

December 2012

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## You Can't Come Up Here!: Exclusionary Play in the Preschool Years

*By Teacher Lisa*

"You can't come up here! This is our airplane!" you hear two children shout, brows furrowed, faces tight as a third child approaches the loft. Such a cringe-worthy statement, or a multitude of other variations - equally harsh, but all with the same flavor of exclusion - can easily send us grown-ups into an adrenaline-fueled fight or flight response. Unsure of how to respond, you may find yourself wanting to jump in and sternly chastise the children in the loft (fight), or freeze in discomfort (flight). Either way, you are missing an important teaching opportunity for all three children.

As with any classroom conflict, take a breath and remind yourself to be child-centered. In situations of exclusion it is often easy to feel empathy and understanding for the child on the outs. Painful feelings from our own pasts bubble up and intrude upon our perceptions of the present. However, it can be more difficult to put yourself in the shoes of the children who are doing the excluding.

Children are not inherently mean and hurtful. They are using the tools they have to solve their problems and get their needs met. Because they are also naturally ego-centric in the preschool years, their focus is on their own feelings and needs and not on how their words and actions may affect others. As the adults in the classroom and in their lives, it is our job to help them build empathy and to teach them to use more appropriate tools. With that in mind, remember that all three children need your help in this circumstance and ask yourself, how might the children in the loft be feeling? What is the need they are trying to express through exclusion?

Children exclude others for many reasons. They may be feeling protective of their play or of a new friendship and the approaching child is seen as a threat. Children engaged in play may not really understand how they got there and they may be

worried that if a new child enters, the enjoyable play will be lost. They may also be afraid that adding another child to the game will interfere with the bond they are feeling with each other.

Another reason children exclude is that they have difficulty focusing on more than one aspect of a situation, or person, at the same time. Referred to as single-focus thinking, this tendency may lead a child to think, "I play tag with Jennifer and Jabari and I read books with Tate, so Tate can't play tag with me." Or, that they can only have one friend at a time ("Right now I'm reading books with Tate, so he is my friend and I can't be friends with Jennifer or Jabari.").

As they become more aware of similarities and differences amongst people, children may also use exclusionary play as a way of sorting out what it means to be part of a group and what, if any, significance various characteristics hold. They form a hypothesis and need to test it out. Thus, you may hear things like, "this is a spaceship and only boys can ride in spaceships." Or, "only people with dark hair like us can be cats."

Further, children may be exploring aspects of power and control. They may be looking for opportunities to make rules and feel in charge.

Ultimately, all of these motivations are completely developmentally appropriate for the preschool set. However, we need to ensure that the behaviors and strategies they choose to employ preserve the emotional safety of all of the children involved. Just as we cannot allow a child to hit another child in order to get a toy (that doesn't keep her body safe), we also cannot let a child tell another child he can't play because he has blonde hair, or because, "I don't like you." (that doesn't keep his feelings safe).

There are several strategies you can use to respond to exclusionary play. You may have to put on your detective hat to figure out what's behind the behavior in order to best support its resolution. If you aren't sure, just start with one and move on to another if it's not working.

- 1. Acknowledge the play that is already going on and ask questions.** Describe to the children what you see them doing and ask them about it. "I see you have buckets filled with plants. Can you tell me and Tara about your plan?" Doing so helps children to become more aware of their play and feel less threatened by a newcomer.
- 2. Problem-Solve with the children about how the new child can join the play.** "So, you are collecting medicine for your sick sister. How can Tara be part of your plan? She would like to be a mother. Do you need a mother in your game?" The goal here is to help the children find a mutually agreeable solution, not necessarily one that feels "fair" from an adult perspective. So, if they all decide that Tara can be the neighbor and they are all happy with that plan, then so be it. If the children are having difficulty, you can offer a solution, "This is your medicine in the buckets? Do you need someone to help you collect more medicine? Do you need a doctor?"
- 3. Encourage the excluded child to share his/her ideas and feelings and help the other children to hear his/her message and see her/his physical cues.** "Look at Tara's face. How do you think she feels about being told she can't be a cat? Tara, what do you want them to know? What's your idea for the game?"
- 4. Establish safety limits.** "Those are hurting words and I can't let you hurt Tara. How else could you let her know how you feel?"

- 5. Help children replace unfair rules with fair rules.** "We can't make rules based on how someone is born. That's something they cannot change. Nikolai has blonde hair and he cannot make it dark like yours. Is there a rule that you have to be a cat to be in this game? What other rules do you have for your game?"
- 6. Find ways to challenge stereotypes or hurtful generalizations.** It is wonderful for children to notice and explore differences. It is a problem, however, when they ascribe value to these differences or use them to treat someone hurtfully. In such cases it is important to challenge children's thinking. You can do this by asking children to think about behavior, rather than physical characteristics. "So, what do you need to be able to do to ride on a spaceship?" If the children are still having trouble moving past a categorical rule, you can offer more information. "Actually, there are many famous astronauts that are woman – grown-up girls – and they ride on spaceships. Should we write a note to remind us to find some books about them at the library?"

Exclusionary play can be challenging and emotional. However, we have to remember that it is a learning experience for children in both positions. As kids are learning about themselves, others, and how to be in the world, they can say or do some very hurtful things. Regardless, they are all sweet, wonderful little people looking for guidance. Preschool is like a laboratory for life and the children are all scientists experimenting with both physical and social-emotional properties. We have to gently help them see the outcomes of their experiments - both positive and negative – to support them in becoming people who can clearly communicate their needs and who use empathy and understanding to inform their actions.



## Happy Birthday!

**Luke** turns 3 on January 13<sup>th</sup>  
**Stella** turns 3 on January 28<sup>th</sup>  
**Anna** turns 3 on January 8<sup>th</sup>  
**Tallulah** turns 3 on January 16<sup>th</sup>  
**Owen** turns 3 on January 12<sup>th</sup>



## Family Night Out is coming! Mark your calendar!

This year the annual Family Night Out will be on **SUNDAY, March 24, 2013**. This event includes dinner, a raffle, music by Recess Monkey, and our silent auction. This year's theme is Rock Band! Come decked out in your best rock star ensemble and enjoy this family friendly evening. Tickets are \$16 for adults, \$8 for kids. Each family has certain responsibilities for this huge fundraiser:

**Each family must procure THREE items.** Packets will be handed out at the December parent meeting (or left in a child's folder) with all of the information you need. What, when, where, how... It's all there. Contact your favorite restaurant or business for gift cards and service certificates, or get creative and donate something that uses your own skills. We will send out lists of items procured on a regular basis so families don't approach a business which has already donated an item for our auction.

**We are still looking for a grand prize for the raffle.** If you know of anyone or any business that might be willing to donate a fabulous prize, please contact Kelly Chavez at [kg.chavez@gmail.com](mailto:kg.chavez@gmail.com) or 206-234-5468. Last year's grand prize was a getaway to Orcas Island. **Each family will be asked to sell \$50 worth of raffle tickets.** Watch your email as we confirm prizes for the raffle.

The Family Night Out is open to the public. In January we'll talk about how **each family will be asked to help with marketing efforts.** Start talking about it now with your friends and family.

**Each family is required to work ONE shift on Sunday, March 24<sup>th</sup>.** We'll explain the jobs and send out a sign-up sheet at February parent meeting. At this point just make sure you save the date!

Thank you for all of your hard work in making our fundraising goals! King Street Cooperative Preschool receives neither public funding nor has any current grants, so we rely heavily on fundraising so we can keep tuition affordable for all families. If you have any questions about fundraising or your role, please contact Kelly Chavez at [kg.chavez@gmail.com](mailto:kg.chavez@gmail.com) or 206-234-5468.

### Update: Chinook Book Fundraiser to Replace Kitchen and Snack Floor



The Board has wrapped up its Chinook Book fundraiser. Thank you to all the families that helped to sell books and mobile packs!! We were able to raise \$1,075 by selling 82 books and 34 mobile packs. This money will go toward funds needed to replace the kitchen and snack room floors. St. Peter's, in addition to purchasing several coupon books from us, has committed up to an additional \$3,000 toward the project!! The Board had one bid completed, and it came in much higher than we anticipated, nearly \$5,000, even with us providing free labor to prep the area. So St. Peter's is working on getting an additional bid, and we will also get one more bid, in hopes of finding a more reasonable price point for what we need done. Kristian, Eva's dad, will coordinate the Kitchen Floor project, so if you have any

connections on flooring materials or recommendations on installers, please let him know. Our aim is to have the install done during our Spring Break. Thanks again for all your efforts! It will be wonderful to have attractive new floors that are easier to clean and maintain.

## Outdoor Playground Remodel Project

The Renton Technical College Survey team has completed their work and handed off their survey data to the Seattle University team. The Seattle University student team has been working hard and recently presented the Outdoor Playground Steering Committee team (3 St. Peter's members, 4 KSCP members) with three grading ideas for the outdoor space. The Steering Committee met to compile and present an official list of "must have" and "would like to have" features for the students to use in planning their design. We used the survey responses from the entire parent group in helping to compile those features. Our next meeting with the students will be to choose the grading option that best fits our needed features and considers our labor and cost abilities. Ricky, Brandon's dad, is the Outdoor Playground Remodel Coordinator, so if you have any questions or would like more information, please feel free to ask!



### **More Important Dates:**

- December 21<sup>st</sup> (Friday).....King Street regular day (SPS 1hr. early dismissal)
- December 21<sup>st</sup> (Friday)..... Holiday Potluck (6-8pm)
- December 24<sup>th</sup> – January 4<sup>th</sup> .....Winter Break No School (SPS No School)
- January 8<sup>th</sup> (Tuesday).....Board Meeting
- January 15<sup>th</sup> (Tuesday).....Parent Meeting (7-9pm)
- January 21<sup>st</sup> (Monday).....MLK Jr. Day – No School (SPS No School)
- January 23<sup>rd</sup> (Wednesday).....Field Trip to Seattle Children's Theatre No School



Your contributions to the King Street Cooperative Preschool Newsletter are very welcome! The next edition will come out on January 15<sup>th</sup>, 2013. Please send articles, pictures, information and ideas to Lissa Munger, [ecmunger@gmail.com](mailto:ecmunger@gmail.com), by January 10<sup>th</sup>.