

Feeling Is First

The Golden Rule of Working with Children in Libraries

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My parents were never big talkers when I was growing up. Dad, especially, was a questioner and a listener—an occupational benefit, I suppose, as a clinical child psychologist and family therapist.

He gardened our thoughts and emotions—three daughters, so there was a lot to grow—patiently, tending both the wild brambles and the delicious fruits with the gentle rain of his attention and the loving warmth of his presence.

It did not matter where we were or what we were doing.

On the front porch as the sun set, eating bowls of ice cream: us talking, talking, talking, he and my mother listening, listening, listening.

Taking a walk in the neighborhood, eating dinner as a family, driving in the car: always the same, interested questions and reflective comments.

Oh, that must have been really scary, huh? . . . What did you think when he said that? . . . What do you plan on doing if that happens? . . . Did I get that right, or is it something else? Tell me . . .

Underneath the questions, the meaning—you are important. Your feelings matter because you matter. I am interested in you, and I love you.

You cannot fully appreciate or measure the value this kind of quiet acknowledgement gives to growing souls, the strength and power it knits into your very bones—a kind of superpower calcium inoculation that prevents future osteoporosis.



Dr. Robert Clapp, Laura (Clapp) Raphael's father, interacts with a child as part of his role as clinical psychologist for the Children's Medical Center in 1974. (Check out those sideburns!) He was always a patient listener, gardening our thoughts and emotions.

I was thinking about this in the past few months, not just because my father died after a long illness, though, of course, this is what you do when you experience such a great loss—think and remember.

No, I thought about it because of a specific incident my husband and I witnessed outside of a Marble Slab Creamery ice cream store.

A mother told her daughter that she could run through a water fountain with other kids, then immediately called her back. "Nevermind," the mother said. "I changed my mind. We have to pick up Sally, and I don't want you to get wet and we have to go all the way home first and then to pick her up." It was logical, and I felt the mother's three-dimensional parenting chess of the moment, where schedules, tasks, time, and space itself must be carefully examined and calculated to make it all work out.

The girl was upset, but she was controlling it admirably until something even more terrible happened—she dropped her ice-cream cone. "Two-second rule!" the mother cried, desperate. But it was too late. Immediate tears.



Laura Raphael, MA, MLIS, started her professional career as a middle school Reading and Language Arts teacher before turning to public libraries. Since 2001, she has worked in public libraries in a variety of capacities, most recently as Children's Services Coordinator for the Tulsa City-County (OK) Library System.

"It's okay! It's fine to eat!" the mother pleaded. The girl's wailing became louder and more plaintive. "Stop crying! It's really not such a big deal as all this!"

The mother cycled through anger, exasperation, disgust, minimizing. The girl stayed inconsolable. I felt for the mother. I felt for the girl. I felt for the rest of us, an unwilling audience to this one-act tragedy.

And I thought about how my dad would have handled it. Because libraries are my lifeblood, I also thought about what it meant to me as a children's librarian.

The bottom line is that Dad would have tried to acknowledge the child's feelings first. He would have tried to put into words the girl's despair and disappointment, and then he would have listened.

"Wow, this is really terrible, isn't it? You wanted to go play in the water fountain, and then this happened. You really didn't want your ice cream to fall on the ground! Is that right?"

And that is the Golden Rule of working with children in any setting, but especially libraries, where their experience can have such a lasting impact on attitudes toward books, reading, and learning.

You listen first. You reflect. You honor feelings, and you honor children for those feelings.

More than anything, this is what I want the children's staff I train in my library system to understand and to do. Sure, I am an enormous advocate of passing on best early literacy practices and being familiar with great children's literature and how to conduct successful readers' advisory interviews with kids.

But all of that can go in the trash heap if children's librarians don't remember the supreme power of acknowledging a child's feelings in the moment, especially when kids are crying, angry, or showing a thousand other inappropriate behaviors in the library.

"It sounds like you are really sad that storytime is over. We had so much fun, and it's hard to stop, isn't it?"

"Gosh, you are so excited to be in the library, you find yourself running right to the picture books!"

"You really like this doll, don't you? Her hair is so pretty, and I noticed you were rocking her to sleep. You want to take her home, is that it?"

We must set boundaries in libraries for children. It is absolutely our responsibility as caring adults to do so, and I am not advocating a free-for-all, if-it-feels-good approach to the inevitable misbehaviors kids show in libraries. If a child is throwing LEGOs at another child's head, you don't give her more blocks.

But you do give voice to the feeling before giving the rule.

Acknowledging their fear, anger, or excitement is not just a strategy to make the library quiet and calm. It communicates the essence of what my dad expressed. Underneath the comments, the deeper meaning: You are important. Your feelings matter because you matter. I am interested in you.

That's the library I want every child to experience, and that you can create by simply listening. &

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