

Introduction

At four years old, Andrew* was tall for his age and an enthusiastic, energetic, loveable boy. However, several times each day, he would push a friend or take a swing at a teacher, or kick over another child's blocks. In fact, whenever there was uproar in the classroom, Andrew seemed to be in the middle of it. Something needed to change.

One day, I decided to try something I had been learning about. At the next "Andrew incident," I quickly got to his side, stopped the off-track behavior, put an arm around him and said something like, "I can't let you do that, Andrew," in a tone of gift-giving. As usual, he immediately began to arch his back, yell, thrash and kick, call me names, and cry. I had my hands full, but even a large four-year-old was not as strong as I was, and I could, with effort, keep his feet from connecting, his hands from punching, and his head from butting mine or banging onto the floor. I worked not to overpower him so much that I added to his terror or stopped his outburst. Instead I used my voice, eyes, arms, indeed my whole body, to connect with him, prevent damage, and let him know that he was safe. I informed him that I was with him, would protect him (children who lash out often feel like there is no one to protect them so they must be on guard and fighting for themselves), and that I knew he was a good boy. I was learning to welcome his crying and tantrums.

In the midst of the tantrum he would insult or threaten me with things like, "You stink," "You are a bad teacher, "I'm gonna tell my mom on you," or "I'm gonna shoot you!" I believed he was saying things he had heard that had frightened him, so I worked not to take it personally, assuming he was expelling how he bad he felt. I maintained that, "I am going to keep you and the others safe," "It's not like you to hurt people, Andrew," "I love you, no matter what," and "The answer is still 'no.'"

In the ensuing weeks, this little boy had many such tantrums within the safety of my arms, and his life began to change. He could actually notice his friends and play in their vicinity without grabbing their stuff or hurting them. They began to welcome him as a playmate instead of drawing back when he came near. This was a striking change.

Listening to his tantrums with warmth and respect was exhausting at times, but the results were beautiful. I began to get braver and more relaxed about heading into the fray, setting limits that needed to be set for him and listening to big upsets and tantrums.

My experience with Andrew and other children have served as the foundation for my ongoing work in early childhood education (ECE). In 1989, I began my work as an ECE instructor at Northwest Indian College (NWIC), a tribally-controlled college in the Pacific Northwest. I have taught a full ECE program of study that includes introductory courses; health, safety, and nutrition; curriculum development; child development; infant-toddler care; practicum courses; creative activities for ECE; guidance in early childhood; communication, language, and literacy; building relationships within culture, family, and community; and so on. It is the knowledge base of early childhood education and always from a tribal perspective.

But one class I knew I wanted my students to have is one that no other college program that I knew of was teaching. I wanted to give students the tools that had turned things around for me as a caregiver 13 years earlier — to listen well to children during those emotional times that are part of every early childhood day. Though I included some

*All names of children and adults in this article have been changed, and are replaced by pseudonyms. Their stories, however, are real and true.

of these ideas and skills in several ECED courses, I wanted to develop a full course specifically to introduce this approach to emotions. I saw this supportive way of being with children and backing their inherent abilities to rid themselves of stress as the framework for everything else I want my students to do in working with young children. I also wanted to model and give them the skills to participate in a kind of co-listening that would help adults know how to listen by being listened to, and give them the emotional slack to do so.

Frameworks for Early Childhood Education

The course I developed and taught, ECED 107, “Re-evaluation Counseling for Early Childhood Educators,” was based on my experience with the peer support system of Re-evaluation Counseling (RC) (www.rc.org) and on my own experience and education in early childhood. At some point I changed the name to “Frameworks for Early Childhood Education,” and in 2007 switched the scope and sequence from being based upon RC to basing it on Hand in Hand Parenting’s “Parenting by Connection” (PbC) philosophy. At that time I began using their *Building Emotional Understanding* (BEU) curriculum (Wipfler, 2006a) within the course.

“Frameworks,” as students affectionately refer to the course, is a core requirement in the early childhood associate’s degree at NWIC. Originally my texts included *The Human Side of Human Beings* (Jackins, 1963) and *How to Give Children an Emotional Head Start* (Riekerk, 1988). Later I added a set of six booklets called the “Listening to Children” series written by Patty Wipfler (1999).

When I revised the course to include the full BEU curriculum, I dropped the Jackins and Riekerk texts, adding *Building Emotional Understanding: A Guidebook for Parents and Caregivers* (Wipfler, 2006a) along with the Listening to Children booklets (Wipfler, 1999). My students appreciated that Wipfler’s writing resonated with their desires to create early childhood classrooms based on tribal values of generosity, cooperation, respect, responsibility, and deep love for our children.

Connection is Key

Hand in Hand’s emphasis on connection was key for communicating what I wanted students to understand. I later read work by Daniel Siegel concerning implications of brain research on the importance of connection. He states, “Relationships that are ‘connecting’ and allow for collaboration appear to offer children a wealth of interpersonal closeness that supports the development of many domains, including social, emotional, and cognitive functioning” (Siegel, 2001, p. 78).

Lezin, Roller, Bean, and Taylor (2004) agree. In their review of over 600 pieces of literature, they found that “Parent-child connectedness, or PCC, has emerged in recent research as a compelling ‘super-protector’ — a feature of family life that may buffer young people from the many challenges and risks facing them in today’s world” (p. 1). Extrapolating this to the importance of caregiver-child connectedness, I was basing my ECED 107 Frameworks class on connection as well.

Research Questions

My work with ECE students at NWIC has led me to investigate the potential of expanding the work on connection from a college classroom to the early learning center (ELC), and the effects of providing support for ELC staff to implement this work. To that end, I have focused on two primary questions in this research:

- *What would be the effects of all staff in a center learning the Parenting by Connection (PbC) curriculum?*
- *What effect would engaging in a weekly support group and having me in their classroom a few times per month modeling and coaching them on the use of the PbC “listening to children” tools have on their ability to deepen their practice based upon their own values?*

Methodology

With grant funding for the Wakanyeja “Sacred Little Ones” Early Childhood Initiative from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation through the American Indian College Fund, we have been able to examine what a tribal college early learning center could accomplish by teaming up to learn from children. Further assistance from the Mellon Foundation for a year of research and writing gave me the opportunity to pursue this inquiry more fully in 2013-14.

Our on-campus child care for children who are six weeks through five years old is operated by NWIC for three major reasons — (1) to give students who are parents of young children access to affordable, high quality childcare, enabling them to persist in their college education; (2) to give children of students a high quality early learning setting; and (3) as a site for students in the early childhood education associate’s degree program to complete observations and practicum courses. With three classrooms it is a relatively small center enrolling up to 39 children at any one time — seven infants, 12 toddlers, and 20 preschoolers. The director is a white woman, and all 10 classroom and support staff are Native women, eight of whom are Lummi tribal members.

The center director had taken ECED 107 a year prior to the grant funding, was enthused about using the listening tools with children, and wanted the tools for her staff. Two had taken Frameworks in the spring of 2011. Now, with the infusion of Sacred Little Ones funding in July, 2011, we could pay tuition and books for all staff. Spring quarter, 2012, seven additional classroom staff currently working at the ELC were joined by six staff from the Lummi Head Start program and completed ECED 107. With all but one of the nine ELC classroom staff having completed the course we were able to begin, as a tribal college, to study the results of using listening tools throughout a single center.

I collected pre- and post-assessments on their expectations, understandings, and experiences, and I listened to their director concerning some changes she observed in their work at the ELC.

Continuing the study, during fall quarter, 2013, I offered the one-credit ECED 116 “Teaching by Connection Support Group” for ELC staff who had already completed the BEU class. Seven of the original eight participated. The eighth no longer worked at the Center.

Data collection consisted of pre- and post-assessments, an interview with each participant, and field notes from (a) each week’s support group class; (b) observations in their ELC classrooms; and (c) modeling and coaching the use of the BEU listening tools in their classrooms.

The seven women in the Support Group cohort are all Lummi tribal members except one who is a descendant of another Washington tribe. Four were in their early 20s, one in her late 20s, one in her early 30’s, and one in her mid-thirties at the beginning of the quarter. Two had had employment in child care prior to employment at the ELC, and the

others' experience was in caring for younger siblings and cousins. Six were students (two freshmen and four sophomores) in the NWIC Associate of Applied Science-Transfer degree program in ECE. The seventh had a non-ECE bachelor's degree and was pursuing an ECE certificate. The number of ECED courses they had already completed was 5, 6, 6, 7, 7, 10, and 17. Two of them completed ECED 107 in spring, 2011, and five completed the course in spring of 2012. The Center had opened in 2009, and they had been employed there anywhere between one and 3.5 years.

Background & Context

My Journey to Emotional Understanding

I was introduced to the idea of trusting children's emotional release through Re-evaluation Co-Counseling (RC). I was participating in my first peer-to-peer co-counseling session just days after my initial introduction in 1976 to RC theory and practice (Jackins, 1963; www.rc.org). My co-counselors were giving me permission and encouragement to release or "discharge" my own strong emotions of frustration, anger, and grief. I was a preschool child care teacher at the time, and daily witnessed thoughtless acts and attitudes from an administrator toward the staff, children, and parents that bewildered and angered me. In my turn as "client" in that first session, I discovered that when someone really listened to me and treated my discharge of emotions as a natural process of release from whatever was causing anxiety, I could experience a powerful process that caused no one any harm at all. In fact, I experienced "falling apart" as a relief and afterward felt much more "together" — less burdened by worry, anger, and feelings of "craziness." I went to work the next day more functional than I had been in weeks and began to help make positive changes.

From then on, I took a new look at the preschool children I worked with, noticing that they were pretty much experts at the process of feeling their feelings. When they got hurt, they cried, often loudly. When they got frustrated, they threw tantrums. When something made them laugh, they laughed full out. Ben's chin would tremble and his teeth chatter right after something had scared him. I began to replace my rather well-honed abilities to get them to stop being upset with an effort to really connect with and be there for them so they could emote fully once they started. I began to appreciate young children's ability to cry fully, without worrying about tears, mucus, noise, or taking care of anyone while they went about this work of ridding themselves of upsets. And I could see and appreciate how much more relaxed, generous, aware of others, able to learn, and cooperative children were and how much less "needy" they acted afterwards.

I noticed from my first few co-counseling experiences that the attitude the listener had toward me could either encourage or discourage emotional release. When their attitude conveyed warmth and their belief that I was worthy of listening to, that I could figure out my own problems, and that they welcomed my emotional discharge, then it was easier to feel safe enough to let my feelings flow. Additionally, being close and holding my hand assured me that the intensity of my feelings was not a hardship on them.

This was markedly different from the shushing, ignoring, scolding, threat of punishment, insistent comforting, sympathizing, or accusations of being manipulative that adults had extended toward me as a crying child. Too, it was very different from the sympathy, empathy, hand-patting, making light, and/or active listening I had experienced in adulthood. They were listening with confidence and belief that I was fundamentally okay and that the processes of emotional discharge were natural, healthy, wholesome, and worth doing.

From the experience of being listened to well, I learned, as I took my turn in the counselor role, to be confident in my client, non-judgmental, pay attention and make room for their feelings. I found co-counseling to be quite liberating in both roles.

Learning from Young Ones' Emotional Release: Physical Hurts

Valuing emotional release, I was able to learn many things over the years from children. Perhaps the first was to notice what would happen when a child would cry after they had a minor injury. They might fall down or bump their head ever so slightly. I decided to quit picking them up to quiet them, quickly comfort them or distract them by rubbing the injured part vigorously. Instead I got down to their level physically, close enough for them to feel my presence, and listened to them while gently touching the bumped body part so they didn't have to try to ignore the pain. Their crying often was way out of proportion to the actual hurt, but that was no problem — I learned from each child's ability to cry. Once the tears were spent, I noticed that they were ready to play again, and often with more awareness of how to navigate the challenge that had caused the fall or bump or with more connection to the other children.

Separations

Drop-off time in the morning was frequently a tearful time for children. I knew to put myself physically close to a crying child. Children would often burrow in to my chest and stop their tears, which I found very comforting. However, they would often be sad or unengaged for an extended period of time once the crying stopped. I now decided to focus on being with them, holding them and instead getting them to burrow in, I made sure they could see my eyes if they looked. I reached for a caring physical connection with them so I could see and hear that specific child. I would not talk a lot, but in a low, confident tone would say things such as, "Your mommy will come back," "I will take care of you while Daddy is gone," "You are safe here with me," and "You have friends here." I did not make them look at me or show me they were listening. I knew from my own experience of crying, that I could hear people talking to me quite well, especially during those moments when I was catching my breath, so I learned to time my comments to those moments. Usually the only indication they heard was that they would dare to glimpse into my eyes for a moment, gather reassurance that I was really listening, and go back to crying even harder than before. As the glimpses became more frequent and lasted longer, the crying might intensify and then — they were done. Sometimes they fell into a thoroughly relaxed sleep or they would become very interested in something going on in the center.

I noticed that if the parent would be sure to say good bye and look pleased with the child and me as they left, especially if the child was crying, things went better. I soon noticed that instead of weeks of daily crying and difficulty enjoying their day when Mommy or Daddy left, a child who could cry hard when I was really listening, would become a child who, after just a few days of crying, would separate from the parent with a great hug and farewell, then be off exploring, playing, and making friends. Parents by and large were reassured that I was not put off by their child's crying and that I could help them part with respect for their relationship with their child. They were relieved with the happy farewells that ensued.

Gaining Cooperation with Laughter and Lightness

Children also taught me that laughter was powerful emotional release that built connection and cooperation. After weeks of four-year old Jonny getting up and running around the lunchroom — the large fellowship hall of a church — I had tried everything I knew to change the behavior. I had him sit next to me, explained what I wanted him to do, engaged him in conversation, directed his attention to the meal and his friends, corralled him with one arm, gave him consequences and time-outs, and was often stern and serious. I had exhausted all the recommendations from experts that I needed to be calm, teach children what to do, and not punish. Jeanette Galambos Stone's *A Guide to Discipline* (Stone, 1978) was one of my favorite resources because of her caring, clear, common sense approach that talked directly to me as a caregiver and respected children's dignity, autonomy, and intelligence. Yet no one had adequate guidance for me about what to do when their recommendations worked only briefly, and the difficulty returned day after day as it did for Jonny. And no one had guidance for me when big feelings erupted and a tantrum (also considered bad behavior in ECE literature) ensued. My self-confidence really suffered because I sometimes saw myself as a failure at something I cared so much about.

Now, one to five other children had started to get up and run around, too, perhaps in solidarity with Jonny or because I had become so tense about the situation. I knew I had to do something for safety reasons. Inspired by their gleeful bodies, I got up and started to lift my knees high, pump my arms, and run around the room in slow motion with a gleeful look on my face as if I were chasing them but without any chance they would be caught. I was saying what I always said, "You need to go sit down now," but my tone was goofy and joyful. I was about eight months pregnant at the time, and I am sure I was quite a sight! The children laughed and laughed and ran all around that big room. Even the children who had never left their seats before got up and were running too. I think the only ones left in their chairs were my astonished co-workers. Within less than three minutes, laughing and running and making eye contact with happy abandon, I cheerfully suggested it was time to sit down again to finish our lunches. With great relief I watched as they all happily responded, heading back to their chairs, chatting and giggling, with easy cooperation. After that day, lunchtime was far more relaxed. Jonny and I had better rapport, and though he would still sometimes look distant or struggle with staying seated at lunch, he and I were able to connect much more reliably. I never got up and ran around like that again nor did the children. It was the talk of the table sometimes though — "Teacher, remember the time we all ran around the lunchroom?" Yes, indeed I did. Their laughter taught me about tension relief — mine and theirs — in a whole new way.

Special Time for Building Connection

Over the years, something that I began to attempt for short periods of time was doing "Special Time" with one child at a time for one to five minutes at a time. During this time, I would tell the child that we had X minutes of Special Time and I wanted to play with them and to do *whatever* they wanted to do. At that, Special Time would have begun, and I would follow their lead, making sure they were the strong, the swift, the brave, the well-informed, and I was the weak, the slow, the fearful, and the clueless. They would sometimes be amazed that I really was following their lead instead of giving my "better" instructions on how to build their blocks or suggesting a book when they wanted to read. I put them in charge of our relationship (keeping my own independent eye out for safety), and it was lovely to get to know each young person better and better in such short spurts of time. Children showed me quite clearly by their increased

affection and easier time cooperating that five minutes of connecting through Special Time could make a very big difference in our days.

Brazelton and Greenspan also recommend “special time” (2000, p. 41) to parents for focused interaction with one’s child, and “floor time” (2000, p. 153) for following the child’s lead.

Setting Limits and Listening to the Ensuing Upset

The other big lesson from the children was the most challenging for me to do or want to do — setting limits on off-track behavior. There were always children such as Andrew in early learning settings who displayed some persistent behaviors that were causing them difficulty with their friends and with us teachers. My old approach was to try using any one of a number of techniques to calm them and prevent a tantrum: ignoring, stopping the behavior with stern reasoning, redirecting, using natural and/or logical consequences, getting the injuring child to reconcile with the injured one, redirecting them to another activity or area of the room, time-out, and so on. But it was an important day when, with a bit of trepidation that my co-workers would be upset with me, I decided to abandon those techniques in favor of learning from Andrew how to help him by actually listening to his tantrum once I set the limit.

I went to him and stopped him at the first sign of off-track behavior, having learned that second chances, once he had started down that path, did not result in improved behavior. I was determined to stay with him in this whole new way, determined to listen. I worked very hard to keep thinking and expressing to him, “I know you don’t want to hurt anyone,” and “You get to have friends.” I purposely did not try to explain what he had done wrong, reason with him, or try to get him to stop having feelings. I welcomed the tantrum, and hung in there with him. I was listening with warmth and closeness, being non-judgmental, while saying “no” to the precipitating off-track behavior, all at the same time.

After many minutes of raging and crying and flailing about, he sank into my lap, talked calmly for a bit, then jumped up with hug and a smile and we went over to the block area to play with his friends without incident. Something had shifted!

This happened several times over the next month. My two co-teachers backed us doing this together because everyone’s day went so much better when we did. Sometimes it was very confusing to me, as no two tantrums are the same even with the same child so it required me to be a flexible thinker and communicator. I am still learning, but I have become way more confident about heading into the fray and setting limits that need to be set with warmth, attention, and confidence. And I know I need to change gears if I start to get angry or too tense to think well, helping myself and the child move on to something else.

I also still set limits playfully (like the day I ran around the lunchroom with Jonny), or just by snuggling a child when I say “no” to something. When two-year-old Lola went to grab Donnie’s toy horse, I cuddled her, and with a smile in my voice, said, “You don’t get to take Donnie’s horsie!” She giggled, cuddled me back, and then picked up the toy pig. Truly the only thing young people need sometimes is a little bit of connection to reset their ability to function.

The children were showing me that it was good to reach for connection with them, welcome and support their outbursts, and discover their resultant abilities to become engaged in friendships and learning again.

Keeping Myself in Shape to Listen: Trading Listening Time

Though I became committed to listening well to children, my patience still frayed quickly unless I could keep ahead of my frustrations by emotionally releasing in my peer co-counseling sessions. I scheduled at least one session weekly where my co-counselor and I would take turns listening to one another, encouraging and assisting one another's emotional release. We would divide the available time, and each would be counselor for half the time and client for the other half. Some days I would be so confused by what happened with a child or have taken a real "knock in the chops," that I hadn't seen coming, that a good session to talk it out, cry, laugh, rage, tremble, or yawn would help me regain my abilities to think, plan, understand, and act well. Other days, I talked about and discharged on things unrelated to child care. Either way, the sessions seemed to help me to think better at work so I persisted with sessions, and learned more RC theory and practice through reading, attending workshops, and participating in support groups and classes.

I also read about and discussed with Randi Wolfe her work with parents. She developed an eight-week parenting curriculum which she called "Listening to Children" (LTC) based on RC theory and practice and using the same *Listening to Children* booklets by Patty Wipfler as I was using with my early childhood students. She conducted positivist research on this parenting education approach in the Midwest of the United States with very encouraging results (Wolfe, 1999). Her work with parents was congruent with that I was teaching early childhood students and teachers.

Essential to Wolfe's LTC, Wipfler's "Parenting by Connection," and my own experience is the importance of adults doing their own emotional work in order to be more fully able to listen to and guide our children. Daniel J. Siegel and Mary Hartzell agree, stating that "by deepening our ability to understand our own emotional experience, we are better able to relate empathetically with our children and promote their self-understanding and healthy development" (2004, p. 4).

Wolfe's research and findings on parents' use of the listening tools among themselves and with their children is promising. The field of ECE, however, was lacking in research on work with early childhood caregivers on their use of the four adult-to-child listening tools and two adult-to-adult tools that I was teaching in the ECED 107 Frameworks course.

Hand in Hand's Four Tools for Listening to Children

In Frameworks, I taught the use of Wipfler's listening tools. She had coined the terms "Staylistening" and "Playlistening" for two of the four adult-to-child listening tools in her PbC BEU curriculum. Wolfe, Wipfler, and I all assigned similar specific meanings to the other two, "Special Time" and "Setting Limits."

Staylistening

Staylistening is the term Wipfler uses to describe those times when a child cries or is upset and, just as it sounds, the adult stays close, connects, and listens, being warmly confident in words, tone, facial expression and closeness, while the child cries fully. (Wipfler, 2006a, p. 23) Listening to children when physically hurt, upon separation from their parents, or when they tantrum are examples of Staylistening.

Playlistening

Playlistening is the word she uses to describe doing something, often repeatedly, that brings laughter (without tickling, which can overwhelm a child), creating closeness and connection. My lunchroom run about with Jonny included Playlistening as does anything a child spontaneously giggles about. Playlistening may occur during Special Time (Wipfler, 1999).

Special Time

Special Time is a way of building connection by putting the child in charge of the play as far as the child can think. While Playlistening may occur spontaneously, Special Time is done on purpose by setting a timer and telling the child, "I want to do whatever you want to do," then truly following their lead. This helps to counteract the everyday power imbalance that children are placed in as the weaker, lesser being in our societies. The planned time ensures that the adult cannot unilaterally end the play, as often happens in our busy and demanding lives (Wipfler, 1999).

Setting Limits

The fourth tool, Setting Limits, is familiar sounding but has some particular characteristics. Chiefly, when a child's behavior goes off track, the adult takes the limit to the child and reaches for connection, as I did with four-year old Andrew. I went to him rather than calling across the room, and I stopped his irrational behavior while reaching for connection with my words and touch. As I then held the limit and Staylistened with him, he was able to expel the big feelings that had driven his behavior off track in the first place (Wipfler, 2006a, p. 44). This differs from setting a limit then leaving a child who wasn't thinking in the first place, to control his upset on his own.

Hand in Hand's Two Peer Listening Tools for Adults

Listening Partnerships and Support Group are Wipfler's adult-to-adult listening tools of trading equal peer listening time for use however the person being listened to wishes. Partnerships are between two or three people, and Support Groups are four or more (Wipfler, 2006b).

Students' Delight with Implementing the Four Listening Tools

Every week as I taught Frameworks classes, we did Listening Partnerships and Support Group in class, then I offered or expanded upon one of the four adult-to-child listening tools to practice with their children at work. Even the most skeptical, by the fifth week, was sharing what a difference it made to credit children with the ability to use their minds in Special Time and their abilities to release emotion in Staylistening and Playlistening. They would have newfound delight in their abilities to handle previously bewildering off-track behavior by using the Setting Limits with Staylistening tools. In addition they were beginning to see these tools as ways to help children resist absorbing the generational traumas of the past by learning to listen to children's healing processes. They were truly learning from the children.

Because what I assigned them to do was based on listening, respect for children and families, and taking responsibility for children's safety and well-being, students were willing to try these methods. Besides, these tools always

had an “escape clause.” If at any time that they felt that they just couldn’t listen another moment, they could distract the child and pull out of the listening mode.

Implementation in the Workplace was Challenging

Over the years, there were seldom as many as 25% of the staff from any one tribal early learning program taking the class together in one quarter. This made full implementation of the listening skills within their workplaces difficult. They experienced peer support within the class; however, they most often were not working in the same room as one another where they could back each other as they tried out the use of the listening tools, and learn from children’s emotional release. In fact, sometimes a co-worker in the classroom, not understanding why my student was listening to an upset child, would work at cross-purposes to the student, sliding a pacifier into a child’s mouth or bringing the child the desperately begged-for sippy cup of milk for naptime.

Modeling and Coaching Were Not Available in Those Earlier Classes

Nor did I have an opportunity to model the listening tools or coach students on their use. And though they might have further contact with me as an academic advisor or instructor in a different course, and they might consult with me on a child’s behavior, we seldom had the opportunity for a Listening Partnership where they could expel their frustrations or fears. Still, they learned a good deal from me, from each other, and especially from the children during the Frameworks course.

Adults’ Need to Release Takes a Back Seat

My students experienced beginning opportunities for emotional release through Listening Partnerships and PbC Support Groups during the quarter. However, once the Frameworks course was over, without the support of the course itself and with so many competing demands on their time, Listening Partnerships for their own emotional needs easily got shunted aside.

Learning from Adults and Children

I theorized that if all the staff in a single program understood what their co-workers were doing when listening to children during emotional upsets, they could support and learn from each other rather than looking askance at one another or interfering. I wanted to discover what would happen for teachers and the children they cared for if the entire staff of an early learning program could learn this approach.

Findings & Analysis

Results from Taking ECED 107 within a Year of One Another

The Northwest Indian College ELC became that program. Two ELC staff completed ECED 107 in spring of 2011 and seven more in spring of 2012. Their director shared with me at about mid-quarter during the spring 2012 course that she could see a marked change at the Center. In particular, she saw lots more laughter and playfulness since the staff started learning Special Time and Playlistening. “You should see Sarah! She is laughing and playing with the kids

outside all the time now. And they have all quit being so hard on little Thomas.” She also noted that as they learned together, they were supportive of one another’s efforts. (ELC Director, 2012, personal communication).

Pre-Tests and Post-Tests

The 11-week class ended, and staff completed post-tests for the course. There were some encouraging changes from pre- to post-tests concerning attitudes toward children’s emotional release. Pre-test responses to the question, “*What is it about handling children’s emotions that would be most helpful to you?*” included, “I would love to know how to deal with a child with a need for emotional support,” “Understanding why they cry over the littlest things,” “Knowing what to do when a child is throwing a fit,” “Finding out why children do what they do,” and “Make it less stressful for both of us.”

Post-test responses to “*How has this class changed your relationship with your child, a child, or several children?*” included, “[I] understood more about the signals a child can have to show you what they want/need,” “It has made us closer,” “I have never seen anything positive about tantrums/crying until now! I never realized they ‘act out’ because of feelings inside from other things,” “I am now able [to be] more understanding of why kids cry.”

Response to the question, “*How does your taking this class impact the community as a whole?*” included, “I utilize techniques that I learned in the class every single day at the ELC working with Native children. It has made me a better teacher and has positively impacted each and every one of the children in my care,” “I teach some of the skills I learned in this class to people around me,” and “It gives me strategies to teach my parents.” And to the question, “*What part of the Building Emotional Understanding class was the most helpful to you?*”, one woman stated, “learning new ways to reach children’s emotions in ways I have never thought so much about. It was basically common sense. Realizing it’s okay for children to be upset with or around you.”

One wrote what seemed to echo throughout the class that, “It is important to build a bond with children so they can feel connected and feel safe and secure so they can show/tell you how they feel or if they want or need anything.” Overall the post-tests were very positive with no negative comments.

Sag Sets In

However, as would happen for me if I could not release my own emotions, I suspected that the stresses of work, school, parenting, and life would result in the return of old methods. In fact, their director noted that, as winter 2013 moved into spring, staff seemed to be: stopping children’s crying more instead of Staylistening; smiling and laughing less; and giving multiple frustrating “second chances” instead of wading into the fray of setting limits and listening to an angry outburst. (Director, personal conversation, 2013). These listening tools can take a lot of flexible thinking, and though the staff loved the results they had experienced during the course, the tools are not what we “automatically” do based upon our own childhoods. It looked as if staff would need support to persist in making time to learn from the children in this arena again.

Our Next Effort — Support Group Class

We decided to try offering them support beyond the initial 11-week class in the form of a Support Group. Fall quarter, 2013, I offered “Teaching by Connection Support Group” as a one-credit class for anyone who had completed

the BEU curriculum. Seven signed up and the eighth would have, but she had a class conflict. We met for just fifty minutes, from 5:30 to 6:20 pm, on Monday evening right after the center closed. Each person was to have a Listening Partnership of, minimum, 15 minutes each (30 minutes total) between class sessions and to read “*Listening Partnerships for Parents*” by Patty Wipfler (2006b). I conducted a pre-test with 23 questions to ask about their relationship to the content of the ECED 107 class. And I administered a post-test to see if and how attitudes and practices had changed by the end of the quarter. As an additional support, I would provide modeling of and coaching on the use of Special Time, Playlistening, Setting Limits, and Staylistening within their early learning classrooms.

Support Group Format

Each class meeting had a simple structure consisting of an opening circle where each person shared some small thing that had gone well since the last time we met followed by pairing up into a short (three to five minutes each) Listening Partnership. We would then reconvene as a group, I would say a few words of appreciation for them and their work, remind them of confidentiality and the safety to release feelings, and we would divide the remaining time equally for each person to be listened to in the circle, usually three to five minutes apiece. Often I would be the primary listener for each person, and everyone else was to be attentive and warm as well. After everyone had their turn, we would each share something we liked about being together and then depart, sharing a hug or two on the way out. Afterward, I would write up field notes describing what had happened each week from my viewpoint.

Taking Risks Pays Off

As the quarter wore on, one person after the other would take the risk of showing her feelings with tears or laughter during her turn, often feeling embarrassed that she was showing so much. Each time this happened, however, the group felt safer for everyone. By the end of the quarter, we had shared much laughter and each person risked crying at least once, some crying pretty hard. Their co-workers supported them warmly, and confidentiality was maintained.

The Interviews

At the end of November I began interviewing the individual students/staff members to better understand their experience. I asked specifically if they thought that the ECED 107 and the Support Group classes had changed their skills at handling children’s emotional moments, and what effect this had had on the quality of their teaching. Other than that, their remarks would go where they chose. Almost always they had a story to tell of a Staylistening, Setting Limits, Special Time or Playlistening incident they were pleased with and wanted to share. I concluded these interviews on January 30, 2014.

Participating, Modeling, Coaching

Additionally, throughout the quarter, I had spent time in their classrooms, modeling the four adult-to-child listening tools with children. Sometimes they had a child whose behavior they found perplexing and wanted help with. Other times I simply joined the classroom, helped out as an extra caregiver, and engaged with children, often doing Special Time, Playlistening, Setting a Limit and/or Staylistening. Other times, I would coach a staff person who was

Staylistening or Setting Limits with a child, to encourage, reassure, and help them build their skills at really paying attention. I wrote up anecdotal field notes of these interactions after returning to my office.

Interview Theme: Changes in Skills Handling Emotional Moments

All evidence indicated strongly that their skills handling children's emotional moments had changed. From the ECED 107 post-test through the pre- and post-tests for the Support Group class, their own assessment was that the classes had indeed increased their skills and in fact, had increased their interest in listening even through hard feelings. They each volunteered at least one inspiring story in their interview of a time they Staylistened to a child, often as a result of Setting a Limit.

Interview Theme: Learning from How children Emerge from a Big Cry or Tantrum

One recurring theme they remarked upon was how the child would be after a big cry or tantrum one of them had Staylistened to. As Andrea said, "I really like how happy the kids are afterwards...Daniel was super happy the rest of the day." Janie shared that, "you *know* they're done and they've gotten that relief because they take a deep breath, and they're relaxed...and then they can learn and play." Delia remarked upon "the expressions on kids' faces...You go around the center and you see these kids who've just had a big Staylistening...then you see afterwards how relaxed and calm they look...and refreshed...The look on their face is just amazing to see."

Interview Theme: Delight with Self and Child's Work

Another theme was how pleased they were with themselves and the child afterward. Andrea had set a reasonable limit that James had had plenty of lunch and milk so she would not get him the milk he was whining for at naptime. She stayed and listened while she said, "No," and the whining became a big cry calling for milk. Andrea saw this as an opportunity to really be there for him while he expelled big feelings. A substitute caregiver, not understanding that Andrea had set a reasonable limit, brought James a cup of milk. After his big cry, "he just held [the sippy cup.] He just looked at it and [seemed to be thinking], 'What am I going to do with this now?'" He wasn't really interested in the milk — it had just been the pretext for his big cry. Instead he was restful and relaxed. "I was really proud of myself," Andrea shared.

Interview Theme: Relief

A third theme was what a relief that, while the child was really upset when the staff member set a limit and the child would have a big cry or tantrum, once the storm was over, the child was happy, relaxed, snuggled up next to them or otherwise showed that they felt really good about the adult who had held the limit without giving in, without giving up, but giving of herself. Perhaps Maren said it most clearly. "There's always been a fear too,...will this child still love me as much if I'm doing a Staylistening with him? What if they think that I'm making them cry? And then I'm like, 'No, I didn't make them cry. Something else is going on and I just helped him release it.'" Andrea agreed. "Yeah, I really like how happy the kids are afterwards...And while it's happening, you're like, 'Oh no, they're not going to like me anymore.' And then afterwards they're done, they're sitting right next to you, and you're like, 'oh, you *are* okay with me!'" Crying, angry children can be very convincing that the person stepping in to interrupt off-track behavior is the problem, when

really, they needed someone to direct their anger and grief at in order to expel it. The children taught the staff that an adult can be a wonderful ally who is that target in their struggle to free themselves of hard feelings.

Interview Theme: Renewed Commitment to Using the Adult-to-Child Listening Tools

Was the Support Group useful in helping them use the adult-to-child listening tools? Sarah's comments were echoed by others when she said, "I noticed when I wasn't taking a class [based on BEU], I wasn't using it as much, so when I am taking the class, that helps..I do use the techniques now, and I think about it, and when a kid's crying I want to go, 'Okay, I'm going to sit here, and I'll listen,' and it helps. It makes a huge difference." Being in the Support Group, whether we talked about listening to children or not, helped them to use these tools so useful to them with the children.

Interview Theme: Improvement in their Teaching

In interviews they each affirmed that their teaching had improved with the more consistent use of the listening tools. My own observation was that this staff had always seen the children as precious. Now the children were seen as precious and interesting even when they were having big feelings or their behavior was going off track.

Interview Theme: Backing One Another

Repeatedly in their interviews the word "team" appeared. "We're a team with these children and doing what's best for them" (Janie). "We're all on the same page" (Barb). "We're more of a team now" (Maren). They found they could count on each other more, they could ask for help or offer help without feeling that they were offending their co-worker. They indicated that the effect of listening to one another in the support group had helped them to trust one another and care about one another's struggles more.

Interview Theme: Ongoing Listening Partnerships

Both the Support Group post-tests and the interviews indicated that the longer listening partnerships had sometimes happened, but not with any regularity. Staff did report doing more frequent short listening partnerships, and they created space for one another to vent for a few moments before re-entering their classroom after a break. When asked if this had been their habit prior to the Support Group, Helga responded, "We didn't start doing it *until* those classes, actually." She appreciated these more informal Listening Partnerships for the way they "help me not get more frustrated with the children...I'd go back to the classroom feeling better about everything."

Interview Theme: Support Group Helps Build Understanding of Children's Emotional Release

In addition, the Support Group itself gave them opportunities to release feelings when most of them never anticipated that they would do so. They began to trust the process of releasing emotions for themselves and one another more. Did this translate into trusting the process in children? Yes. Maren put it this way: "Now that I've expressed my emotions in this Support Group class and people don't judge me for it, I feel like, 'Okay, all right, this works, I like this!'...That's what's also made me realize how big it is [to cry]. ...When the [children] decide to let me be the supporter of them,...and I can help the child release their emotions...it felt really awesome for me."

Interview Theme: Effects of Modeling and Coaching Use of the Tools

Did my modeling and coaching serve to build their confidence, assist skill development, and keep them interested in more? I loved doing this part of the work very much. Further exploration of the effects of this work is needed. However, I did coach the staff on Staylistening for a couple of hours daily for three days with Talia who seemed to cry incessantly, missing her mom. She would sit helplessly and bawl, not crawling or pulling to a stand even though she has recently had her first birthday. Things improved each day for Talia, and on the fourth day, “she didn’t even cry when her mom left! Instead she smiled and waved to her mom. During the day...she was able to enjoy herself, play, and move around [on her own] more than usual.” Sarah was so justifiably pleased with all of their work together, that she wrote up a report of the sequence of events. She went on to say, “Each of us doing Staylistening with this child was difficult for us at times, but it was definitely worth it! I feel like we have earned [the child’s] trust and she seems to feel so much more comfortable with how much she moves around now...Having Shelley here to coach us and help us when we need it the most has definitely made a huge difference in our work.” Talia then went on to have a smooth and positive transition to the toddler room in the next month.

Conclusions

Indications are that Teaching by Connection modeled on Parenting by Connection is an important and exciting addition to early childhood education best practices. As a tribal college, NWIC has been uniquely suited to conduct this research. As an institution we are committed to promoting indigenous values of connectedness, caring, and making sure all of our children flourish — all congruent with the tenets of Parenting by Connection. In this study, Native early childhood workers have been on the cutting edge of demonstrating that an early learning staff can effectively learn from children’s abilities to connect and to fully release emotions that drive behavior off track while providing vital peer support with one another through Listening Partnerships and Support Groups.

Based as PbC is on the adults maintaining ongoing confidential, safe avenues of emotional release, there is a challenge to continued use of both the two adult-to-adult and the four adult-to-child listening tools. Without attention to our own issues, we adults tend to bring our tensions into our work and have less attention for children’s needs for emotional release. With the end of the fall support group, a few staff continued to engage in the Support Group through the winter and spring, but the use of Listening Partnerships decreased, and some staff found it difficult to maintain the level of safety and camaraderie they had experienced during the fall quarter (Sarah, Delia, Andrea, individual personal communication, 2014).

An important next step could be a collective inquiry with the ELC staff as co-researchers to build shared knowledge and learn together about the ongoing use of the adult-to-adult tools. Additionally, collective inquiry with the staff concerning all that the children are teaching them would shed further light on the value and sustainability of this work.

Another area of inquiry would be to examine how training the staff to become assistant instructors and even instructors themselves of Parenting by Connection might affect the use of all the listening tools in the Center and the community.

It has been an honor to engage in this work with these brilliant Native women and I look forward to investigating further what they and young indigenous children can show us about emotional healing, learning, and life.

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