“Do as I say, not as I do.”
“What you do speaks so loudly, I can’t hear a word you say.”
“Actions speak louder than words.”

These are phrases I remember hearing as a child from various adults, including teachers, playmate’s parents, and older relatives. They were expressing a philosophical view about how adults believed children should behave. They pertained primarily to adult/child relationships. It is often assumed that we do not need to look at our attitudes and behaviors toward the adults we work with in conjunction with our roles in creating high-quality programs for children.

As an early childhood educator, I have given a great deal of thought to these phrases and what they might say to teachers and caregivers as they work with other adults in the early childhood setting. I believe their importance applies equally to the area of adult/adult interactions.

In many respects, our roles as teachers are geared toward observing children and what they are doing, helping children learn to get along with each other, and providing children with the opportunities to develop their skills to function in a group. Rarely do we take the time to reflect on our own behaviors and interactions with other adults, learning how to work collaboratively, building the skills needed to manage conflicts and areas of differences. Adult/adult interactions should become a more intentional and conscientious part of our day-to-day life in the classroom.

Adult/adult interactions are important in developing high-quality, accountable, early childhood programs and in creating environments that support growth, development, and learning. Quality group settings that are designed for young children cannot achieve their goals unless the adults who work in those settings plan and work with each other in meaningful and productive ways. Yet, outside of the required staff meetings, usually devoted to administrative and curricular needs, the amount of time and attention devoted to actually cultivating adult/adult relationships seems to be almost negligible. While professional development opportunities and in-service training bring adults together, it is outside the day-to-day context of the classroom. These occasions, however, can be building blocks toward more effective adult/adult communications within the early childhood setting.

Children’s interactions with each other and with adults, as well as the interactions that occur between and among adults, must become part of our thinking, planning, and actions in early childhood programs. We need to make more conscious attempts, however, to ensure that adult/adult relationships are being developed and nurtured, and that they are focused on functioning in ways that benefit children’s positive growth, development, and learning.

As you think about your interactions with other adults, begin to focus on how adult/adult exchanges can benefit the children and the programs that serve them. Think about ways you can be accountable for what children are learning from those interactions. Think about how your interactions with
other adults can affect the type and quality of experiences that you create for young children. Positive adult/adult interaction occurs when:

- Adults take time to engage in joint planning, based on their collective observations and anecdotal records.
- Adults interact by communicating and sharing information about children and their families.
- Dialogue and problem-solving help determine how and what teaching experiences and learning goals might be made more effective for the children.
- There is a mutual exchange of ideas about the learning environment, and about sharing tasks and responsibilities for setting up projects, rearranging the classroom, caring for the classroom pets, and other day-to-day chores.

Although there are few research studies that specifically look at the relationship between the ability of adults to work competently with each other and the effects this has on outcomes for children, it is interesting to note that validated curriculum models tend to talk about this (e.g., HighScope, The Creative Curriculum). These curriculum models emphasize the importance of team planning and of sharing information and responsibilities for the classroom and the children. There are other materials written about the nature of adult/adult relationships that deal with power dynamics and struggles that can interfere with the way in which staff are performing in various settings (Bloom et al., 1991).

Positive and consistent adult/adult interactions open up opportunities for communication about how children are growing and learning and how that development can be supported. It is rare that you will find programs that provide staff development and training based on principles of adult learning, coaching to help teachers learn to work collaboratively, or conflict management strategies. It is critical, therefore, to think about how your interactions with other adults can contribute to children becoming capable, confident, and competent. Two examples may be useful:

1. **Talk with all the other adults about what you all are doing.** When it comes time to plan, focus on the goal(s) that you want to achieve with a particular child or group of children. Together, as a team, decide what type of experiences will foster the goal(s). Then divide up the responsibilities for gathering, setting up, or putting away materials and equipment for the project. The idea is to think as a team: “Why are we here?” and “How do children grow, develop, and learn?”

   You are beginning to create an atmosphere of trust, which is important for young children. They need to know they are safe—emotionally, physically, and psychologically. One of the ways that adults can help build this atmosphere of safety is to work collaboratively. The reason you are there—first and foremost—is to provide informed, professional care and education for the children. The focus on the question, “Why are we here?” should provide a context for the conversations and interactions among and between adults.

   Adults need to interact with each other in ways that promote their development as learners and problem-solvers as they engage in the teaching and learning process. In his work on theories of adult learning, Malcolm Knowles (1984) suggests that adult learning is problem-centered rather than content oriented. This is not to say that content for the children’s program is not a critical factor. Rather, the intention is for adults to focus on their process of planning and implementation as a way to jointly problem-solve.
(2) Create opportunities for “quality adult time.” Another way in which adult/adult interactions can be enhanced is through a period of “quality adult time.” Virginia Satir suggests that the ability to engage in positive adult/adult communication impacts the interpersonal dynamic. “Quality adult time” can be five minutes or longer if you can manage. The point is to build trust among adults and learn that it is important to have time to share feelings or experiences that may or may not have anything to do with the classroom. I might share a new hobby or talk about a situation with a child in my class, or the topic may be of a more personal nature. In any case, I need my colleagues to be aware and give me any support they can.

Often, when we do not have this kind of atmosphere that promotes honest and trusting adult relationships, there are misinterpretations or “attitudinal” problems that become internalized and affect the climate of the classroom as well as the interaction among colleagues.

Remember the quotes at the opening of this discussion? Revised, they can guide our adult/adult relationships and influence the interactions between all of the members of the teaching/learning community we call early childhood education.

“My actions speak louder than my words.”

“It is confusing for people to see me do things that are contradictory to what I am saying.”

“What I do speaks so loudly that people cannot hear a word I am saying.”

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References

