Separation issues are expressed in many of the recorded play scenarios and are clearly important to every child's developmental process. Children who are preoccupied with this issue will be able to attend to a curriculum that focuses on and allows them to master their worries.

Behavioral Clues

In Chapter 1, the essential developmental tasks of early childhood were reviewed. Issues of body integrity were seen to be paramount for the toddler, who must

struggle to achieve a sense of whole self in a context that includes separation from his own body products, the intrusion of piercing vaccination needles, and the snipping of the barber's scissors. The toddler's sense of self-constancy is easily threatened. A broken toy may bring sobs of despair, expressing the child's conviction that what is lost or broken can never be repaired, or it may be handed silently to the adult in the belief that she possesses the magic necessary to bring even the wilted balloon back to life.

Developmentally arrested preschool children show many behaviors indicating difficulty with body integrity in the school setting. One child may scream when she sees a doll whose plastic arm has come off, as if this indicates that her own arm may also be severed or lost. Another child may seem to break things compulsively, disassembling whatever crosses his path and destroying his own products when they are close to completion. Another child may need to assemble toys compulsively, seemingly unable to relax until every hole is filled with a peg and every piece of train track is joined with another. He then may become inconsolable if he suffers even a minor injury from a fall or an altercation with another child. All of these behaviors indicate that issues of body integrity and self-constancy are still unresolved in these children. A curriculum addressing these unresolved developmental issues would then be in order.

Consider those children whose separation reactions remain extreme long after the usual "phase-in" period has passed. There are always children who scream as though they fear the temporary separation from parents will be permanent. They seem to experience a daily abandonment in preschool, while other children may feel empowered by the caregiver's confident goodbye. There are children who become so distraught that they vomit or fall asleep to seek refuge from intolerable feelings. There are also children who cannot acknowledge separation at the time of goodbye but never seem to be able to invest in the school environment. They remain silent, physically constricted, and seemingly preoccupied until their reunion with parents at the end of the schoolday. A curriculum addressing separation issues would be logical for a group of children with these behaviors.

Often, teachers analyzing children's behaviors focus on antisocial behaviors and the many ways that children find to act out within the group. Traditionally, analysts have seen acting-out behavior as a way of avoiding feelings. Children who act out are discharging or "getting rid of" emotions that are unwanted and overpowering. Instead of owning and experiencing their own sad, angry, and fearful feelings, children often act in ways that evoke these feelings in the other. Indeed, antisocial and destructive behaviors are important to understand, as their impact on the milieu is strong. Children who act out in intrusive ways may prevent other children from feeling safe in the school environment.

Traumatized and developmentally arrested children frequently lack the emotional foundation for experiencing a healthy range of feeling responses. They rarely possess the resources necessary for spontaneously expressing strong emotions in acceptable ways. They may hit another child if irritated by competition for the

same toy, throw toys in anger when the teacher announces cleanup time, preemptively attack a peer whom they fear, or smash their own wood collage to the ground before the unkind words of an older brother destroys its worth. While examples of acting-out behaviors are infinite and could fill an entire chapter of a book, all examples can be seen as an indication that children need more help to tolerate their feelings, to understand emotional cause and effect, and to express their affects clearly. Therefore, curriculums focusing on identifying affects, predicting emotional responses, and expressing feelings through language, play, and drawing are appropriate for groups containing many acting-out children.

Valuing Psychosocial History

Psychosocial histories indicated that several of the children had experiences involving injury either to self or someone considered essential to their well-being. The teacher's access to this important common experience allows her to integrate body integrity themes into her curriculum plan and to design caregiving routines for the children that support a sense of physical as well as emotional well-being. Many teachers lack access to children's psychosocial stories because their preschools do not have a structure for the kind of parent meetings that facilitate sharing on that level. While mental health staff or consultants may have interviewed parents and have valuable information that could inform the teacher's practice, issues of confidentiality may prevent them from sharing what they know. Teachers and clinicians need to collaborate in order to hold the histories of young, fragile children and need to work together to use their knowledge to enable growth and learning in the classroom. Teachers and directors may want to organize "Story Gathering Days" to invite parents to tell their children's important life stories directly to their child's teacher (Koplow, 2002).

Strengths and Abilities

There are many ways that emotionally fragile children are atypical when compared to their age-mates, but there are also many ways in which they demonstrate age-appropriate interests and abilities. For example, Darryl's preoccupation with street violence made him anxious, aggressive, and hypervigilant at school, yet it did not prevent him from developing an interest in "marrying" Wendy. "Marriage" play frequently emerges in groups of well-functioning 4- and 5-year-olds who are overflowing with Oedipal interests. Ana's autism limited her social behavior and made her communication idiosyncratic, but her ability to follow recipe charts during cooking activities was impressive.

These children's age-appropriate strengths and interests can and should be employed to explore early developmental issues through the curriculum. While body integrity may be an issue that is usually paramount in toddlerhood, the curriculums addressing body integrity may involve age-level concepts—such as

breaking and fixing, whole and part—that would be unavailable to the young toddler. The theme may generate discussions of cause and effect, “science-type” experiments, and sequential learning activities that would be beyond the level of most children under the age of 3.

The fact that the emotionally fragile preschool child may be able to use art and collage materials constructively and creatively will enable participation in complex projects that not only foster mastery of the curricular theme but also provide the experience of being successful with a variety of materials and activities. Without the organizing influence of the therapeutic curriculum, the child might be unlikely to discover her own capacities and talents.

THE ABCs OF THERAPEUTIC CURRICULUM

After the teacher completes the threefold inquiry previously discussed, she is ready to choose a theme that will address the difficulties she observes. She then designs a series of activities that incorporate the children’s strengths and allows them to work on the designated theme during various periods of the day (see Chapter 9). Often themes are introduced at the morning meeting via song and story. A group activity elaborating on the theme follows. Subsequently, materials that are particularly relevant to the explored theme are added to the usual selection of materials available at free play and outdoor playtime.

Curricular themes are generally planned to be carried out over the course of a week, although some themes may require more time to be sufficiently explored. Often, teachers may decide to rework a theme when a renewed sense of concern is expressed by the group or when events occur that give a theme particular relevancy.

The assessment of a theme-based curriculum is made on the evidence that children have retained and internalized the material presented. Evidence of integration is sought in the children’s own spontaneous play, language, drawing, and social behavior. Therefore, evidence of a successful separation curriculum may be seen in a lessening of anxiety during arrival and dismissal, or in a separation-anxious child’s newfound ability to play about comings and goings, or in an asocial child’s spontaneous conversation with a peer about a baby kangaroo’s sadness as he watches his mother hop away.

DEVELOPING EARLY-LEVEL CURRICULUMS

This section will take the reader through the process of developing therapeutic curriculums. The initial examples will focus on the development of curriculums for children who are functioning on an early level. The teacher’s attention to the children’s expression of developmentally relevant issues through spontaneous play

and behavior will be illustrated. The teacher’s process of organizing and presenting themes related to the issues expressed will be demonstrated in the anecdotal material.

“Go Away—Come Back”: Handling Routine Separations

Observations. It is 9:30 A.M. and Miranda, a 3-year-old girl, enters the gross motor play area. She covers her face with her hands and refuses to interact with other children. As the teacher moves closer to her, she can hear Miranda repeating to herself, “See Mommy soon. See Mommy soon. After lunch, see Mommy.”

Miranda’s classmate Peter spends his play time repeatedly opening and closing the classroom door. He exits the room and reappears seconds later, only to reenact this routine several more times.

Two 4-year-olds, Camilla and Preston, play together in the dress-up corner. Camilla pretends to cook, and Preston announces that he will drive to the store to buy her more food. He leaves the area for his make-believe destination, when he hears Camilla burst into tears screaming, “No! Come back! I want my daddy!”

At dismissal time, Camilla, Preston, and Miranda become increasingly disruptive. They run around the room, open and close the refrigerator attempting to grab more food, and finally cling tearfully to the teachers, resisting departure although they have wanted to be reassured about going home all day long.

Through observation, the teacher begins to recognize behavior patterns that reveal the children’s shared developmental preoccupations. Although the children demonstrate a range of ability in the areas of cognition, communication, and social functioning, none of them seem to have achieved a solid degree of object constancy and thus cannot negotiate routine separations. Their difficulties prevent them from maintaining an external focus and disrupt their ability to sustain productive learning. Therefore, the teacher decides to design a curriculum called “go away—come back.” Her goal is to help the children to cognitively and emotionally integrate the knowledge that important people continue to exist, regardless of whether or not they are out of sight.

Implementation. The teacher introduced the theme of “go away—come back” in morning meeting, using a music and movement activity. Each child used a cloth to hide himself, while the rest of the group sang a song about hiding and finding him. The song, to the tune of “Ten Little Indians,” went as follows:

Where oh where is Preston hiding?
Where oh where is Preston hiding?
Where oh where is Preston hiding?
Underneath the cloth!

The hiding child was then uncovered. The teacher then read the story *You Go Away* by Dorothy Corey,* following the story with an activity in which each child was given a bin of sand and some small plastic bears to hide and then recover.

During gross motor playtime, children were provided with large cardboard boxes, hollow tumble forms, and tunnels to play out "disappearing and reappearing" games.

Several other activities were planned for subsequent days, including more elaborate stories about hiding and finding, tabletop fingerpainting (in which children made designs that could then be erased and redrawn), and circle games, where children hid and then came back to sit in their seats. Throughout, staff used the curricular focus to verbally organize cognitive and affective learning, even for the youngest or most developmentally arrested children. Language levels were determined by the developmental level of the child. For example, an autistic child's sand play with bears may have been articulated by the adult as follows: "Bears go away, bears come back!" However, the language used to communicate about the activity to a verbal 3-year-old who had experienced several traumatic separations due to changing foster placements was more personal and elaborate: "I see the bears are hiding so far down into the sand! Do you think they're worried that they won't be able to see us again?"

Assessment. Miranda runs to the mirror, looks at herself, grins, and runs away again. She eventually becomes involved in a turn-taking game with Peter, who is also interested in playing peek-a-boo with the mirror. After Peter spies his mirror image, he laughs and runs into the teacher's arms, then returns to his mirror image.

Camilla and Preston engage in making a sandcastle for bears "for hiding." Preston calls out, "Bear, where are you?" Camilla responds, "Here! In the basement!"

After lunch, Preston gets the book *You Go Away* and hands it to the teacher. All the children listen attentively as she reads. When the story is over, Camilla and Miranda are able to take the teacher's hand and allow themselves to be escorted to their cubbies to get their coats. Preston waves goodbye from the bus window.

In this case, the teacher clearly saw the children using the therapeutic curriculum input to master their worries about separation. She may decide to extend the curriculum another week or to revise or amend it by designing activities that might be especially meaningful to her particular group of children.

*Most of the children's books mentioned in this chapter are listed in the bibliography in Chapter 9.

"My Special Animal": Making Transitions

Observation. The children are coming off the school buses and entering the playroom. Camilla stands with her coat buttoned up tight and will not remove it. Wendy begins to whine for crackers and throws a tantrum when told that snacktime comes later. Preston stands frozen on the lobby steps, refusing to walk by himself but also refusing help from the teacher.

Eventually, everyone enters the room and becomes involved in play. However, an hour later, when it is time to go down to snack, the children are distressed once again and require much staff attention in order to move on.

Children who have difficulty achieving inner representations of self and significant others are at a loss during transitions. They must rely on external sources of comfort and therefore become disorganized when the externals of a situation change. The children need help to develop their abilities to internalize comforting feelings. A therapeutic curriculum was evolved to help the children begin to use transitional objects to self-comfort during transitions and thus foster autonomy and growth.

Implementation. Each child was asked to bring a favorite stuffed animal to school. If a child did not have an animal at home, one was provided from the classroom. The child was permitted to bring the school animal home each day, with parental agreement to ensure its safe return.

The special animals were given two primary functions. One was to comfort children in times of distress and to accompany them through transitions, thus remaining a constant in periods of change. The other was to act as alter ego for children whose ego development was very much in process. Thus the teacher encouraged the children to use their special animals in every part of the daily routine. Animals were given seats at snack, and children were asked to voice their animals' food preferences. Children were asked to decide how old their special animals were and what their special animals would like to have for their birthday parties, which were then celebrated by the class as a group activity. Teachers took pictures of the special animals as children used them for self-comfort and to bridge routine transitions, and they made books for each child about the genesis of his special animal and how he could use it to feel better.

Ongoing interactions between special animal and child and special animal and teacher in the context of the daily routine helped the animals to be endowed with properties of self and of comforting other, and also heightened the animals' ability to function as transitional objects.

Assessment. Miranda walks to the playroom door, hesitant about beginning her morning at school. She is clutching her stuffed green dog, saying, "Doggie's all right. He'll be all right." She puts the dog on the top of the slide and says, "Doggie's

turn to go on the slide." At drawing time, Miranda asks the teacher to draw Doggie, who is feeling sad because "his mommy is at the store."

Wendy brings her stuffed bunny rabbit to the teacher and announces that her bunny is hungry and wants snack right away. The teacher suggests that she feed her bunny some pretend food until it is time for snack. Wendy takes her bunny to the sandbox, where she, Preston, and Camilla begin a game of cooking rice for Bunny.

Peter screams when the teacher turns the water off in the sink, where he has been washing his hands for several minutes, oblivious to the line of waiting children behind him. He jumps up and down squealing and does not respond to the teacher's words. When given his stuffed puppy, he quiets momentarily but then pulls toward the sink and as his distress escalates. The teacher gets a bin and fills it with soapy water, suggesting that Peter give his puppy a bath. Peter smiles in delight and begins soaping the puppy in a focused way instead of putting his face into the bin or splashing wildly, as he usually does in water play.

Watching the ways that the children used their special animals allowed the teacher to assess whether the curriculum helped them to better manage transitions and enabled them to develop their self-concepts and autonomy behaviors. For Miranda, Wendy, and Peter, the curriculum was quite successful. It allowed Miranda to bridge the gap between home and school more successfully and gave her a symbol for expressing her feelings about transition. Wendy was able to use her special animal to help her delay gratification and wait, without feeling deprived and getting into a power struggle with the teacher. Peter used his special animal for comfort and to promote more organized behavior. The "special animal" curriculum was a valuable tool through which each child expanded his ability to be more autonomous and to interact with the world in a more productive manner.

"Mine": Boundaries and Possession

Observation. Peter looks at his mirror image without seeming to recognize that he has control over the movements of the boy he sees in the mirror.

Miranda walks over to Camilla, who is playing with blocks on the rug. Miranda grabs Camilla's blocks and seems stunned when Camilla reacts by throwing herself on the floor and sobbing. Miranda then takes refuge in the lap of the nearest adult, where she stays for several minutes.

Preston and Shaneka are playing in the dress-up corner. Preston, who is being Batman, demands that Shaneka come over to him. He then proceeds to hug her in an intrusive and sexual manner. She pushes him away, and he slaps her for resisting.

At lunchtime, Miranda and Peter have difficulty staying seated in their own chairs. They need help from the teachers to stop taking food from other people's plates. Camilla doesn't want her own food but wants to be fed a bag of potato chips left over from someone else's birthday party. She cries when told that she needs to decide about eating her own food.

The children's behaviors suggest to the teacher that they are confused about personal identity, boundaries, and ownership. To address these unresolved developmental issues, the teacher evolves a curriculum based on the concept "mine." She plans activities that she hopes will enable the children to conceptualize and internalize a sense of themselves as separate individuals with control over their own bodies and a right to their own feelings and possessions.

Implementation. Teacher-directed activities for the "mine" curriculum were introduced in morning meeting. The group sang songs delineating body parts and differences in dress.

Teachers made individual books about each child at home and in school, using photographs to illustrate what was unique about each child's constellation.

Group activities included the assembling of a "this is me" puzzle, individualized to resemble each child. Children painted shoeboxes as "that's mine" boxes that could hold all personal items that they wished to keep inaccessible to other children. Each child was given a series of blank books entitled "My _____" to explore and represent issues of ownership that were personal to him or her.

Gross motor activities and free playtime offered infinite opportunities for teachers to help children appreciate and respect each others' boundaries and to help them verbalize their own rights to individual body integrity, as well as to participation in group games and sharing of group toys. Teachers emphasized the children's modeling of language, which would help children effectively communicate their claims; for instance, "No, that's my toy." "I want a turn next." "Don't squeeze me like that; it hurts." Games where children were given visual representations of their own physical boundaries, such as personal seat mats, individual bins, or individual clay trays, helped children feel acknowledged, protected, and clear about where they begin and end.

Assessment. Shaneka approaches Preston and begins tugging on his sweater. "Stop," says Preston. "That's my body."

Camilla is folding up green squares of construction paper and stuffing them into her "that's mine" box. "That's my money," she says proudly.

Miranda sees Wendy working at a puzzle at the table. She reaches out to grab a piece but is stopped by the teacher. "Not mine?" Miranda says with questioning intonation. She then answers herself: "Soon Miranda's turn."

Peter is blowing bubbles in front of the mirror. He is gleeful as he watches his image blow bubbles simultaneously. The teacher verbalizes the connection. "That's Peter. Peter's bubbles." Peter smiles broadly.

By going back and examining the children's spontaneous play, language artwork, and other activities, the teacher is able to monitor the extent that "mine" is being internalized as a cognitive and affective concept. The teacher is able to help the children move closer to claiming ownership of possessions, affects, and accomplishments. A successful "mine" curriculum may precede the development

of a curriculum about sharing, mirroring the evolution of normal developmental processes.

METHODS FOR DEVELOPING PRESCHOOL-LEVEL CURRICULUMS

The process of developing therapeutic curriculums for children whose cognition is at or above age level but who have not worked through important emotional issues is much the same as the process of developing these curriculums for children arrested at early developmental levels. Often children with unresolved emotional issues have not developed in an even, integrated fashion. A 4-year-old, for example, might be able to do puzzles at an 8-year-old level or memorize the words to a story, while at the same time relating to others much as a toddler would. Another 4-year-old might be cognitively intact but unable to attend to typical learning activities because of pressing emotional preoccupations. The therapeutic curriculum taps into the child's emotional energies to provide investment in his cognitive explorations, and it appeals to the child's cognitive strengths to help the child understand and resolve important emotional issues.

The "Pumpkin" Curriculum: Exploring Affect

Observation. Melinda walks stiffly into the room at the beginning of the day with a wooden expression on her face and intones mechanically, to the teacher, "Hi, Judy, how are you?" Throughout the course of the day, her affect shifts very little. At meeting time, she reads, with no emotion, the words she has memorized from a book about feelings.

Sam speeds around the playroom on a tricycle. He suddenly tips and falls over, the heavy metal tricycle falling on top of him in a tangle of arms, legs, metal, and wheels. Quickly, he jumps up and laughs, insisting when the teacher rushes over and voices concern, "I'm not hurt, I'm not hurt."

Vanessa plays with the baby doll. She begins to cook for the baby but quickly begins to become hurtful instead, mashing food on the doll's face then hitting her repeatedly. When the teacher suggests that this must make the baby sad and pretends the baby is crying, Vanessa begins to laugh and says, "Okay, I'm leaving then. Goodbye," and abandons the play.

Tony wanders around the room during free play provoking the other children. He knocks over one boy's building. He takes a pegboard another child has been using when she is not looking. When challenged by the other children, he lashes out at them aggressively. When the teacher takes Tony aside and reflects that it seems as if he is feeling angry this morning, he begins to cry and screams, "I'm not angry . . . I'm happy! I'm happy!"

Through observation and evaluation, the teacher assesses that these children are all cognitively able to identify affects. However, they have not accomplished

the important developmental task of integrating their own affects. They are either disconnected from their affects, show a narrow range of emotion, deny real feelings, or display false affect. The teacher thus designs a curriculum that will allow the children to explore affect on a variety of levels and help them connect to and express their own affects. A "pumpkin" curriculum around Halloween provided the perfect vehicle for this exploration. At the same time, it captured the children's natural excitement and curiosity about a popular holiday theme and addressed it in a meaningful way.

Implementation. In implementing the "pumpkin/affect" curriculum, the teacher introduced a variety of materials and activities related to the theme of pumpkins and affect and used them to both (1) model symbolic representations of affect and (2) offer children opportunities to explore affect through their own symbolic play, art, and language activities.

At meeting, the teachers used books and songs about both affect and pumpkins to introduce the themes of the group activities. Group activities included: making orange playdough to fashion personal pumpkins; cooking pumpkin Jell-O jigglers with raisin faces, pumpkin muffins with icing faces, and pumpkin pie; walking to the store to buy a large pumpkin and small individual ones; carving a jack-o'-lantern; making pumpkin face puppets; creating a collage of small paper pumpkin faces with varying affects; and taking turns creating expressions with a large pumpkin face with movable features. Finally, the children made masks and used them to dress up and go trick-or-treating in the school.

These activities provided important learning experiences (e.g., learning about the features of a face, cooking, exploring the neighborhood on a walk to the store) while at the same time offering a metaphor (pumpkin faces) through which the children could work on affect. Throughout, the activities emphasized choosing different kinds of affects to depict on the pumpkin faces, according to the emotional state of the "pumpkin makers." Emotional cause and effect was explored through play with the puppets. The teacher would ask the children such questions as, "Vanessa, what is making your pumpkin sad today?"

During free play, many of these materials were reintroduced and set out on the table so that children could play with them spontaneously. The large pumpkin face made of orange poster board and covered with contact paper could be arranged into a happy, mad, scared, or sad face, depending on how a child chose to stick on the movable features. The teachers modeled different affects by cutting pumpkin shapes out of the orange playdough the group had made and making faces on them; children were free to change these and create their own. Children also practiced creating faces on the feltboard by manipulating felt features. Books about feelings were easily accessible on the bookshelf, as were photograph books of the children, which focused on how they felt in different situations. On the playground, the teacher drew pumpkin faces on the wall with chalk and modeled different affects, then let the children draw their own.

As Halloween drew near, the holiday theme was explored more closely: A "pumpkin/affect" curriculum evolved nicely into a dressing up curriculum, where the children continued to play about affect as they made different kinds of masks and where issues of real and pretend were also examined.

Assessment. By observing the children's spontaneous language, art, and drawing representations over a period of time, the teacher can evaluate the extent to which the children are internalizing the concepts.

Vanessa sits at the table during free play, manipulating the features on the large pumpkin face. She puts tears on the face but turns the mouth upward in a smile. The teacher suggests that maybe the pumpkin is crying on the inside but feels like it has to smile outside. Vanessa glances up at the teacher, then turns the mouth down. Vanessa says, "He's sad." "How come your pumpkin is sad?" the teacher asks. "Because his mommy hit him," Vanessa replies softly. "That must have hurt the pumpkin," the teacher says.

Melinda is intently watching a conflict between two other children, staring in particular at a little boy who is crying. She walks over to the feltboard and quickly makes a sad face out of the felt features. "Look—Raul is sad!" she observes.

Tony becomes enraged when he has to take turns with a material he has been hoarding. The teachers stop him from hitting the other child and suggest that maybe he can draw an angry picture instead. Tony draws a mad pumpkin face, saying, "I'm angry at you. I don't want to share the trains!"

Through these observations, the teacher concludes that the "pumpkin/affect" curriculum has successfully been integrated and has helped to make children more connected to their feelings and able to communicate about them.

"Big and Little": Balancing Dependence and Autonomy

Observation. At snacktime, Vanessa jumps up excitedly and grabs the juice bottle to pour juice for a younger child in the class. When the teachers remind her that the grown-ups are there to help the other children and that the other child might like to pour the juice herself, she insists angrily, "Mommy says I'm bigger!" Vanessa has difficulty accepting limits set by teachers and frequently engages in power struggles with them.

Rosa arrives at the beginning of the day, clinging like a monkey in her father's arms. She begins to whine and whimper as he attempts to put her down and leave. Throughout the day, she relates to adults in a soft-spoken, compliant manner. When confronted by other children, Rosa is unable to assert herself and just withdraws quietly. When she is hurt, she assumes an infantile position and clings to the teachers as she sobs and sobs.

During cleanup time, Tony runs around the classroom jumping on furniture, shouting, "Look at me! I'm Batman!" He sees two children fighting over a toy and rushes over to intervene. Highly anxious throughout the morning, Tony is

unable to seek comfort or reassurance from the teachers. When they offer him a lap to sit on at meeting, he adamantly refuses.

It is clear from these descriptions that the children in this group have not resolved the important developmental task of establishing an age-level self-concept and an appropriate balance between their dependency and autonomy needs. Some of the children, who may have been parentified or unprotected by adults, feel they must act as if they are "bigger" than they actually are; other children, who may have been infantilized by adults, have not achieved age-appropriate levels of autonomy or self-assertion. The teacher thus designs a "big and little" curriculum in order to allow children to move closer to a more appropriate developmental position of being both little and dependent and at the same time achieving increasing levels of autonomy and mastery over their environments.

Implementation. The teacher chose an array of materials and activities to represent the themes of big and little. The theme was introduced at first on a more conceptual level and later explored through activities that were more personally relevant to the children.

At meeting, books such as *Big and Little*, *Mama's Little Bears*, *Little Gorilla*, and *Peter's Chair* were read. Songs representing the theme of big and little, such as "Three Little Ducks," were sung. Later, the teacher made a "birthday cake" chart depicting their ages and measured the children on a height chart. During group time, children made big and little handprint pictures, big and little shape collages, cooked big and little pancakes or cookies, drew in big and little drawing books with big and little markers. Later, they pretended to be little and "grow big" to music. One day, the children played in the dress-up corner and were encouraged to be "little." The next day, they dressed up to be "big." A birthday party was held with playdough birthday cakes, in which each child got to choose to be little or big and select the number of candles for their cake. Another day, a similar birthday party was held with real cupcakes that children had cooked and decorated, and real candles were used.

During free play, children explored the concept through their play. They filled and emptied big and little bottles with water; drew with big and little markers; built big and little buildings with big and little blocks; played with big and little animals, toy people, pegs, stacking cups, and Russian dolls; cut out big and little shapes out of playdough—the possibilities are almost endless. Children were also encouraged to dress up in "big" clothes or to pretend to be little, like a baby.

Teachers helped children make connections to their own feelings about being little and being big. For Vanessa, a child who behaved in a parentified manner and experienced intense ambivalence about her dependency needs, a photograph book was made depicting her being "big" and being "little." Again, it was stressed that she could also do lots of 4-year-old things and grown-ups would still take care of her.

Assessment. Rosa comes into the room, and the first thing she does is walk over to the bookshelf and select *Little Gorilla*. She wants to hear again and again the part about how even though Little Gorilla gets bigger and turns 5 years old, everybody still loves him. She stands up and says, "That's like me. I'm 5. I'm getting bigger, right?" She measures herself against the height chart. "That's right," the teacher responds, "and even if you act like a 5-year-old girl, grown-ups will still take care of you." The next day, Rosa wants to walk, rather than be carried, into the classroom. At snack, when asked if she wants help pouring her juice, she says adamantly, "No! I want to do it myself!"

Vanessa plays with the big and little giraffes. "This one's little . . . this one's big." She pretends the mommy giraffe says to the baby, "I said, 'Clean up your room right now!'" The little giraffe responds, "I don't want to clean up. I want you to help me. I'm little!" At snacktime, instead of jumping up to pour the other children's juice, she asks to sit on a teacher's lap and wants help pouring her juice. She looks up at the teacher, "I'm little, right?"

Tony sits at the table making a collage out of big and little circles. He glues one large circle and lots of little circles surrounding the big one. "That's Grandma," he says, "the big one. That's me. That's Alicia. That's Michael. The little ones. 'Cause they like us—little." In the playroom, Tony pretends to be a kitten and crawls around, meowing. "Meow, I want milk."

During an activity where the children dressed up and pretended to be little, Sam gets inside a large blue laundry bag and cries like a baby. He wants to be carried up to the playroom this way. "I a baby," he says happily. Once in the playroom, he wants to be pushed in the carriage. A few minutes later, he pops out of the bag to ride the tricycle for awhile. "Before you were being little, like a baby," the teacher observes. "Now you are riding a bike like a 5-year-old boy." Sam continues to go in and out of the bag during the rest of playroom time, alternately playing and interacting with his peers at a 5-year-old level and pretending to be a baby. At lunchtime, he hands the bag to the teacher to hold and goes to wash his hands at the sink. "I'm going to be little again tomorrow," he says.

From her observations, the teacher concludes that the children in the group have not only integrated a conceptual understanding of the theme of big and little, but they have also explored the issue in relation to themselves and come closer to achieving a middle ground with regard to an age-appropriate balance between their autonomy and dependency needs.

"Boats and Bridges": Working Through Separation

Observation. It is summertime, and the end of the schoolyear is drawing near. Several children will be graduating and moving on to new schools in September. The teacher notices a lot of behavioral regression and an increase in the overall anxiety level of the children.

During free play, Tony runs around the room, unable to focus his attention on his play. Whenever the door is opened, he shoots out and runs down the hall, hiding from the teachers when they come after him. At goodbye time, he becomes angry and destructive, knocking things off the shelves, kicking the teachers angrily when they stop him, yelling, "Shut up, stupid. I'm not coming back to this school ever again."

Vanessa plays with the toy people. She puts a little girl in the school bus and drives it away from the teacher she is sitting with.

TEACHER: Where is the little girl going?

VANESSA: Away. To her new school. She's not coming back.

TEACHER: Who is going to be with her?

VANESSA: No one. She's bad. She is going to be all by herself.

At snacktime, Vanessa resumes some of her former parentified behaviors; when the teachers offer her help, she turns on them angrily, saying, "I'm 5, stupid. I'm going to a new school."

Rosa's eyes follow the teacher around the classroom. Each time the teacher goes out of the classroom, she quickly rushes over, asking the teacher if she can go with her. During transitions, Rosa lies down on the floor helplessly, wanting a teacher to pick her up and carry her like a baby. At goodbye time, she stands steadfastly by the bookshelf, her glaring eyes and silent expression declaring, "I'm staying right here." When she is helped to leave, she breaks down and sobs.

The teacher assesses that many children in the group are preoccupied with the upcoming separation and their feelings of anxiety, loss, and anger. Separations are particularly problematic for the children in the therapeutic nursery, many of whom have experienced traumatic separations in their lives and are insecure in the knowledge that adults will consistently keep them safe and cared for. The teacher designs a curriculum about boats and bridges, which provides a perfect metaphor for children to work through their feelings about the transition and be reassured of continued connection. The curriculum is in keeping with a summer-time interest in water and lends itself to cognitive explorations of this and related themes.

Implementation. The curriculum was initiated at the beginning of the summer session, as the weather was growing hotter and the wading pool was introduced.

At meeting, books dealing with the themes of water, boats, journeys, and bridges were read, including *Where the Wild Things Are*, *The City*, *Jenny's Journey*, *The Story of Ping*, *Harold and the Purple Crayon*, and *The Little Red Lighthouse and the Great Grey Bridge*. Songs representing these themes were plentiful and included "Row, Row, Row Your Boat," "Down by the Bay," "Michael, Row the Boat Ashore," "A Sailor Went to Sea, Sea, Sea," "London Bridge," and "Baby Beluga."

There were numerous materials and activities that could be used to represent and play with the theme of boats and bridges. Children played with toy plastic boats in the water, making them go away and come back. They made soap boats with toothpicks and paper sails and sailed them back and forth in bins of water and in the wading pool. They made boats out of celery stalks and watermelon rinds. They painted oaktag boats in watercolors, as well as fish, and attached them to a large ocean mural they had created by painting a large sheet of Kraft paper blue. The group rocked together in a wooden boat to the tunes of "Row, Row, Row Your Boat," "A Sailor Went to Sea," and other boat songs.

The group took a walk to the river to look at the boats and bridges and then made a photo album about the trip. The whole school took a tram ride to a nearby island. When they came back, the children painted milk cartons and pretended to slide them back and forth along a string over the river they had crossed with the tram. On another day, the group read *The Little Red Lighthouse and the Great Grey Bridge* and built bridges out of wooden blocks, connecting one water bin to another, and had people and cars go back and forth across the bridges. In the playroom, the children pretended that the floor was an ocean and used large toys and furniture to connect one island of "land" to another. The grand finale of the curriculum was a parent-child activity that involved making and floating ice cream-banana boats in a tub of water, and then, of course, eating them.

Throughout, the themes of bridging separations, of moving back and forth across a gulf, and of being apart but remaining connected were highlighted. As the end of the summer drew near, the "boats and bridges" curriculum evolved into a "new school/old school" curriculum through which children addressed the issue of the school transition more directly. By this time the children were ready to do so, as they had already had ample time to explore their feelings on a metaphorical level.

Assessment. In the playroom one day, Tony announces, "Hey? I have an idea. Let's pretend the floor is water, like we did yesterday." Sam responds, "Yeah, that's a good idea. This is a boat [referring to his bicycle]. Watch out for the sharks. Yikes!" Sam shuttles Tony back and forth across the shark-infested waters from one teacher to another. When they arrive at the couch where one of the teachers is sitting, they jump on her lap, breathless. "Yeah—a safe island!" says Tony, "We was scared, right, Sam?"

During free play, Vanessa plays with a small blue plastic boat in a bin of water. In the boat, she places a little girl. "The boat's going away . . . now it's coming back. Uh-oh, it's sinking." She submerges it in the bubbles. "It's lost!" The teacher queries, "Hm, I'll bet that is scary for the girl—to feel so lost and all alone. Is there anyone who can help her?" Vanessa says, "Yes—here comes the rescue boat. Don't worry, little girl. I'll help you!" She steers another boat toward the submerged blue one.

Rosa plays next to Vanessa. She has constructed a wooden bridge out of blocks, connecting one bin of water to another. She lines up several little plastic people along the bridge. They include the children in her class.

TEACHER: I wonder where those children are going?

ROSA: They're going over there—to the other water. They're 5 now.

TEACHER: How do they feel to say goodbye?

ROSA: They sad.

TEACHER: Maybe they can come back for a visit sometime, or call on the telephone.

ROSA: They gonna come visit tomorrow.

TEACHER: That sounds like a good idea.

The teacher observes that the children are not only engaged in the teacher-directed group activities, but that they are also playing about the theme of boats and bridges spontaneously and using this play to address feelings about separation. Once given this channel through which to work through feelings about the separation, their overall level of anxiety diminishes, as do their acting-out behaviors.

CONCLUSION

A curriculum that is designed by teachers to address unresolved developmental issues is compelling to children and allows them to stay connected to their internal experience while maintaining receptivity to external input. A therapeutic curriculum discourages rote learning and encourages children to build a conceptual framework for their own personal experiences. This framework bridges the domains of cognition and affect, as teachers introduce symbols that can be used to express and elaborate both thought and feeling. This "curricular bridge" gives children a stronger foundation for understanding and embracing the more abstract symbols that come their way during the primary school years. An emotionally responsive curriculum gives children an early message that school is a place that offers them a mirror for important issues and life experience and also helps them create symbols to hold meaning, enhance communication, and decrease emotional isolation. That is an offer that young children cannot refuse.

REFERENCE

- Koplow, L. (2002). *Creating schools that heal: Real life solutions*. New York: Teachers College Press.