

The Happiest Preschool:

Transforming Early Childhood Education

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Preschools and kindergartens will become the happiest environment for children when they adopt innovative thinking about the value of active playful learning, have only developmentally appropriate expectations, manage behavior solely with kindness, and, in general, foster healthy social-emotional development and create a joyful, positive classroom. This forward-looking approach is exemplified by Smart Love,^{®1} an original and empirically tested psychology that is the guiding principle at the Natalie G. Heineman Smart Love Preschool in Chicago.²

The S.M.A.R.T. Approach

A child's relationship with a teacher is the most important determinant of the quality of social-emotional learning, because social-emotional learning occurs most comprehensively by imitation. The human brain has multiple inborn mirror-neuron systems that drive humans to comprehend and imitate the actions and intentions of others.³ Since children will imitate how they are treated, the Smart Love approach is based on that reality.



The S.M.A.R.T. acronym reflects the guidance of: **S**tay Positive, **M**odel Kindness, **A**cknowledge and **A**cept All Feelings, **L**oving **R**egulation of Behavior, and **T**ime With a Teacher.

- **Stay Positive**

Teachers stay positive regardless of what children are doing or saying, with the result that children lose their fear of negative consequences and trust teachers with their self-doubts and concerns.

- **Model Kindness**

When teachers model kindness and respond positively to all requests to play or to help, children imitate them. Thus, a culture of caring and cooperation is created in the classroom. Teachers are often told not to help children with academic or personal efforts they can accomplish by themselves. But refusing help when asked simply makes children feel unsupported. It may foster independence, but not in a positive sense. Telling children that they don't need help with a competency you know they have ignores age-appropriate emotional needs for adult caring and involvement. In the S.M.A.R.T. approach, teachers demonstrate that they are always available to hear and respond to children's wishes.

Teacher: Larry is a new 3-year-old at summer camp. He is actively engaged and likes participating in group fun. Every time it is Larry's turn to wash his hands for snack he will say, "I don't know how to wash my hands." We always respond that we would be happy to help. I said, "It seems you like it when I help. You don't have to say you can't do it. All you have to do is ask a teacher to do it with you." Larry smiled broadly and held out his hands to wash them with me.

- **Acknowledge and Accept All Feelings**

When teachers acknowledge and accept all feelings, it shows children that feelings don't have consequences and so are different from actions. Unfortunately, most social-emotional learning approaches lack the all-important modeling of kind and accepting responses by teachers. Too often, social-emotional learning devolves into conflict resolution or techniques for neutralizing or suppressing upset feelings. Conflict resolution usually takes the form of lectures about sharing, being nice, cooperating, and taking the other child's point of view. Coping mechanisms include meditation, self-isolation, breathing exercises, and mindfulness. But lecturing children about being nice to

others breeds resentment that resurfaces when teachers aren't around, and teaching coping mechanisms conveys that upset and angry feelings are unwanted and that children should learn to suppress them rather than acknowledge and understand them in the context of a caring relationship. When you acknowledge and accept children's unpleasant feelings, children learn the social-emotional lesson that they never have to be ashamed of how they feel, and they become comfortable with all of themselves.

- **Loving Regulation**

Loving regulation is the Smart Love approach to managing children's behavior. Teachers regulate behavior when necessary, but do so gently and kindly without attaching negative consequences. The focus is on helping children understand what led to the behavior that needs regulating. Traditional behavior management alienates children because teachers stand apart and dispense disapproval or sanctions. In contrast, Loving Regulation teaches children to turn to teachers when upset, shows that you can disagree with important others and still be friends, and removes the ideas of punishment and negativity from behavior management.

- **Time With a Teacher**

When children are upset or out of control, they are never isolated; instead, they get time with a teacher. This approach is in contrast to the prevalent practice of giving time-outs, which sends the message that the child should go away from others when they are upset rather than seek help in a caring relationship.



Teacher: When some of the children were trying to get me to go to jail, I made an open-ended remark, saying, "It's not fun to be locked up. I don't want to be by myself. What did I do that was bad?" One of the children said, "You were rude and talked back." I asked if the boys ever talked in ways adults didn't like and, if so, what happened. The children immediately said they were given time-outs at home, and that they hated being sent to their rooms. I said, "It sounds like when you get a time-out, it feels like being put in jail." Both children agreed. I said, "We don't do time-outs here and maybe we could talk to your parents about not doing them at home."

Time with a teacher can turn into a wonderful opportunity for connection, even if it starts as a way to moderate a challenging moment. The message is that the relationship with a teacher is always available to help children feel better and rejoin the group when they are able.

Classroom Management

In the happiest preschool, classroom management is focused on creating an enjoyable learning environment in which children can make decisions, be spontaneous and creative, interact enjoyably with peers, express themselves, enhance their curiosity, and learn through play. This classroom culture allows children to thrive and reach academic benchmarks while having fun and preserving their enthusiasm for learning.

No Need for Rewards. Teachers are often taught that rewards, such as gold stars, extra privileges, and praise for achievements, are good ways to motivate children. In reality, rewards often backfire and are counter-indicated as motivators.⁴ Effort, not success, is the real goal of learning as an ongoing process. In a classroom where there is an economy of incentives, rewards become the focus of children's efforts rather than the pleasure of learning or cooperating. Rewards as a way of stopping unwanted behavior ("Sit down and be quiet and then you can . . .") are about compliance, not understanding. Rewards, whether they are used as incentives or reinforcement, devalue the social or academic activity they are supposedly incentivizing by conveying that the effort is not sufficiently important to be engaged in for itself. Rewards also create hierarchies in the classroom and can upset and discourage children who aren't getting them. Also, some children learn to misbehave in order to get rewarded for behaving better later.

Keeping Rules to a Minimum. One factor that contributes to teacher burnout is having to spend a lot of class time enforcing rules. Teachers are instructed to make children sit down and do worksheets, walk quietly, use inside voices, socialize, use materials a certain way, and take turns using the bathroom. In contrast, the happiest preschool has only three rules:

1. No hurting yourself or others physically or emotionally.
2. No grabbing.
3. No damaging the classroom.

Infractions of these rules are always responded to with loving regulation or another of the S.M.A.R.T. skills, rather than with lectures or sanctions. For example, if a child grabs another's toy, a teacher might say, "We need to give it back, but I can see how much fun you thought it would be to play with it. Come with me. I'm sure we can find another fun toy."

When kindergartens and preschools are thoroughly rule-governed, an atmosphere develops in which children are frequently in the wrong. The misconception is that a multitude of rules makes for an orderly classroom, and chaos would occur without them. In reality, the opposite is true. Most rules are neither necessary nor age-appropriate, and when children understandably have difficulty abiding by them, they get in trouble and teachers must spend much of the class time trying to create and maintain order. Teachers feel bad when the amount of time they have to spend enforcing rules reduces the time available for teaching and connecting. Furthermore, unnecessary rules interfere with children's spontaneity, enthusiasm, closeness to teachers, friendships, and joy of learning.

In contrast, in the happiest preschool, there are no rules about bathroom use or requirements that children use the potty; loud, enthusiastic voices are considered a sign of positive involvement; transitions are made fun with singing and games; there are spontaneous groups but no formal groups; children are not forced to include others in play; and polite responses are not mandated.

Making Requirements Fun. Preschool children encounter numerous requests on a daily basis, such as washing hands, transitioning to another activity, and putting on indoor or outdoor clothes. All of these requests can and should be handled with S.M.A.R.T. practices so that they don't turn into power struggles or other negative kinds of interactions. Teachers can make agreeing to the request fun and companionable rather than unpleasant. For example, waiting patiently is not an age-appropriate competency for preschoolers, yet their inability to act more grown up than they are often brings disapproval and sanctions. With a little effort, teachers can positively and creatively support children who need to wait.

Teacher: Brett asked me to read a story in the cozy corner. A few other children wanted to join. I opened the book and Brett said, "No, I want to play doctor instead." But other children were now waiting for the story, so I let Brett know that since more children wanted to join the story, I would read this one to everyone before we went to play doctor. He started to look very upset about having to wait, so I said, "You know sometimes when I am at the doctor's office, I have to wait in the waiting room for the doctor to see me, so I read while I wait for my appointment." Brett smiled and said, "OK, let's read our story and then I'll take you to our appointment."

Play-Based Learning That Is Actually Playful

Genuine play is defined as activities that children choose solely out of interest and for enjoyment. One of the reasons for the inappropriate preschool focus on structured academic learning is the belief that children will not learn enough through play.



Even play-based schools have absorbed this misconception and mix free play with directed play. Directed play is not true play because, although play materials are involved, children are told what to do with them and are expected to comply. In the happiest preschool, learning playfully builds entirely on children's interests. The key is that teachers participate in the play and introduce learning content where appropriate, but children never feel pressured or forced. When children learn to read, write, add, and subtract is not as important as whether they love these activities and want to do more of them.

All subject content can be based on individual children's interests and made fun. For example, writing is usually taught from the board or from worksheets. Children are asked to copy letters, but these have no meaning for them as they can't do anything with them or get anything out of them. As a result, many children hate writing exercises and have no desire to pursue writing in their free time. In the happiest preschool, students learn writing in order to facilitate their play, and use it to communicate in new and interesting ways, such as making lists of classmates to invite to a pretend birthday party. The same is true with reading. When teachers avoid formal worksheets and universal instruction, they can individualize how they help children learn to read. Students should want to read because they perceive that words convey something important to them.

Assessment

In the happiest preschool, there is no formal testing because it interferes with the true objectives of preschool, which are to enhance children's curiosity, confidence, and love of learning. Testing confronts children with what they don't know, invites invidious comparisons with other children, and suggests that teachers have a predetermined idea of where they should be academically rather than applauding where they are. All benchmarks in reading, math, science, and other subjects can be reached in play and evaluated under the radar without focusing children's attention on achievement. When talking to parents,

teachers can emphasize the progress a child is making (e.g., “When your child first came, she was having trouble recognizing her written name, and now she knows it”). It can take a leap of faith to trust that children will assimilate the necessary skills from interest and enthusiasm in play, but this is exactly how children learn best.

Helping Teachers Distinguish Personal and Caregiving Motives

In the happiest preschool, teachers learn to differentiate between personal and caregiving motives. Caregiving motives prompt responses to children in ways that are developmentally facilitative. Personal motives reflect how teachers are feeling rather than how children are feeling and what they need. All teachers have both sets of motives. The skill is to be aware of both, but only respond to children with the caregiving motives. Often, this distinction isn’t recognized. In fact, teachers are encouraged to share personal feelings with children. A lot of harm can be done to children when teachers communicate negative personal motives by saying, “I don’t like it when you . . .” or “It makes me feel angry when you don’t. . . .” When approval is conditional, children tend to hide behaviors they know teachers won’t like; feel ashamed of their inability to live up to expectations; feel angry at, or alienated from, teachers; and, in some cases, provoke negative responses in order to get attention. One way to facilitate making the correct choice is to ask yourself, “What does this child need from me right now in the way of kindness and understanding?”

Conclusion

Even when teachers are in a school that doesn’t allow for the implementation of the entire S.M.A.R.T. program (i.e., there is no choice about testing and good scores are necessary for a school’s survival), adopting any of these ideas will improve the classroom culture, benefit students, and make teachers’ work more enjoyable and successful.

Moreover, *any* application of Smart Love principles will help children who are underserved and environmentally deprived or traumatized. When, as often happens, these children are met with increased controls, demands for order, and inappropriate academic and social-emotional expectations, they become ever more unhappy and disinterested in learning. Many are ultimately expelled. The S.M.A.R.T. approach offers all children a caring, helpful relationship with their teachers as a gateway to learning and a model of relating to themselves and others. When children come to preschool suffering from environmental stressors, the relationship with their teachers can be a real life-preserver, regardless of the constraints put on schools.

Notes:

¹ Pieper, M. H., & Pieper, W. J. (2011). *Smart Love: The comprehensive guide to understanding, regulating, and enjoying your child* (2nd ed.). Smart Love Press.

² As of this writing, the preschool has been in existence for over 13 years (www.smartlovefamily.org).

³ Szalavitz, M., & Perry, B. D. (2021). *Born for love: Why empathy is essential and endangered*. Harper Collins.

⁴ Kohn, A. (1999). *Punished by rewards: The trouble with gold stars, incentive plans, A’s, praise, and other bribes*. Houghton Mifflin. Mueller, C. M., & Dweck, C. S. (1998). Praise for intelligence can undermine children’s motivation and performance. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 75(1), 33-52.

Note: This article is excerpted and adapted from The Happiest Preschool: A Manual for Teachers, Martha Heineman Pieper, Ph.D., and Kelly Perez, Smart Love Press, LLC, 2024. The Manual illustrates progressive transformational principles in more than 270 teacher-student interactions that teachers can learn from and follow. www.smartlovepress.com

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