
Marian Marion

Reflecting on Rules and Making Room for Messy Play

The opening vignette in this chapter is worthy of filming: Teachers nervously watch children gradually work their way from digging at the edge of a mud puddle to splashing right in it. The teachers know the center's rules prohibiting such joyous, albeit messy, play but wisely decide to ignore the rules in this case. Startled at the outcome of the hearty play episode, teachers describe calm children who later willingly cooperate with cleanup.

Like these teachers we all have struggled with the occasional clash between our cherished beliefs about how children develop and learn and our practices. In my heart, I, as a young teacher, knew that children derived unbridled joy from sensory experiences. I had seen it firsthand as a student—children's finger, foot, or spatter painting adventures, playing in mud, painting with big paintbrushes and water, water and sand play. As a teacher, however, I also quickly understood the realities of teaching in a school where different ideas about children's learning prevailed. Administrators often do not understand active, play-based learning, and some parents fear the potential messiness of some activities. The teachers in this article seem to recognize this dilemma, and I think that their initial hesitation reflected the culture's aversion to messy play in a school.

It took great courage for them to take that first step toward messy play, and the teachers themselves use the mud play episode as the beginning point for serious self-reflection about classroom rules and control in general. They focus on their stated views of children and about how the excessive number of rules was out of sync with these views. The teachers take the first step in a journey of examining their rules. They list all the existing rules, come up with criteria for absolutely essential ones, and then reduce the number. This reflection is not always a smooth path for the teachers but is done with goodwill and respect for colleagues.

It is important to note that the teachers do not just discard all the rules but instead carefully examine each one. They decide that there are too many rules and reduce the total number to those that are indeed meant to protect the children's health and physical or psychological safety. The net effect of reducing the sheer number of rules benefits everybody, children and teachers alike.

Children Benefited From Teacher Reflection

Children benefited greatly from their teachers' reflection on reducing the number of rules in the classroom. One old rule involves limiting work time in learning centers, with children

required to stop playing, clean up, and move on to another center even if they did not want to leave. When teachers change that rule, children can work longer in the centers they select, and this increased time benefits their learning and development. Some learning centers, such as the water table and block area, are redesigned to accommodate more children for play. After rethinking the rule about tidying up every center after every play period, teachers allow children's work, such as block structures, to be left standing for children to return to and complete in the future. This move alone enhances a child's memory, planning, and creativity.

When teachers focus on essential limits but do not go overboard with rules, children tend to develop positive and healthy self-esteem. They feel worthy and grow in competence and a healthy sense of control. The teachers involved in rethinking the number of rules send the message that the children deserve the teachers' reflection, that they are worthy of their teachers' time. Children's sense of control, including self-control, increases when they are encouraged to make more choices for themselves. Again, it is not a free-for-all but a safe environment where children's choices are possible and respected.

Along with the reduction in the number of rules, the classrooms' physical environments change gradually as well, which benefits the children. Carol Anne Wien describes some of the physical changes as a "softening," which shows up as conversation areas, art prints, family photos, and flowers. A softer physical environment contributes to a reduction in children's stress. Along with the increased space and time for play, the changes to the physical environments create a more pleasant and relaxing space for children. Teachers observe that there is far less aggression after implementation of the changes to the physical environment and a reduction the number of rules.

Teachers Benefited From Their Own Reflection

The teachers also benefit when the number of classroom rules is reduced. Monitoring and supervision is an essential and necessary part of a teacher's responsibilities. However, the teachers in these classrooms realize that the large number of nonessential rules had resulted in the need to constantly police the children's behavior. They find themselves spending too much time reprimanding children for infractions of the rules. This results in a great stress for the teachers. So, reducing the number of rules leaves teachers far calmer at the end of each day.

Another wonderful outcome of reducing rules is that teachers have more time for observing and assessing children's development. One teacher, for example, films children engaged in dramatic play, block play, and working with LEGOs and is astounded to see the deep and extended play episode.

The teachers also work with colleagues in tackling the issue of the excessive number of rules. They talk things through. They deal with disagreements. Through it all, they work as professionals, doing the hard work of reflection and subsequent changes. Their work, as they are delighted to see, creates peaceful and productive classrooms for children in their care.

Marian Marion, PhD, has been a professor of early childhood education and child development both in Wisconsin and at Governors State University. She is the author of a child guidance textbook in its ninth edition.