Promoting emotional health and wellbeing through partnerships: A parent/teacher/community collaboration

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Abstract

The research described in this paper is about children's fear and how, through forging strong bonds, or partnerships, between teachers, parents, children and the community, we may be making positive strides towards addressing fear and other emotions in young children. Partnerships, as this term is used in this research can be defined as interaction and participation between teachers, families, children and community members to achieve greater understanding of children's experiences, qualities, needs and backgrounds and to implement action based on this understanding to further enhance children's development and learning (Arthur et al, 1999; Dwyer, 1989). This can be achieved through partners sharing information about children's fears and other emotions to develop an increased awareness of the emotional spectrum of young children, and through sharing ideas about best practice in responding to these emotions as a way of helping young children to understand and develop appropriate ways of expressing these emotions. Through supporting children's growing understanding of emotions, we encourage the development of emotional literacy, which helps children to achieve both within the school setting and in life in general.

Introduction

This is an emotional world, magnified by recent world events in Bali, the Middle East, the United States and now in Melbourne, where university students were the target of a violent rampage. As adults, we watch these events unfold in the media, wonder whom and where will be the next target, and sleep restlessly. Our thoughts are charged with emotion and uncertainty about the future.

These emotions haven't missed young children, who grapple to make sense of what has happened in the world and in their own lives, often through withdrawal, clinging to caregivers, "acting out" behaviours or attempting to verbalise their thoughts to adults and other children. From within the parameters of their limited experience, they must come to terms with events and emotions from which even the most caring adult cannot protect them. To facilitate this growing understanding of emotions, it is our responsibility as teachers, parents and community members to recognise emotion in young children and to respond to them in ways that facilitate emotional growth for them.

Fear is a particularly powerful emotion, in that while there are positive effects of fear, its negative effects on children's learning and development can be devastating. Children's perception and problem solving behaviour can deteriorate through fear (Izard, 1991; Mackie & Hamilton, 1993). Their self-esteem and social interactions can also be adversely affected.
Garber & Dodge, 1991; Lazarus, 1991) and unresolved fear can lead to phobias in adulthood (Kindt, Bierman and Brosschot, 1997).

As adults, we may not always recognise fear or other emotions in young children. Further, our responses to fear may vary depending on our knowledge of the child, our own experiences with the emotion, and our role in the child's life. For example, while parents recognise fear of the dark in their children, teachers, who have little experience of the dark with their preschool students, may be unaware of this fear. They might therefore be surprised when the classroom is darkened for rest time or a video and a child becomes upset or, when reading Franklin in the Dark to the class a child to closes his eyes and covers his ears. Teachers, on the other hand, may recognise the fear that some children have of being teased, while parents may be unaware of this fear. Children, themselves, report fears of heights, of deep water and of falling from high places, but in many cases neither parents nor teachers are aware of these fears.

Adults' responses to children's fears vary, and may not always be effective in helping children understand and address their fears. For example, during morning tea, preschool teacher Maria reassured 4 year old Kevin that his parents would be picking him up at 3:00. When this didn't work and Kevin continued sobbing, she said, "I can see some chooks over there. If you'll eat your banana, we can go look at them." Kevin stopped crying, looked towards the chickens and chewing the last of his banana went with Melissa to see them. Melissa's persistence eventually led to distracting Kevin, but it only postponed his fear. Later, that morning, Kevin returned to his thoughts about being separated from his parents and once again began sobbing and asking to go home. Other strategies, and learning a bit more about Kevin's home life and possible reasons for this fear may have helped Melissa to find more effective ways to respond to Kevin's distress. Much of this can be achieved through partnerships - with parents, other teachers and members of the community.

By working together in partnerships, teachers, parents and children can learn to recognise, understand and respond to children's fears and other emotions in ways that best facilitate the development of emotional literacy in young children. Emotional literacy involves the recognition and understanding of emotion in oneself and in others and the ability to manage one's emotions well, resulting in success in learning and all other areas of life (Goleman, 1995). Partnerships have been found to result in greater understanding and communication between home and school, fewer crises and misunderstandings, better student confidence and more goodwill between partners (Dwyer, 1989). In early childhood education, partnerships with families are said to be an essential component of effective programming (Arthur et al, 1999; Feeney et al, 2001). In the Reggio Emilia approach, participation by families is considered as important to educators as the participation of the children (Arthur et al, 1999).

Methodology

This paper is based on a study of the fears of 3 to 5 year olds in preschool settings. Participants included forty-five children, their parents and teachers. Parents, children and teachers were asked to respond to a checklist of items that the 45 focal children may be afraid of and to add any items to the list. They were then asked to describe how these children display fear.

Parents were then asked to describe how they respond to their children's fears, and all three groups - teachers, parents and children - were asked to describe how teachers respond to children's fears. They were further asked to evaluate how effective they deemed teachers' responses to children's fears to be and whether they could suggest further strategies for
responding to children's fears and helping children to develop understandings of fear and other emotions.

Their answers indicated that there are discrepancies in the recognition of fear, and responses to children's fear, and that some of the ways that are currently used to respond to children's fears are not considered effective. They further indicated that one way of addressing these issues is through developing partnerships, where understandings about fear and strategies to address fear are shared and developed between partners.

**Recognition of Fear**

Young children experience a number of fears, which were reported to various degrees by all three participant groups. Parents as a group reported a much greater and more varied number of fears than did either teachers or children. Table 1 (below) illustrates the five most common fears reported by each participant group.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1 - Most commonly reported fears</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Teachers (%)</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preschool (59%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being teased (39%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New people/ strangers (32%)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Being left alone (26%)</td>
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<td>Doing something new (24%)</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

In general teachers' reported children's fears much less frequently than parents or children themselves. Teachers' most commonly reported fear - fear of preschool, was only mentioned by fifty-nine percent of teachers, and their next most reported fear - fear of being teased, by thirty-nine percent. Teachers' reporting of children's fears dropped dramatically, from fifty-nine percent for the most reported fear to two percent for the least reported fear. On the whole, teachers seemed to be the group that were least aware of children's fears. Preschool teacher, Ruth, explained, "The fear is probably something that is not within my experience with the child; our shared experience."

Teachers' lack of awareness of children's fears is further supported by the kinds of fears they reported. Nearly all fears were in some associated with preschool. The six highest
ranking fears according to teachers were: fear of preschool, fear of being teased, fear of new people or strangers, fear of being left alone, fear of doing something new and fear of punishment. As teachers’ awareness of the children they teach are based primarily on their observations and interactions within the preschool environment, the above are probably the only fears they would witness. Fears that occur outside of preschool, such as fear of dogs or fear of rides, may only become apparent to teachers through reports from either the child or the parent; if indeed these incidents are reported to them.

Parents, on the other hand, were less aware than teachers of some fears, which may be fears that occur primarily within the preschool setting. These include fear of being teased and fear of attending preschool. Children, too, reported fears that they experienced of which some teachers and parents seemed to lacked awareness. These included fear of fear of deep water, fear of fire, fear of burglary, fear of heights, fear of being in a fight and fear of adults arguing.

Table 2 (below) shows the percentage of participants in each group who reported the existence of particular fears in the focal children, demonstrating the differences in each group’s awareness of particular fears.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Items</th>
<th>Parents who reported item</th>
<th>Children who reported item</th>
<th>Teachers reports of this item</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fear of preschool or babysitter</td>
<td>53%</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>59%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fear of being lost</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>53%</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fear of being alone</td>
<td>68%</td>
<td>53%</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fear of loud noises</td>
<td>66%</td>
<td>62%</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fear of new people/strangers</td>
<td>51%</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>32%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fear of doing something new</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fear of the dark</td>
<td>70%</td>
<td>47%</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fear of accidents, illness or death</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>49%</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fear of doctor, dentist, hospital</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fear of deep water</td>
<td>53%</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fear of fire</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Fear of rides at fetes or fairs & 36% & 24% & 2% \\
Fear of heights or falling from high places & 28% & 38% & 2% \\
Fear of burglary & 17% & 44% & 4% \\
Fear of being teased & 28% & 36% & 39% \\
Fear of being in a fight & 11% & 44% & 9% \\
Fear of making mistakes & 21% & 31% & 17% \\
Fear of adults arguing & 34% & 44% & 4% \\
Fear of insects, spiders and snakes & 62% & 31% & 15% \\
Fear of dogs or other animals & 47% & 33% & 13% \\
Fear of bad dreams or nightmares & 57% & 49% & 17% \\
Fear of ghosts, monsters or spirits & 34% & 44% & 15% \\

While each participant group demonstrated awareness of particular fears in the focal children, each group reported awareness of some fears that were not strongly reported by the other groups. This seems to indicate the presence of context-specific knowledge that is available to some but not all participants, who consequently would act in isolation, based on their limited knowledge. In a partnership approach, all three participant groups would interact together to share their knowledge for the purposes of achieving deeper understanding of children's experiences and thus more effective ways of responding.

**Clarity of Fear Expression**

As well as differences in awareness of the fears that children experience, each participant group was not equally aware of ways that children demonstrate fear. Fear can be displayed through physiological changes, such as rapid heart beating, shortness of breath and the skin becoming pale and sweaty (Darwin, 1872; Ekman & Friesen, 1975; Izard, 1991; Goleman, 1995; Ledoux, 1998). It can also be displayed through facial expression (Ekman & Friesen, 1975; Fewtrell & O'Connor, 1995; Izard, 1991); verbalization or vocalisation (Bowlby, 1973; Lazarus, 1991; Watson, 1970); withdrawal from the feared object and drawing closer to the attachment figure (Bowlby, 1973).

Despite the variety of ways that fear can be displayed, participants in this study mainly reported vocalisations, moving away from the feared object and clinging to attachment figures. No participant reported physiological displays such as rapid breathing and palid skin.
Children were the only participant group who named facial expression as a way that they display fear. Four-year old Evan said that he shows fear "by opening my mouth." Many other children used facial expressions to describe how they display fear rather than words. Adults may either take this form of fear expression for granted, or need to be alerted to it.

Parents reported that children display fear by crying, withdrawing and clinging to them. Teachers reported these behaviours as well as screaming, asking to go home and becoming aggressive. Teachers' additional fear display reports could be indicative of their knowledge of child development and their experience with large numbers of children. While these factors could enhance teachers' recognition of fear behaviours, many parents may not recognise behaviours such as screaming and aggression as indicators of fear. But some fears were clear to parents, despite a seeming lack of overt display. Hayley, mother of 5 year old Lenny and 4 year old Sam, noted: "I think some fears [teachers] don't necessarily know about unless they're a visible sort of fear in the sense that someone is crying and it comes out."

While each of the three participant groups reported some forms of fear display, no group reported the breadth of fear displays described in the literature. However, each group offered insights into how children display fear that would benefit the other groups. Again, through working in partnerships, teachers, parents and children could benefit from each other's perceptions of children's expressions of fear and other emotions, and so be better equipped to respond effectively.

Responding to Fear

In this research, a number of responses to children's fear were reported by parents, children and teachers. These included: verbal responses, such as talking to and reassuring the child; physical responses such as picking up the child or staying near her/him; modelling non-fearful behaviour; taking action against the feared object (for example, by killing a spider); using teaching strategies (such as talking to children at eye level); and planning activities to address children's fears. As with fear awareness and fear displays, all three participant groups varied in their reporting of these strategies.

Parents' responses to children's fears included a number of verbal strategies, such as offering safety, reassurance, acknowledging the fear, empathy and discussion. They also reported physical responses such as picking up and hugging or comforting the child. Some said that they would model non-fearful behaviour, or use some form of action to respond to their children's fears. For example, Hayley, mother of three year old Sam, said that after consoling Sam and acknowledging his fear of spiders, she would ask him if they could go to look at the spider together. "If he says 'yes, that's fine,' then we go and have a look at the spider together."

When reporting teachers' responses to children's fears, all three participant groups had different ideas. Children mainly reported that teachers take some form of action as a response to their fears. For example, five year old Larry noted that when children are afraid of the dark at rest time, teachers "turn the lights on." A number of children also reported verbal responses from teachers to their fears. Four year old Allan noted that when he is afraid, "they [the teachers] talk to you." Other children said that teachers stay near to fearful children and one said that they "carry you."

Parents reported that teachers respond to children's fears in mainly verbal ways, such as explaining the fear to the child and offering the child safety. A few parents reported physical responses by teachers, such as keeping the child within close proximity. Yet teachers reported using a number of strategies to respond to children's fears, beyond those reported
by parents. These included verbal responses such as reassuring, discussing and explaining; physical responses such as keeping the fearful child close by or giving the child a hug; modelling non-fearful behaviour; and taking various forms of action, such as accompanying a child to the door to wave goodbye to the parent. However, teachers also reported using teaching strategies, such as allowing the child personal space and time-out, and encouraging the child to draw her/his fears. Some teachers described observing children and planning lessons based on children's fears. Lessons included reading and discussing books about fear, drawing or painting the feared object, dramatising the fear, or using dolls and figures to talk about the fear.

**Effectiveness of Fear Responses**

While many participants reported that responses by teachers were effective in helping children to deal with their fear, some reports suggested that teachers' responses could be more effective. For example, Maggie, mother of 4 year old Curt, said of teachers' responses to Curt's separation fear:

> In terms of improvement, I don't know that it's been particularly effective. He does appear to be getting slightly better, but in terms of the immediate effect, I think that their reassurance helps him. It certainly helps me to not feel so guilty about leaving. But he doesn't seem to be changing very much in this constant wanting not to come.

Perhaps teachers could be doing more to address Curt's situation, and this might come about through learning more about Curt and working together with his parents to develop strategies to address his fear. Commenting on 3 year old Cindy's fears of being in preschool, mother Leona said:

> I think the comfort they give her is great and I think she responds to that comfort, but she's actually stuck of what to do at this point in terms of inserting within group frameworks. She just doesn't seem to know how to do that. I actually think there should be a tiny bit more facilitation [on the part of the teachers].

In a partnership approach, information about the child would be shared, so the teacher would be aware of the child's home life. Reciprocally, the family would be aware of the structure and philosophy of the program and of the child's participation in the program. Together partners, and this could include the child, other early childhood professionals and support personnel, could explore and develop strategies for responding to fear and other emotions. Parents might choose to participate in the program in some way that would enhance the child's preschool experience. Community members might offer information, advice and support in emotion education. Children might offer insights into their emotions that adults would otherwise have overlooked. It becomes a "win-win" situation when people work together in partnerships to address issues of importance to children's health and wellbeing.

**A Partnership Approach**

In this research, partnerships was the most cited strategy by parents and teachers as a way to help teachers respond to children's fears. Termed a "caring community" (Goleman, 1995, p. 280), partnerships between parents, teachers, children and members of the community could be established to share understandings of children's emotions, emotion expression and ways of responding to emotions. All groups would benefit from other partners' insights and experiences into the range of fears and emotions that young children experience and
the ways they express those fears and emotions. Norman, father of 4 year old twins, Lewis and Kyle, described the importance of partnerships:

I think it really has to come from more of a planned approach, as in talking to the adults at the start of the year, try and get more of a profile on the child's behaviour, and trying to work out where the areas of development are. And then reporting back on it. It will only work if there's a two-way thing between the teacher and the parents so you [the parent] can model it to the kid, rather than just have a standard approach and only be reactive for when the kid wants something. By then it's probably either too late or you'll just hush over the problem.

There are many reasons to establish partnerships. The family is the most significant influence on the child's development and wellbeing and therefore an integral part of the learning process. The benefit to all partners is evident through improved home/school relationships that focus on the best interests of the child (Arthur et al, 1999). To educate a child devoid of this awareness is to limit the potential for effective, holistic pedagogy. A home/school continuity can not only support children's learning and development but can also provide opportunities for partners to share information to give a broader picture of the child and to share strategies that support individual children's growing emotion understanding.

While this research focused on parents, teachers and children, partnerships with other community members were noted by some as important in addressing fear and other emotions in young children. Preschool teacher, Jane, noted the importance of involving other community members when she said, "Police visits, excursions...it's really just following through in your normal program, but if [fear or other emotion] incidents arise, you look round at the resources in the community, talk with other staff members. Partnerships with the community can include: other teachers; administrators; services that directly support early childhood education, such as the Department of Families, Out of Hours Care, and Department of Health; community services such as police, fire fighters, ambulance officers, postal workers, medical practitioners; and the extended community such as other schools, TAFE, university. Each of these may have something to offer to support understanding and addressing fear and other emotions in young children.

To some extent, partnerships develop naturally. A teacher who is welcoming of parents and has an "open door" policy encourages partnerships. However, not all families may be forthcoming. Often partnerships need to be nurtured through invitations to participate in special events, information and resource sharing activities, surveys of their ideas about curriculum, or actively getting to know families and valuing their ideas and contributions. Likewise community members need to be identified, valued and encouraged to participate in the program. Through these efforts partnerships can be developed that support emotion understanding and continued learning and help to develop emotionally literate children.

Conclusion

Partnerships that develop to address fear and other emotions can work towards understanding and appropriate expression of these emotions. This can include learning to use the face and body to express the emotions; learning words to describe the emotion; using art, drama, music or movement to express the emotion; or talking to others and sharing ideas about emotions. Through partnerships with families and the community, a broader understanding can develop, responsibility for addressing the emotion is not left to one or another partner, and ideas and strategies become more fluid and innovative. Goleman (1995), sums up the goals for partnerships in emotion understanding and
education as follows: "The optimal design of emotional literacy programs is to begin early, be age-appropriate, run throughout the school years and intertwine efforts at school, at home, and in the community" (p. 281).

Bibliography


