

Dear Parents,

It's been a very active month; every area of the room has gotten used, chewed up, spat out, and chewed again. If you drop in randomly just before clean-up time, you would think it could take hours to put everything back in place and get everybody organized and quiet. Yet when the lights blink there is a great commotion with kids going all over the place to sort it all out. Dogs in the dog basket, blocks on the block shelf, sand toys into the big basket, sand swept from the floor, puzzles onto the puzzle and game shelf.

Sure some kids like to hide or keep playing or run around. The clean-up time can be noisier than the play time. But it's because there is so much high spirited interaction. Some new friends, some new toys, some confusion, and little by little some new understanding of new procedures and expectations.

Being among a large group of kids with different ideas and ways of playing, it's a big adjustment. So is realizing that you have to ask or explain yourself much more than at home. A lot of waiting for your turn: the water fountain, the easel, the music room, space at the sand box, the small cars, etc. But one of the biggest adjustments for kids in nursery school is the cognitive development of the idea that there is structure and purpose in the world.

It is the organizing principle within which kids, people, begin to plan and control their actions and behavior toward others. Cause and effect, decentering, compassion; do I want to play with someone? And how do I balance my desires with hers? There are lots of choices in the classroom, within the structure, but it is not a place where you can do just whatever you want, whenever you want. The structure is not only the schedule of the day (play, group time, snack, gym, etc.), but also in the way that the teachers are constantly trying to balance the needs of individual kids with other individuals and also with the group as a whole. Some kids are compliant, some are resistant. It doesn't matter. We're not trying to promote obedience or "good" behavior. Instead, how do your actions affect others?

So just getting through the morning can be emotionally exhausting, even if kids have had a primarily positive experience. And there is a lot of unpredictability in other kids' behavior, and in a kid's own responses. When you don't know what to expect from someone, or what their intention is, it can cause concern and misunderstanding. On the way home parents may hear some hair-raising stories; a child's perspective is limited, so check with teachers for more information. In many cases, when a child understands that no harm is intended, a whole new relationship may develop.

There has been a lot of easel painting, with different size brushes here and there. We make a point of putting a kid's name on the paper, asking kids if they want to do it or make some of their letters. Some kids promptly paint over their name. Some paintings remain unidentified. But in most cases, kids are not painting just to have a resulting object, or to make a picture of something. (What a "picture" is is a very vague notion.) It is the process of physical action, having an effect on the materials (paint, paper) with the tools (brushes) and trying to control what that effect is. Physical knowledge. Some kids lose interest quickly, or feel frustrated that it requires effort and doesn't paint itself. Yet for

many, the absorbing concentration is a major involvement. Are graphic and aesthetic decisions being made? Probably, we don't know. But it is as physical as football.

One other area that gets a lot of use is the sandbox. The complications here arise from the fact that it is big enough for one or two kids to spread out, but may be inviting for six or eight kids. How do they accommodate each other? Is it encroachment, or co-operation? When each child has enough room, there is pouring, scooping, filling, road construction, fantasy enactment, tactile and physical. Then somebody gets too close, takes "your" sand, picks up the truck you had parked at the side of the mountain. They say you weren't using it, they want it, they need more sand. In these cases of verbal or physical conflict, or just differences of opinion, some kids will just leave.

But whenever possible, a teacher will intervene, even bring a kid back, in order to ask questions and elicit each child's ideas and purpose. We can't necessarily solve every time two kids want the same toys in the same space. Often, when facing each other's explanation, the kids themselves work out a compromise, and the teacher shuts up and bows out. But the most frequent teacher interventions involve "Who had it first" (not always clear to the kids themselves), "Is there another one you can use" (often not), and modeling the concept and verbal technique "You can have it when I'm finished."

Parents may remember the notion of Protection Of Work that we spout here at Park West. This is sometimes simplified to mean that kids don't have to "share." But in practice it can be very complicated and unclear, to kids and even to teachers. This idea is meant to relieve kids of the polite expectation that they have to give up what, or some of what, they are using. We think that individuals have the right to finish working out their ideas or fantasy play without the disruption of sacrifice. If someone has a scenario for three trucks, they don't have to give up one; if some has a restaurant with a table of food, they don't have to give it up for someone else's picnic.

But can anybody have all the food, or all the trucks? Does everybody have to have the same number of trucks? How does everybody get the same amount of sand, or the same extent of inches around the table?

So teachers are making judgments all day, every day. What work is protected, and what isn't? Of course we make a lot of mistakes, underestimating someone's need in some cases, overestimating someone's rights in another. Again, it is a constant process of balancing, and it is that for kids too. Protection Of Work is not a rule; it is a concept that emphasizes that balance is always changing, always an effort. Rules are of some value, but limited. It is the reason for a rule that is vital, and we hope we can instill that in kids.

How do your actions affect others?

Decentering.

Thanks,

Joseph and Amanda