

What I Learned from Children

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This is my first ever experience of working with children as a teacher. There are 10 children between the age group of 4 ½ - 5 years in UKG class. I spend the whole day with children, talk to them formally and informally and participate in various activities with them. Hence there are plenty of opportunities for me to understand them deeply throughout the day. Though I have been working with the children for past six months only, but because of the new experiences with them every day, I am able to understand children better and better. While interacting and working with the children on a regular basis, I felt that we adults have a lot of misconceptions about them which, I find, are seen in the classroom. In this article I am trying to explain what I have learned from children especially in terms of developing more understanding of children and breaking many misconceptions.

Children do cry while going to the school. This a natural phenomena for us. The children are deeply attached to their homes and all of a sudden we forcibly send them to an alien place called school which is like a different planet for them. There are very few things in the classroom with which the child feels connected. And then they start crying. They are intimidated, threatened and made to sit in a classroom/school. The question is – can learning become a pleasant process in such an environment? What I have learned is that the children are naturally interested in learning provided you give them a good environment. Then they will never want to leave school. When I started teaching, I also had the same impression that small children often cry while coming to school. Gradually I realised that if the school environment is friendly and they can associate their homes with school then they come to school happily. I remember the first day of my class, a child came to the class crying bitterly. It was with great difficulty that his father brought him to the school and left him in the classroom. But the same day the child was not ready to go back home after the school. I did not understand the reason for this that day though I knew that the attractive environment of the classroom and toys attract children but there was something more

important than this. I observed that during play time and eating time this child used to speak a lot but when we sang or something was asked during circle time, he would be scared. I talked to his mother about it. She said that they were sending him to a tuition centre to prepare him for school life and he used to get beaten up there. He used to plead with folded hands not to be sent to the tuition centre. The madam at the centre would say that she had corrected many children by beating them because that is the way children learn. He will also become alright. I was baffled and did not understand what kind of improvement the madam was talking about since this child was ready to learn on his own. Anyway, the mother stopped sending him for tuitions after our talks. She told that earlier he used to cry to go for tuition but now he himself gets ready to come to school. Nobody had to dress him up or do any such thing for this little four and half-year-old child in the morning. His mother also told me that if they had to go somewhere and the child had to take leave, he would insist that school should be informed about his absence only then he would go to grandmother's house. So more than an attractive classroom, it was the fear free environment, respect and recognition of the child in the classroom that created interest towards school in his mind. There is one more instance related to this child. He was trying to write his name for several days. Before the children came to school, their names were written on their almirahs. There were hand made folders with photographs, a slate and a card with their names and pictures. These were given to each child on the first day when they were introduced to each other. No separate activity was done to teach them to write their names but in a few days, it was found that the children were writing their names everywhere. Before starting any work they used to write their names first. Perhaps they were doing this because though they knew it was their name but they liked to write it. This child copied and wrote his name for many days. Then one day he wrote it without seeing and shouted loudly, "Oh! What fun today! I learnt writing my name today." We clapped for



him. When a child is recognised in the class, made to feel important then he feels that he is not just a part of the crowd but has his own identity and he develops a liking for school and studies. This is not the case with one or two children, almost all the children do this. I am surprised to see that when children can learn in such a natural manner without being forced, why we pressurise them so much.

Small children also think deeply about the way they are treated - whether it is good or bad. They may not have a fully developed language to express their views, but they have their own thoughts on how they are being dealt with. One day a child was saying that he enjoys coming to school and does not like it even if there are holidays for two days. When I asked the reason he said, 'Before coming to this school I was going to anganvadi which was not at all good. We had only two toys there and the madam used to beat us. There were two sticks, one big and one small. The small stick would hurt badly. "When I asked whether somebody beat him, he answered, "Yes, madam used to hit if we talked. Whoever talked would get beaten up." This child is only five years old. He said, "Madam would ask for a stick to be brought if a child came crying there. The child would stop crying and if any child continued crying then madam would hit him. It felt bad when madam hit. I did not understand why we were beaten up for talking." My next question was, "Were you not afraid to come here?" He said, "I was very scared. When I came to the classroom my eyes were watering but I was not crying." I thought I might have misunderstood him, so asked him again, "Oh! So when you came to school for the first time you were crying because you were scared." He said, "No, my eyes were watering but I was not crying because I was happy. The class was beautiful, there were many toys, so I liked the place and I felt happier because there were no sticks here." Of course, the child did not share all this in one go. I talked to him for a long time and his feelings were revealed bit by bit. So the broken language, in which he explained his point, is not important here. What is important is how deeply he felt about these things. Another girl coming from a different school said, "The A B C D madam used to beat, 1 2 3 madam used to beat and chota se anaar madam used to beat. We would get beaten up if we did not write beautifully." The children shared many such experiences where they were raising questions about the actions of elders. Although there can be various kinds of discussions on this subject but I want to impress upon the point

that even small children think seriously about the happenings taking place around them and can react to them. The children may not be equipped with proper language to make their point, but they feel everything and given a chance they can even express them. Only we adults need to listen to them carefully.

When I started teaching, all the items kept in the classroom were entrusted to the children. Since it a classroom for small children, there are lots of toys and many learning materials that attract children. There is a small library also having many small books. The very first day I told children that it is their classroom and everything kept here belongs to them and so they have to take good care of all the things. Once a few people from DIET came to visit their classroom and one of them asked a child if he breaks the toys. The child responded promptly that these are our toys, why would we break them. I was reminded of what I had told them on the first day. I never had to tell them to take care of things again and again, rather they would discuss things like – this book is torn, we need to stick it. No child has damaged any item deliberately. It was necessary to mention this point here because generally it is believed that children, especially small children damage things but as I continued my work and interaction with them I learnt that if we trust children and if they are treated like adults then they will never disappoint you. Children are responsible provided they are treated with equality and respect. Another special thing that I have experienced is that children do not want to be treated like a small child. We often see that while talking to the children, elders use an exaggerated, animated baby talk style. Sometimes they talk angrily or authoritatively. If we talk to them in a normal way with respect and listen to their views carefully then they also listen to us attentively and follow it. If things are explained to them logically then they understand it very well. Treating children like elders, believing them, talking to them logically and reasonably and encouraging them goes a long way in their development. Do not tell lies to children because they can make out that it is not true and they are not being taken seriously.

Working with children also gave me insights into how to tackle children when they commit any mistake. It is not necessary that we should make the child realise her mistake or scold her. At times, we should keep quiet and give them space to think about their mistakes. One day, while playing, a

girl got hurt by two other girls and started crying loudly. The two girls were really scared because they were sure that they would be scolded. I made all the three girls sit together but did not mention anything about the fight they had. The two girls sat quietly for sometime. Then I saw them talking to the third girl who was crying. I could not hear what they were talking but their gesture told me that it was not about the fight. They were together the whole day in a friendly way. These things are common in children and their altercations can be solved in many different ways. At times, they are made to sit on thinking mat where after thinking they tell what mistake they have committed or whether they have done anything wrong at all. Sometimes both the parties sit on thinking mat and put forth their point in front of everyone. This process is quite advantageous because the children become aware and take care of each other. I feel that they do not hit each other deliberately. Small children often fall because they lack balance, so they may hit each other by mistake. But I observed that now they immediately say 'sorry' if any child

is hurt. Of course, they go on complaining about each other the whole day. This definitely does not mean that one should ignore every happening. The child should have full faith that if something wrong is done to her the elders will listen to her but one need not react to every little thing. Trust them and they will be able to solve their problems.

By understanding each other's point of view the children have started to understand each other's feelings. One day the children were playing. One of the games required them to come running, pick a toffee in their mouth and run back. One child was unable to do this and another child took away her toffee. She started to cry. Just then two children came running to her and gave away their toffee to her and started shouting, 'you have won... you have won.' Little ones have deep understanding of other's feelings.

The children are like a seeds having full potential. We need to give them a fertile environment so that they may flourish fully and to do this we need to understand the childhood.

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