Reframing Discipline
Connecting with Every Child
Key to Successful Discipline

“When I don’t have a relationship with a child and I try to establish a boundary or set a limit, it’s a lot harder. There’s a lot more resistance.”

A child with whom we have a relationship – who feels valued and accepted – is much more likely to work with us when there are difficulties. It’s just natural to be helpful and cooperative with those we feel care about us. But developing a relationship with a child we are constantly at odds with may sound impossible.

Building Relationships by Acknowledging Children

Verbalizing to children that we notice them, letting children know that we care about what they feel, think and do.

Acknowledging What Children Do and Create
- I see that you used all three colors to make your picture
- I notice that you have spent a long time working on your building
- You thought of a new way to wear that hat

These simple statements, expressed with interesting and enthusiasm, communicate to children that we value what they are doing. A child’s interpretation of our acknowledgement looks like this:

Child’s action – Our acknowledgement – What I do is important – I must be important

Children we continually receive this kind of acknowledgement feel that we value them.

Acknowledging What Children Feel

Children’s feelings erupt quickly and intensely. Saying things such as “if you cry, it will hurt worse’ tell a child to try to stop feeling. But he can’t. Like all of us, children experiencing strong emotions are totally involved in them. Acknowledging feelings can help children work through them and move on.

Statements that acknowledge feelings look like this:
- Oh, clean up time came too soon for you. It’s hard to stop playing isn’t it?
- Your face is telling me that you are really angry with Sarah.
- Where does it hurt? Show me? Oh, on your arm, over here?

Acknowledging feelings doesn’t mean children won’t still have to clean up, stop hitting or share a toy. But it does tell them that we understand their frustrations,
anger or hurt. Children respond to us when they feel this validation. They begin to feel a connection with us:

*Child’s feelings – Acknowledgement – My teacher understands – My teacher cares about me*

Although we are concerned and sympathetic to others, we may not have learned the language of acknowledging feelings. Practicing acknowledging statements can help build bridges to children whose behavior we find difficult. This is the starting point for real change.

“One of the most powerful things is just being with a child and letting them know what you are there and seeing them for who they are.”

Acknowledging feelings is an important way we can connect with children. Young children have intense feelings and often don’t know what to do with them, and sometimes we don’t either. When we learn to acknowledge these feelings, we will find that it makes a difference. We will be supporting the child “in the moment” and our caring with strengthen the relationship between us.

Acknowledging feelings is …
- Describing what we see
- Giving words to feelings
- Really listening
- Reflecting back what the child says
- Showing empathy and concern

Acknowledging feelings is NOT…
- Hurrying the child to get over it
- Denying feelings
- Blaming or correcting
- Redirecting the child’s attention