

January 2020

In partnership with South
Region Children's Services



**MEDICINE HAT & DISTRICT
Child Care Association**
www.mhdcca.com



Teacher Tom is coming!

We encourage you to check out Teacher Tom's Blog. Here is an example of one that he posted in September 2019. Registration is only open until Jan. 24, 2020 for our workshop on February 8! Visit www.mhdcca.com for more information.

Conflict is Ugly, Messy and Necessary

A few days ago, a parent told me that her child loves school so much that she didn't have to nag him to get dressed and out the door, which according to her is a very big deal. I believe her, but it's sometimes hard to see because he spends much of his day embroiled in conflict. And he's not the only one. Indeed, there's a whole group of them, intense, creative kids, who spend much of their time together alternating between cooperation and bitter quarreling.

This is, of course, normal, even if it's often exasperating for adults. Whether we like it or not, conflict plays a central role in childhood play, just as it's unavoidable in adult life. Sometimes the arguments seem silly to us, easily solved, not worth the energy, such as when they fight over a specific shovel when there are dozens of identical ones lying about, or when they raise their voices over whether they've made mud "soup" or mud "stew." But what they are doing is serious business, a core aspect of learning to live in the world with other people, and our Johnny-on-the-spot interventions, however well-intended, quite often rob them of the opportunity to learn that they are capable of solving it themselves. Naturally, we step in when conflicts take an ugly turn, such as when physical violence erupts or when a pattern of bullying emerges, but when we rush in at every raised voice, we do them no favors. Yes, perhaps it's a good idea to move closer to them when emotions begin to run high, but I've found that more often than not, children who already have relationships with one another, like classmates and friends, can find their own way through.



Snow angel courtesy of Dragons & Butterflies
Creative Preschool

These past couple weeks the four-year-olds have spent a lot of time, in quieter moments, making agreements with one another. We come in from the playground with our gripes, with our concerns, with our grievances, and then we talk about them. We've all agreed, or instance, to not hit one another, to not take things, to not kick or throw hard objects. This list of rules, which we've been adding to almost every day, is already quite long and detailed. The words that fall under the heading "name calling" is robust. These are our collective aspirations for how we want to live together, our "rules" if you will. And in just a few weeks, we've already discovered that just because we've all agreed, it doesn't mean that we will all always remember our agreements -- there is still some hitting and taking and hard object throwing -- but at least now we've all started working on it, together.



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Continued from front page... "Hey, you're breaking the rules!" a girl shouted at her friend turned antagonist, "No taking things!" We said no screaming in people's ears and you're screaming in my ears!" "You hit me. No hitting!" These words have been ringing out on our playground for weeks now. Several times a day, a child will appeal to me, such as, "Teacher Tom, she won't let me play with her. I think we should make a rule about that." And I'll respond, "Let's talk about it at circle time. I'll help you remember to suggest it." Sometimes we can agree. Sometimes we can't. Either way, the discussion is important.

Others will come to me with complaints, such as, "He took my bucket!" And I'll respond, "Oh no, what did you say?" More often than not they'll answer, "Nothing," to which I reply, "It sounds like they forgot their agreement. I would remind them if I were you." If they seem reluctant, I might coach them on the language they can use. Sometimes I agree to stand beside them as they confront their friend. Most of the time, when a child evokes the self-imposed rules, their classmates relent or offer an alternative version of events, which leads to an argument. Again, I might step nearer, but as long as they are talking to one another, even when it's heated, I know they are doing the work they need to do. If they begin to talk over one another or become overly emotional, I'll suggest they take turns, so that we can all listen. It's ugly, messy, fraught, and necessary.

I strive to not impose solutions, but rather allow the children to come to them on their own. Sometimes I take the role of mediator, echoing the children's words. "She says you took her bucket." "He says, he had it first." "She says she just put it down for a second." "He says he didn't know." And so on, giving everyone a chance to both speak and listen. This tends to give children the space to slow down, to consider, to understand, and to begin to find their way forward.

Sometimes I'll say, "I want to remind you that we all agreed to not take things from other people." I strive to take the posture that I'm reminding, not commanding. Sometimes, when there is a significant power imbalance between the children, one of them will become tongue tied, so I'll voice their words for them, "He says you pushed him. We all agreed to not push one another."

My rule of thumb, however, is to stay out of it, all things being equal, to coach, to suggest, to be near, but leave as much of it as possible to the children, to get them talking to one another rather than through me. As the year goes along, they will come to understand that resolving their conflicts is in their own hands.

It's messy and makes us uncomfortable, but children are always motivated by the real world and there are few things more real than conflict. So often, as adults, we view playground conflict as failure, but if we are to raise our children to take care of themselves and to take care of others, we have to understand that conflict is as central to child's play as running, jumping, laughing, and singing. They will only learn how to do it through practice. And, believe it or not, it's part of why they like coming to school.



Christmas Movie Event 2019: Many thanks to Tammy Paulson (IF Cox Before & After School) for helping with the snacks and to Nova Townsend (St. Michael's Out of School Care) for being our "Santa" and greeting the children so warmly.