‘you are welcome’: an ethical approach to child care

by Anne Kennedy

Providing high quality programs or services for young children and families is a professionally challenging and highly complex endeavor. Center administrators, directors, and caregivers are required to address issues of accountability, accessibility, affordability, and appropriateness as they work with increasingly diverse families and children, often with limited resources and support. At the same time there is a growing recognition by governments of the importance of the early years linked to the notion that every childhood lasts a lifetime. In attempting to address these competing demands, it can be difficult for decision makers in early care and education to know where to focus their thinking and efforts.

Some researchers in early childhood education are making a strong argument that the focus needs to shift from a ‘what works’ or ‘technical’ approach to the recognition that ethics is at the heart of early childhood education and care (Dahlberg & Moss, 2005). The challenges and the complexity of working in child care signify that ethics need to be regarded as central to the provision of high quality care and education. The ethical nature of early childhood education has also been highlighted in early childhood professional codes of ethics (NAEYC, 1998; ECA, 2006).

Child care is an ethical concern because choices or decisions based on values are at the heart of service philosophies, program decisions, relationships with children and staff, and partnerships with families. The values we hold commit us to act or respond in certain ways. Ethics, as Dahlberg & Moss (2005, p. 65) claim, is “a very practical matter” which should form the basis for child care policies and practices.

One area of research which offers philosophical and practical support for early childhood professionals, comes from feminist researchers such as Joan Tronto (1993). Tronto talks about an ‘ethics of care’ which is focused on respect for the ‘Other’. The use of the capital ‘O’ for the word ‘Other’ is used deliberately in this research as a way to convey the importance of treating others, including children, with deep respect. The idea of ‘welcoming’ the ‘Other’ even though they might seem to be a stranger to us, is a feature of the ethics of care.

There are many examples in different religious and cultural traditions of offering hospitality and kindness to strangers in ways that honor their differences. In some African communities, for example, a stranger arriving in a village would be offered food and shelter even if doing that is difficult for the community. The ancient Greeks referred to this tradition as ‘filoxenia’ or ‘love of stranger’ which Zable (2002, p. 166) describes as “the sacred bond between host and guest”. It is the practice of welcoming the outsider by people with good will in their hearts.

“You are welcome” is a phrase used often in the context of service to the public such as when serving customers in a shop. In most instances, the person being welcomed in these contexts is a stranger to the server. The server does not expect that the person he or she serves will need to become like them in order to be provided with good service. The server is focused on responding appropriately to the customer in order to ensure that the person feels welcome.

Questions

How could the concepts of ‘you are welcome’ and the ‘Other’ be used to improve programs or services that are provided for children and families?

What would ‘you are welcome’ look like in practice?

What would be the visible signs to children and families that their ‘otherness’ or difference is respected?
Visible signs or practices of an ethically responsive ‘you are welcome’ approach to the ‘Other’ in child care:

There would be documented evidence of the children’s voices in the room or service.
Sometimes, only the adults’ words or interpretations are evident in the written materials or documentation displayed in a child care environment. There needs to be evidence of the children’s expressed opinions about their experiences through their words, smiles, gestures, or work. This practice is known as giving children a voice. Children’s voices can be captured on tape, by photographs or videos, through writing down the children’s exact words as they are spoken, or by samples of their work. Including the children’s responses or interpretations is a sign to them and their families that they are welcome in this place. Documenting the children’s voices in this way is the ethics of care in practice (Rinaldi, 2004).

There would be signs that children and families from previous years have been welcome in this environment.
At the end of each year, caregivers often clean out all the signs of previous occupants in their desire to provide a fresh welcome for new children and families. It can be reassuring, however, for new families and children to know that other children and families have enjoyed their participation in the service or center. Photographs of previous children’s participation in experiences, or messages of ‘welcome’ from parents, as well as staff to new parents in the newsletter, are ways to signal that this is a place with a proud history of welcoming children and families.

The environment is aesthetically welcoming through all the senses.
As a visitor to someone’s home, a sense of welcome is generated through our senses. There may be good smells coming from the kitchen or from fresh flowers in the rooms. Music or warm greetings satisfies the sense of being welcomed through sounds, and a hug or kiss from the host is being welcomed through touch. Young children will respond positively to the welcome their caregivers provide through different sensory modes such as sight, smell, sound, or touch. In one center, staff noted that toddlers and preschoolers who recently arrived as refugees from Asia, were showing signs of distress at the smell, taste, and texture of the food that was being offered to them. After consulting with families, the staff adapted the menu so that it included smells, tastes, and textures that would be familiar to these new arrivals — ‘you are welcome’ in action!

The environment reflects the children’s family and local community contexts.
It can be difficult to feel welcome in an environment that is strange or unfamiliar. Children will experience a sense of welcome when there are familiar things to see, hear, touch, or smell. Items brought from children’s homes, photographs of local community places that the children visit, or of their homes, playing music that families enjoy, or sharing stories which reflect the experiences of the children in the group are practical ways to support this sense of familiarity and welcome.

Everyone is welcomed by their name and their presence is acknowledged.
If people forget our name or seem unwilling to learn how to pronounce it correctly a message is sent that we are not important and not welcome. A person’s name is part of their identity and ignoring or mis-pronouncing it can have a negative impact on how people feel about themselves. The busy nature of arrivals and departures in child care can mean that staff may overlook the importance of acknowledging every child and adult on their arrival or departure. Using correct names for parents and children is an important part of these welcoming practices.

Everyone feels valued and has a strong sense of belonging.
A sense of belonging is essential if children and their families are to feel welcome in the child care program. A sense of belonging can be supported through practices such as displaying labeled photographs of every child with their family and putting the same photographs in a book for children to share with staff and each other. Acknowledging individual children and their families in the service newsletter or celebrating special family or community events can also help to support a sense of belonging to a group that cares for every member.

Differences are valued and there is active negotiation for the inclusion of every child and family.
It can be easy to welcome those whose lifestyles, values, family backgrounds, or abilities are similar to our own experiences or values. The challenge is to be welcoming to everyone, including those who may seem like ‘strangers’ to us. The ‘you are welcome’ idea, means respecting the ‘Other’ and not trying to make the ‘Other’ the same as ourselves. Welcoming
the ‘Other’ may mean being comfortable with differences at times and being willing to negotiate in order to find shared understandings.

**Listening is central to learning about each other.**
The feeling of being welcome is partly achieved when someone listens to another person’s ideas or concerns and responds appropriately. In the ongoing early childhood education projects in Reggio Emilia, Italy, there is a commitment to use listening as a tool for learning about each other (Rinaldi, 2006). Infants and toddlers require special listening skills as they communicate less through words and more through gestures, body movements, babbling, or facial expressions. Young children have many things they want to ‘tell’ their caregivers that can only be ‘heard’ through giving them our full attention as we listen.

**Reflection**

If the phrase ‘you are welcome’ is to underpin a commitment to an ethical approach to children and families, staff have to think about the visible signs and practices that send messages of welcome every day.

- Does every child and parent feel a sense of being drawn into the center through the welcome they receive every day?
- What are the visible practices that children and families see as signs of being welcome? How could these be improved?
- What are the signs to everyone in the service or center that differences (or otherness) are respected?

Shifting to an ethics of care focus in child care requires a willingness to spend time thinking about and responding to these types of questions. Whatever decisions we make as administrators, directors, or caregivers, they are not made in isolation. Our decisions connect us to the people we work with each day. I believe that these connections and inter-dependency can be supported by an ethics of care focus.

**References**


**Other?** Deep respect may be something early childhood teachers and directors yearn for. Kennedy has some ideas about how to get it — by exploring our approaches to developing community with good will in our hearts. Work through the list of questions (p. 46) with your teachers to see where the conversation leads you.

**Ethics and welcoming — what’s the connection?** Kennedy explains the connections beautifully and challenges us to continue the conversation until we see evidence of it in practice. Her list of visible evidence is worth considering. Use it to assess where you are and to identify specific things you can do to expand the ways you welcome and build community.

**Reflecting:** The recognition that we can all be reflective practitioners is supported by identifying starting questions for reflection. Ask your staff to respond to the three questions (p. 48) and then facilitate a group discussion about what they learned from reflecting.