

A Question

by Amy Laura Dombro



J. Brown - G. Simon

Asking questions is an important, often overlooked part of working with infants and toddlers. The value of questioning lies more in the process than in finding an answer. Questioning encourages us to explore our practices and to observe ourselves and children in an ongoing way. More often than not, observing will reveal new questions. The scarcity of clear-cut answers is one of the fascinating and sometimes frustrating parts of working with young children and families.

Questioning challenges us to stretch as we examine new ideas. It can be an invigorating break from the nitty-gritty of daily life in a day care

setting. The children we care for can only benefit from spending their days with adults who are learning and growing.

There are many reasons why we don't ask questions. We are busy. Working with young children and parents demands a total involvement that makes it difficult to step back and gain the perspective needed to formulate a question. I wonder though if the major reason that we avoid asking questions is that the process of articulating them often touches the mixed feelings many of us have about infants and toddlers being in group care? I'd like to share my experience with such a question.

As head teacher of an infant/toddler day care program, I worked very hard along with my staff to create an environment where children would

feel safe, secure and happy. I was upset the day an observer commented to me that several children seemed low-keyed, a term that describes a flatness of affect. She pointed out Ricky, a 14-month-old toddler who sat at the table going through the motions of eating a banana.

"He's just tired," I explained, a bit defensively. It was hard to accept that a child in my program might not be as content as I hoped. At the time I could not even entertain the question of why Ricky looked so joyless.

A few years later, the image of Ricky eating his banana came back to me as I had the opportunity to observe in other day care centers. As I watched, this time as an outsider, more objective than I could be in my own classroom, I saw several children who did seem low-key. Though they

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ate snack, pounded playdough, and jumped on large blue pillows, I had the sense of them not really being there. There was a lack of expression on their faces. Their movements were mechanical as opposed to lively and spontaneous. It was as if they were running on empty.

The children I focused on were young toddlers Ricky's age, 10 to 16 months, in what Margaret Mahler refers to as the "practicing stage," a descriptive name. Practicing stage toddlers often look as if they are practicing. I think of Jeremy, a new walker, who spent fifteen minutes climbing up the slide in our classroom gliding down on his stomach and then on his back. This is a time of their lives when children are on the go. They rarely stop. If one of these children stumbles and falls they usually pick themselves up and continue on their way. Phyllis Greenacre describes children this age as "engaged in a love affair with the world."

Ironically, these are the same children who often seem too busy to say goodbye to their parents. The parent who but a few months ago held a clinging, protesting infant when it came time to say goodbye in the morning, now has to wave her hand in front of her toddler's face as he climbs up and slides down the sliding board for the seventh time in as many minutes. "Goodbye," she says. "Bye," he might say with a casual wave of his hand as he heads up the steps again. "He doesn't care if I leave," parents of this age children often comment.


Nothing could be further from the truth. As Margaret Mahler explains in her theory about how children develop a sense of themselves as separate individuals, children in the practicing stage are fueled by their parents' presence. They follow a pattern of moving out and exploring, checking in with their parents and moving away again to continue their investigations. A child's checking in, "refueling," can take any number of forms ranging from a child climbing into his parent's lap before heading back to the blocks to catching his parent's eye across the room. It is as if checking back to his parents nourishes a child, allowing him to continue his intriguing re-

search about the world.

Over the years, my question emerged — one that has taken me a very long time to ask myself and colleagues: What does it mean for a practicing stage toddler to spend long hours five days a week away from his parents, his primary source of fuel? I don't know the answer. But I hypothesize that being in day care costs practicing stage children something. Rather than moving, exploring, gathering information, and feeling pleasure in their new discoveries about the world and themselves, many practicing stage toddlers I observed spent a good bit of their day in a low-keyed state, their energy turned inward, perhaps as has been theorized, trying to hold onto an image of themselves with their mother.

While I think we need to be concerned, I'm not advocating panic. Rather, I think we need to collect more observations of practicing stage children in day care. We need to ask other questions. First, are my observations true of a large number of junior toddlers? If so, how much of the day do children seem to be low-keyed? How does children's behavior in day care compare to their behavior at home with their parents? We need to explore as objectively as possible what being in day care means to these children. And depending on what we see, we need to develop strategies for supporting them.

As professionals in the relatively new field of infant/toddler day care, we have a responsibility to ask questions of ourselves. Questioning must be an ongoing part of our work. We

don't need a research grant to pursue a question. Rather we have to set aside time for observing: 10 minutes a day twice a week can provide lots of information and probably new questions to explore. And we need to talk with each other. Our conversations can take place during staff meetings, in workshops, classes and in articles such as this. Only by continually asking questions can we keep ourselves on our toes and provide infants and toddlers with the quality day care they need and deserve. 



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