

Welcome New SYC Family!!!

This booklet is a collection of articles written over the years by various SYC staff members, to help explain some of the most important aspects of SYC's philosophy and practices.

We welcome you to our SYC community and we hope that these articles help you understand and answer at least your preliminary questions about why we do some of the things we do. As always, we encourage you to discuss the ideas presented here with your child's teachers if you have questions.

...the SYC Staff

The First Preschool Hurdle: SEPARATION

All kids and parents have feelings about being separated from each other. These feelings are normal but are often uncomfortable, so no one wants to deal with them. Teachers know different families have different feelings about separation, and all are okay. We know how to help both children and parents deal with these feelings, so ask for help if you or your child are struggling with this.

How to help your child: Allow your child to express how she is feeling. (This doesn't mean you have to do anything about those feelings, such as stay home from school. If you as a parent are not trusting the situation she is in, talk with your child's teacher until you feel better.) Know that dealing with these feelings, especially for children, takes some time. And if you take the time, it will help your child in future separations she will have to face, and you will learn some techniques to help her.

Here's how we help children deal with these feelings at school:

- First we accept that the child is having these feelings and encourage him to express that.
- We empathize with him so he will know it's okay to feel this way.
- We empower him by offering several active ways to do something about the way he feels. He might write a letter (see "If You Get A Letter..."); cry as long as he wants to (with lots of teacher comforting, usually on the teacher's lap); he might also hold a transitional object (blanket, stuffed animal) from home; draw a picture of whomever he is missing; make a phone call to his parent; or we might ask you to send a picture from home of the missed parent or an article of clothing from the parent that the child can keep at school
- We don't rush him through these feelings; rather we trust the developmental process--that he will master the sense of being separated and move onto another stage when he is ready.

What parents sometimes worry about with our techniques:

- That we are drawing too much attention to feelings and thus will make it worse.
During the preschool years, children are developing a sense of self. The feelings they experience are an expression of that self, so when we listen to the feelings, we are validating who that child is. When the child feels heard, she can usually move on to finding interesting things to do at school.
- That we encourage dependency.
The children at our school are young and dependent on us to meet their needs. We try to do this by accepting their feelings and empowering them to do something about them. They have to practice being independent. Usually children begin to master these separation feelings and move on to enjoy school.
- That they are "bad" parents and therefore their children are suffering emotional problems. They feel guilty about wanting to leave.
Once again, anxiety upon separating is normal and part of the developmental process. If your child misses you, you have done a good job of bonding with him! If he doesn't miss you it may be because you have a very social child whose desire to be with others overrides feelings of

separation, or he is busy coping with the new situation and will experience separation feelings later in the year.

- That their child experiences separation anxiety only at SYC and not any other places they take him.

There are two possibilities: (1) Other places discourage the expression of feelings because they don't know how to handle them or would rather not be bothered by them.

(2) School is different from home in many ways. The number of children and adults may cause anxiety in children. The requirements for behavior at school are different than in a home setting. Children have to learn to wait for teacher attention, or for a turn. At SYC we gently help children to express their feelings about this and then to cope as they learn how to be at school.

...Jan Waters, SYC Director

If You Get A Letter...

Dear Mommy, I miss you. I want you to come and get me right now. I don't want to be here anymore. I'm mad--you got me up and brought me to this place. I wanted to watch "Animaniacs" instead. I want you to give me a pop tart. I want you to get me now and we can go to the zoo again. I miss the elephant and the seal. And I want cotton candy. Love, Danny

One of the tasks of life, and of children, is learning to cope with emotions. Children are learning about how to express them in new and "safe" ways. At SYC we use lots of tools for expression. One of them is letter writing. Letters and stories may come home to you offering you insight into your child's thoughts or remembrances of her day at school. Often the letters are a safe place to express the tougher issues, thoughts and feelings she is facing:

- Missing you--that's a big one. Sometimes tinged with both sadness and anger because you're not doing what she feels is important. For example, "Come and get me now."
- Events--both good and bad. We've written many letters for children after they got hurt, and they're wishing their mommy or daddy could come to take care of them. So we write out those wishes.

Why? Two reasons:

Emotional expression and release. In writing a letter for a child, teachers offer a safe, supported moment. We write and read back only words that the child offers to us for her ideas and feelings. This provides validation and acceptance. Although the letter isn't you, writing to you gives a sense of a message sent.

Literacy. Children's thoughts and words are given personal value and meaning in the written form.

Remember that the letter(s) you receive reflect only the thoughts and feelings of your child at a given moment in the day. In fact, if the technique worked, after (or shortly after) writing the letter and putting it in a safe place, she moved on to other things--play.

Sometimes it's hard to receive these letters, particularly those full of anger. Here are common statements we've written many times:

- I hate this place, they're mean to me
- Don't bring me here ever again
- I'm mad at you
- I hate you! I hate...

When we read these statements we must try to realize what part of it the child was really mad about. Many times he was mad because he is at school and not with you, where he'd rather be. He is in a situation or place he'd like a way out of--"come and get me right now." The good news is he is saying what he likes and wants as much as he is saying what he doesn't like.

Many times your letter will hold a key to whether he got through the "hard" stuff. It follows a format, generally: some hard feelings, sad feelings, then moves into wishes, maybe a memory about something different. This means your child expressed the thoughts and feelings and moved on to other ideas, and probably right into play after the letter.

So now what? Suggestions to the receiver:

- Read it out loud to your child
- Ask if there's anything else he wanted you to know
- Ask, "What do you want to do with this letter now?"

Chances are, he is pretty much done with the issue(s) presented in the letter. He doesn't need much response except to know that you received the message.

These letters are not only a way for us, as teachers, to hear your child. They also provide a connector from your child to you when you can't be there to hold him.

...Jenifer Bojanowski, SYC Teacher

Rough and Tumble Play at SYC

At SYC many children have enjoyed wrestling and boxing with other children and sometimes even teachers. Our staff has always supported wrestling and boxing as a way to allow children to feel powerful and to learn how to control their physical impulses. When teachers see children grabbing and pulling at each other in the classrooms, we will often say “It looks like you two would like to wrestle. I’ll get you a mat in the running room so you can really wrestle.” Then the teacher asks each child to tell each other your rules. For instance, if someone says stop the other has to stop and if someone steps off the mat, the other has to stop or no hitting my nose. The teacher stays right by the mat to watch carefully and make suggestions. We might say “Do you want him to pull your shirt? or Do you need to take break? or Remember to say STOP if you don’t like it!”

We think there are many benefits in this type of play. As two children wrestle together, they begin to understand how hard a touch is, when it is too hard, and how to deliberately move their body in a way that keeps the play going. They learn that some friends like to wrestle a little more gently while others want to be tough. Daniel Goleman in the book *Emotional Intelligence* recognizes that part of learning to control impulsive behavior is learning to interpret physical body signals. “One of the key skills for anger control [is] monitoring their feelings—becoming aware of their body’s sensations, such as flushing or muscle tensing, as they [are] getting angry, and to take those feelings as a cue to stop and consider what to do next rather than strike out impulsively.” We at SYC believe that body contact during wrestling and boxing helps kids practice interpreting these signals.

Early childhood experts call this rough and tumble play. In his article, “The Nature of Children’s Play,” David Fernie, co-author of *Early Childhood Classroom Processes* and former OSU professor, says that “a kind of play with motion, rough and tumble play, is popular in preschool years. In this play, groups of children run, jump, and wrestle. Action patterns call for these behaviors to be performed at a high pitch. Adults often worry that such play will become aggressive, and of course, it must be monitored. Children who participate in this play become very skilled in their movements, distinguish between real and feigned aggression, and learn to regulate each other's activity.

Typically children between ages 3 and 6 should become more pro-social and less aggressive. Rough-and-tumble play: play such as wrestling, chasing, and hitting that mimics aggression but actually occurs purely in fun, with no intent to harm is clearly pro-social, teaching children how to enter a relationship, assert themselves, and respond to actions of someone else while exercising gross motor skills.”

Pollack, in his book, *Real Boys* reminds us “Little boys may seek emotional bonds in indirect ways. With other boys, these bonds may be forged through exuberant, rough -and-tumble play.”

As teachers, we see so much value in rough and tumble play that we are willing to do the necessary supervision to make sure children are respecting each others limits. We watch the faces of the participants and sometimes ask, “Do you still want to play this now or do you want to stop?” If one becomes angry or more aggressive, we will help the child stop and think about what is happening that he or she doesn’t like. In general, we find that children enjoy this activity so much that they try very hard to follow the rules and limits of the game in order to participate.

...Stephanie Rottmayer, SYC Director

Children and Conflict

All of us have seen children in the midst of conflict. Sometimes our own discomfort with conflict makes us try to get rid of it as soon as possible. We might be tempted to give children our own solution to the problem, or separate arguing children, or take away the thing they're fighting over. At SYC we believe that having and settling conflicts helps children to learn about themselves and others and to develop their problem solving skills. We encourage and support them while they work out their disagreements.

As an example, young children often want the same toys others are using. It's common to see one child take a toy out of another child's hand, leaving the toyless one crying and calling an adult for help. These kinds of conflicts are inevitable and maybe even necessary as children learn and grow into people who can negotiate on their own without our help. When a child comes to us to tell us what has happened, we don't dismiss it as tattling. We know that children come to us for help with problems they can't handle alone. There are several things we would do in response.

- View the situation as a chance to help both children learn how to live cooperatively with other people. We're not born with this skill. Having this attitude eliminates the urge to lecture, blame, make children apologize or dole out consequences.
- Support both children with touch, eye contact, listening and gentle talking
- Make statements and ask questions about behaviors and feelings in a matter-of-fact way to get information. "You didn't like that." "You wish you could have this toy." "What do you think we should do?" Having their feelings acknowledged and accepted helps children move toward solving the problem.
- Help the children say how they want to settle the problem and help them carry it out. Sometimes they have ideas and we just have to help them agree on one. At other times we offer ideas, especially early in the year or with younger children, or with children who are too upset to name a solution. In a typical property dispute, an SYC teacher might offer to make a turn-taking list for a desired toy. Once children have been at SYC for a while, they trust the list and even suggest it themselves to solve an ownership issue.

Children can learn several things by dealing with conflicts, and we adults who had our early conflicts handled for us can learn some of these missed lessons when we help them. First, children can see that one way to solve a problem is to get an adult to help. If young children learn this early, maybe they'll continue coming to their parents for help with more complex problems as they get older.

We also want children to know that stating their feelings and wishes clearly can help them solve a problem with another person. Children can learn that their feelings are real and valued, even their hard-to-have feelings. They can also find that it's possible to disagree with someone, express their feelings, solve the problem and still be friends. Then, they can take all the solutions they thought of and add them to their list of strategies to try the next time. This helps them become more independent social problem solvers.

Disagreements will happen wherever there are young children. If we adults remember what children can learn from handling conflict, then we'll naturally support their efforts, just as we do

when they take their first walking steps. They only need our help until they've had enough experience to negotiate alone. This important skill will be valuable to our children all their lives.

...Angela LaMonte, SYC Teacher

DEVELOPING GENEROSITY IN YOUR CHILD

Sharing & Turn-Taking

Parents often want their child to learn to share with other children. When you have arranged a play date for your 4-year-old and her friend from school, why can't she just let her friend play with her toys so both can enjoy the time together? Will the friend's mother think you are a terrible parent if you can't get your child to share?

At SYC, we don't force children to share their toys during class. Why? One reason is that sharing is a concept most young children are not developmentally ready to understand. At age 2½, most children are not sure where their own body ends and other things, objects and people begin. So when holding a teddy bear, it's not readily apparent to a toddler that the bear is not a part of her own arm and hand.

An important task early childhood is to develop a sense of self. At ages 3-5, children begin to understand that objects are not really part of them, but now they begin to feel how important certain things are such as a special blanket or toy. Dorothy Briggs in her book, *Your Child's Self-Esteem* says, *"Possession is one device the young child uses to hammer out autonomy. Consequently, ownership takes on special meaning to the toddler set. To them, separateness means the right to possess. Just as babbling comes before talking, so owning comes before sharing. To fully share, a person must FIRST fully possess. None of us can share what we don't have. And the little child needs time to get the feel of ownership thoroughly worked into his experience before he can let go."*

One way to accomplish this is to own—find out what is hers as compared to others. When a child won't share, she is affirming that she knows she is an individual separate from some one else. She wants adults around her to understand how she feels about her special things and wants us to respect her rights to her own possessions. This makes sense to adults when we think about our own special things that we would rather not share. For instance we might not want to lend our brand new car to a neighbor for a week or give a loan to a relative if we don't think it will be paid back. This is the kind of sharing that adults have a hard time deciding about and it's just as big a deal to a child. For children to get what they need at this point in their young lives makes it more likely that they will turn out to be adults who are generous in spirit.

Children can be taught to appear to share—sort of false sharing. Everyone has seen one child hand things over to another child when he's made to by an adult. Some adults use timers to control the use of a toy and when the timer rings, the next kid gets it whether he is done or not. The child learns to do what is required and it is easy to believe that he has learned to share because he quits arguing about it. But when these external rules aren't around, that same child will often fiercely guard objects/space/people/privileges because he never learned to feel full or finished enough so he can willingly hand it over to someone else or even be happy to let someone else enjoy it.

Eda Leshan, child psychologist and author of *When Your Child Drives You Crazy*, said, *"Generosity, a wish to share with others for mutual enjoyment, can be nourished only in a climate where a person's needs are understood and respected. When they're not, selfishness is inevitable. The most generous adults are not necessarily those with the most possessions but people who feel good about themselves, who feel loved and respected. The most selfish, on the other hand, may*

actually have a great many possessions, but if you look behind the fur coats and the fancy cars, you're apt to find someone with a need to hold on to things in the absence of love and respect."

Anything a child brings to school from home is considered personal and we won't ask a child to share it with another child unless she wants to. Teachers encourage kids to keep their special things in their cubby hole when not in their hands.

Our classrooms rules are that if Jimmy is playing with a school toy, he can use it as long as he wants. If Sarah wants the same toy, we will help her ask Jimmy if he is done. If he says no, then Sarah can ask to be told when he is finally done. Teachers coach children through this process until they can do it on their own. If Jimmy leaves the toy to play with something else, a teacher might tell Sarah "I see the toy you wanted on the floor now." If Jimmy comes back and says he wasn't really done, the teacher will offer to save something for him next time, but this time Sarah has the toy now.

It's hard to wait for a chance to play with something and teachers might help a child think about what she could do while waiting: "When it's your turn to play with this toy, you can have it as long as you want it and you don't have to give it to anyone else until you are done." After children go through this process a few times and see that we really will let them play with something for as long as they want, it makes waiting on something next time a lot easier. If a child gets upset about waiting, teachers help by coaching him to ask again if the other is done yet, by writing down feelings about waiting, or just sitting with the child and acknowledging that it's very hard to wait.

Sometimes it isn't even the toy that the child wanted in the first place. Often a child really just wants to play with the kid who has the toy! Teachers usually ask, "I wonder if you wanted to play with Jimmy too?" So it's important for us to notice what might be the real need of the child rather than just assuming the toy is the issue.

True sharing is about offering something willingly and from the heart. Preschoolers often actually DO share with each other if they feel full ownership and have been respected to make the decision to share on their own.

Learning to take turns is different than sharing, and it's a concept that CAN be learned in early childhood. Children in our program learn to take turns getting the attention of the teacher or other children as well as using toys and equipment. Our small groups help children practice taking turns speaking and listening because there is less competition than in group time with the whole class.

We often use lists to help teach about taking turns for special equipment like a rope ladder or trampoline. These lists help children wait, as they can see their own name printed under that of a friend and watch as names above theirs are crossed off. Besides helping children wait, lists offer lessons in literacy, sequencing and math.

Some equipment at school is open to use by all and can't be owned by one child. Our climbers, indoor and out are examples of equipment that is for everyone. Also we all recognize the issue of space and privacy. Sometimes children need to have a tent or a box all to themselves just to have their own space. This is especially important to children getting used to being in the midst of a large group at school. At home, children can get the feeling of ownership of space that no one else

is allowed to go into, even if it's just a sheet thrown over a table. All of us need a little privacy from others once in a while and respecting a child's need for privacy models this value.

All in all, children learn moral values like generosity from seeing them being modeled by the important adult role models in their own lives. Your family values will have a much larger impact on your children as they develop into adulthood than any other factor in their lives. Be sure to talk with your children about the times when your family chooses to be generous to others to help them understand why this is an important value to you.

...Stephanie Rottmayer, SYC Director

Weapon Play at SYC

Many parents wonder why we let children play with toy weapons at SYC. Every year there are certain children who want--and seem to need--this kind of play. Sometimes weapon play becomes part of the peer culture of a class, much like Pretty Ponies, Care Bears, Barbies and others.

I can remember my own children playing cowboys and cowgirls. I questioned letting my children play at "war". But the day I looked out into our back yard and saw Mike using our toilet plunger as a gun so he could play with his friend who had a toy gun, I began to question what I was doing by not allowing weapon play in our home. I began to see that Mike had a very different view of toy guns than I did of guns in general. I began to look at weapon play in a child developmental way instead of in my adult socio-political way.

Over the years all the popular superhero characters have shown up at SYC. We have seen Superman, Batman, Catwoman, Spiderman, the Hulk, He Man and Sheba, Ghostbusters, Ninja Turtles and the Mighty Morphin Power Rangers. Sometimes the play is called "Good Guy Bad Guy" with no assigned superheroes. And some classes do more of this play than others.

Throughout this play, children are working on developmental issues including a sense of good and evil, a sense of power and protection, and a *beginning* sense of life and death. Development is most likely to happen when children are allowed to select their own play themes. Parents usually don't like these play themes and worry that children will become violent and aggressive because of this play. Our teachers are carefully trained in dealing with children who are playing with toy weapons. From the beginning of the year, children are told, "people are not for hurting" and hurting others is not allowed. Of course they are just beginning to learn, and children do occasionally get hurt. The incident of the hurting becomes a lesson to all children in the class as we discuss what happened. We do not let children hit each other with swords or other weapons. If a child will not stop hitting, we take the weapon away until the child tells us she will not hit again. Children can do amazing things with their fine motor skills to keep from hitting others so they can continue using weapons!

Some children are frightened by weapon play and don't want to participate. In some cases it even scares them to watch this play. If this is the case, we limit weapon play to the running room, so the frightened child has the choice of two other rooms in which to play. Sometimes children don't know how they feel about this kind of play. Teachers use a divider and label it the "safety corner" where children can go to feel safe, but yet be able to watch the play. Sometimes after a period of observing the weapon play, a child will want to join in. Children who continue to be frightened sometimes feel better if teachers support them while they ask the weapon-playing children if they're going to hurt them. Once they are assured that we enforce the rule that people are not for hurting, they will often join in, or go on with other kinds of activities.

Some children cling to weapons at the beginning of the year as a security object. When the weapons disappear from their hands, then we know they are feeling comfortable. We have not seen more aggression in our classes because of this play. In fact, we see less. During "war" play, conflicts arise which provide us with one of the most important opportunities for learning at SYC, where we can help children learn to resolve their own disputes. We clearly state our people-aren't-

for-hurting policy and then encourage the children to talk about the problem, expressing their wants and feelings until some resolution is reached.

Our 4-year-olds put politicians to shame with their conflict resolution skills.

...Jan Waters, SYC Teacher, Former SYC Director

The Parents in the Hall
(...or Why I Love Working at SYC)

Beginning my twenty-first year at SYC, it's become familiar. While the kids struggle with the idea of their parents leaving them at school, Tina and I struggle a little with their parents who gather in the hall—some of them anxious, surprised to be experiencing some separation feelings themselves, and others who would rather be out doing all the things they planned to do when the kids were finally at school, stuck here because their kids still need them. They distract us and keep us from getting all the work done!

But the gathering in the hall is such an important part of SYC. It's the beginning of a community—something I don't think a lot of other schools foster much when they shove parents out the door, or even worse, at schools which demand that parents remain in their cars when dropping off the children!

Our parents often start with only one thing in common—the choice of a program like SYC for their children. Then the parents start getting to know each other out in the hall while their children are getting to know each other in their classes. Next come carpools and playdates.

And it happens every year. Eventually the hall clears out and all the work gets done (And truth be told, we're almost lonely without all the parents around to distract us from the boring old paperwork.)

And, by the end of the year the best thing of all is that we know we will see some new best friends—among the parents as well as the kids.

...Adele Stratton, SYC Office Manager