

Safe and Sound Schools Conference

December, 2017

Keynote

Light in the Schoolhouse Window:

Helping Children Find their Way in Dark Times

by Lesley Koplow

Typical developmental fears in young children often include fear of the dark. When it is dark, children worry about monsters in the closet and under the bed. Children are afraid that they may get lost in the darkness on their way to seek comfort from the important adults in their lives, allowing the(ir) nighttime monsters to prevail. If it is dark, children can feel a loss of contact or connection, a fear that not only will important people be too hard to find, but that their parents or teachers won't be able to find *them* either, and they will be alone. Being left alone is a common fear for many young children, who know that they are highly dependent on adults for care and protection. Children who have experienced abandonment or loss in their young lives may be especially vulnerable to these fears, and may begin to panic when an adult leaves them in a dark room.

Leaving a nightlight on in a dark room can go a long way for children, illuminating the familiar and reassuring them that they are still in the safety of their own space, still connected to their intimate environment and the people in it. Secure in this knowledge, it is easier to cuddle into soft blankets with a Teddy Bear, to close your eyes and allow for sleep, and easier to separate in the morning when it's time for school.

Schools have always needed to leave a bright light burning in their schoolhouse windows, so that children and families can find their way there. Since the beginning of public education, socially responsible school communities have offered children a daily protective factor against risk. This often unacknowledged but powerful protective factor has always been an important function of a high quality educational setting. Young children can come to school for safety and respite, food and warmth, predictability and new experiences, a sense of belonging and an opportunity to develop unique strengths and talents, as well as to discover the meaning of symbols that hold the keys to empowered learning. Children who have been well cared for and well protected *prior* to coming to school, expect to find

the same within the classroom environment. Children who haven't been able to count on the essential foundations of care and protection **before** coming to school, enter the school building with personal stories that make group life and focused learning more complicated. The lights **within** the classroom need to burn bright enough to allow adults to see **all** that children carry **into** the building, so that children's challenges do not remain hidden, or isolated within the child, with no way of expressing themselves other than through anxious habits or explosive behavior. Schools that practice ERP know that understanding children's developmental issues as well as children's life experience stories, and weaving both of these into the tapestry of the learning process allows for higher student engagement and a more positive and pro-social classroom community.

These days, even teachers in ERP informed schools may find themselves at a loss when they are confronted with the ways that current events are impacting our children. All adults in the lives of children are accustomed to being called upon to take the familiar role of **interpreter** for the young children in their care. "Why is that man yelling?" asks a little boy on a class trip, pointing to a man on the street corner who seems to be giving a sermon to

no one in particular. “Why does that lady have a hole in her eyebrow?” asks a little girl in your group, pointing to the pierced cashier as her teacher is counting change to pay for the classroom pumpkin. Responding to questions like these becomes second nature to teachers in the early childhood grades. What may be less familiar to teachers is the role of interpreting social messages and social policies that are hurtful to the children in the room, or to their parents, or to their caregivers, or to their neighbors, or to the social and emotional well being of thousands of our citizens and residents. While practicing in emotionally responsive ways that emphasize our accountability **to the children** themselves has **never** been an easy road, we now find ourselves doing this important work in a dimly lit cultural space where even **adults** are struggling to find their footing; and to see things clearly. As educators and social workers, its easy to feel lost and confused in the fog of societal regression, and hard to clarify and interpret confusing reality to children.

A 6- year old is making a card for her great-grandmother who lives in Puerto Rico. Her great grandmother is elderly and sick, and has had no electricity since Hurricane Maria devastated the island. “Why can’t the President

just send her some new light bulbs?”, the child asks her teacher innocently.

“Her lights have been out for so long!”

An 11 year old Mexican-American boy who has memorized the poem on the statue of liberty as a school assignment asks his teacher “ Why does our country want to deport my people when the statue of liberty says that the U.S. welcomes everyone?”

A 12- year old studying civics calls out to her teacher. “Betsy Devos *is* the Secretary of Education, right?”

“Yes she is.” her teacher confirms.

“See? I told you!” the child says triumphantly to her friend seated next to her.

“But if she’s the Secretary of Education, then why did she say on the news that she doesn’t *believe* in public school?” inquires her confused seat-mate.

While these questions are important indicators of children’s need and emerging ability to make sense of what they hear, see and read in the

world around them, if you are a classroom teacher in these times, children's questions or comments may leave you speechless.

Although we know that drawing firm lines between real and pretend is a challenge for children under the age of seven for **developmental** reasons, in 2017 we find the lines between real and pretend being *intentionally* blurred, making us question our own orientation in time and space, and challenging us to respond to the many questions, thoughts, and fears developing in our children who are watching and listening.

Young children are **in process** of developing self-image, identity, self-worth and a crucial sense of belonging. Our children are being exposed to hate speech and hateful rhetoric directed at people who may look like **them** or their friends or their neighbors or their caregivers. What does this mean to young children, who may not understand the content of what is being said but are highly attuned to the affects of powerful adults?

Ultimately, when parent-child relationships are strong and the important adults in a child's life are able to make sure that children are not taking in these messages **on their own**, the power of intimate relationships will suc-

ceed in making a protected space for the development of positive self image. In families that **may not** be able to focus on what messages their children are taking in, because the adults are stressed by overwhelming demands in their day to day lives, there are fewer buffers. Unmet adult and child health and mental health needs, threats of deportation, fiscal insecurity, violence and a million other very real deterrents to family well being may dominate the domestic landscape. Children in these circumstances absorb the high stress in their intimate environments **along with** the loud and potentially harmful media messages that come their way, and may be **on their own** to make sense of what they are taking in. Without adult buffers, the vulnerability to internalizing these negative messages is heightened.

If you teach 3,4,5 or 6 year olds, you are very familiar with children's developmentally driven preoccupation with "good guys" and "bad guys". Children use dramatic play to try to sort out the positive and negative parts of themselves in social play scenarios, as they struggle to master self regulation and the integration of the positive and negative impulses that all children have. This play is part of the process that allows them to ultimately develop a positive sense of themselves.

Right now is a very confusing time to figure out about “good guys” and “bad guys”. The president, who is supposed to be a “good guy” keeps showing “bad guy” behavior on the news. Men with powerful roles are portraying ***other people*** who may *look like the children who are watching, as though they were/are* the bad guys.

If you work with 4, 5, and 6 year olds, you know that a core developmental issue for children in this age group is power vs powerlessness. Children at this age feel small in a big world. To compensate for this feeling of relative powerlessness, they ***are drawn to identifying*** with powerful figures, figures who are even ***more*** powerful than their own parents. Superheros, royalty, firefighters and here and now figures of strength and power are very popular with this age group. This identification with power helps children feel less vulnerable and helps them keep their emotional balance as they work to master age appropriate challenges. But, when the powerful figures that children are looking to, are ***also*** scary figures, it becomes complicated for children to develop in their shadows. When our national heroes are too

scary, children need their **local** heroes to know and show their own strength.

Who **are** these local heroes? Fortunately, there are many. In this context, I will define local heroes as people that children perceive as “in charge”, and who stay committed to supporting the well being of **everyone** within their communities, no matter how far the political pendulum swings. Local heroes make their supportive stance clear by speaking out about the value of **all** children and families, and by taking actions that demonstrate their commitment. In **this** context, our mayor and school’s chancellor were local heroes when they spoke on the news about public schools being protected from immigration agent intrusions, and sent out information to all New York City children and families about steps that parents could take for legal council if they were detained. In this context, our governor is a local hero when he repeatedly states that “hate has no home in NY state”, and refers to the beautiful mosaic of the NY population.

These are a few of the **visible** and powerful local heroes, who teachers can point to in their role as “interpreters” .

“Some of you have been talking about things you have heard politicians say about(immigrants, Mexicans, black and brown people, muslim people, Jewish people, etc) Since we live in New York, lets see what our mayor and our governor think about that.” Highlighting “**visible**” local heroes can provide an important layer of protection for children in dark times.

Indeed, when children are well protected, there are many concentric circles of care and connection between themselves and the bigger world! These circles include families, school communities, religious communities, neighborhoods, town, cities and states that surround children with their own distinctive climates and cultures, and can help children feel an essential sense of belonging.

Perhaps paradoxically, it is the “**Invisible**” local heroes that often provide the **most effective protective factors** in the lives of children during dark times. Most of the time, these local heroes do not even know who they are, or, how powerful they are. These local heroes are the people sitting here today. They include teachers, school leaders, school social workers and parents who spend hours every day with children, who are “**in charge**”

and powerful *in the eyes of children*. When children can identify with local heroes who see them as valuable and hopeful, and when these local heroes act as “good mirrors” for children and their families and communities, the strength of these powerful adult-child relationships can work to buffer the impact of a distorted societal lens. Teachers and social workers may feel helpless in the wake of policies that endanger their students or their student’s families, but you are not powerless. You are among the few adults who bear witness to the complex lives that schoolchildren in the 21st century lead, and who see the results of policies that make their lives harder. This vantage point gives you the resources to affirm children’s reality, and to become a voice of clarity and advocacy in the outside world.

Only local heroes can give children the essential feelings of self worth and belonging in their day to day lives. “This is MY school! I belong here. I am an important part of something bigger. I am wanted here. The government might want my family to leave, but my school wants us to stay!” It is the local heroes who are close enough to “hold” children so that they feel safer and feel valued. It is the local heroes who are close enough to partner with children in a way that helps children *hold the difficult stories that they*

bring into school, and the local heroes that ***make sure that children are not alone with the negative messages that they may be getting from intrusive and pervasive media.***

Local heroes have a unique window into the life experiences of diverse groups of children, even when those children live in very different socio-economic and cultural realities from one another and from the teacher or social worker herself. It is the local heroes who bear witness to the intense life experiences that children carry, and it is the local heroes that know what people who make educational policy ***pretend not to know***. Local heroes know that if we leave children isolated with stressful, negative life experience, we increase their risk for reactivity triggers, we increase their risk for physical and mental health disorders as they grow up, and we decrease their ability to think deeply and to develop the capacity for ***critical thinking***, a ***skill prominently featured*** in Common Core! In ERP informed schools, local heroes know how intimately emotional well-being is connected to learning. Instead of insisting that children leave their outside lives in the schoolyard, they invite life experience in, and give it a voice.

If you happen to work in a school located very close to a construction site, you know how impossible it is to teach while you are being drowned out by the rumble and shrieks of construction vehicles. Trying to ignore the din, and encouraging children to do the same, requires superhuman effort with mixed results, and leaves you with a very real throbbing pain in your head by the end of the day. If you acknowledge the issue instead, saying, “It is Soooo noisy in here and hard to concentrate! What do you think would help us to feel less stressed by this noise?” there will be a collective sigh of relief. Children’s reality has been validated, which allows them to join you in brainstorming solutions.

Similarly, when you work with children who carry their whole lives into the classroom, and their lives are full of developmental challenges, confusing experience, loss, disruptions and trauma, trying to ignore the ***underlying din*** and ***teach over it*** requires superhuman effort with mixed results, and often leaves you with a very real pain in your head and in your heart by the end of the day. Inviting children and families to talk about, draw about, or write about their experiences, feelings and worries brings relief, and allows

you to join them in their developmental journeys to find *meaning* in their learning.

Local heroes know that while poverty is correlated with a myriad of psychosocial stressors, and an elevated risk for unmet need, research has found that children who live in higher income brackets are not necessarily free from trauma or toxic stress. The Adverse Childhood Experiences studies (ACES) reveal that 60% of middle class children experienced incidents of disruption and trauma during childhood. Among children living in poverty, a large Head Start population study found that 85% -90% of children had experienced significant traumatic events. Teachers and social workers in ERP informed schools know that *partnerless children*, regardless of income bracket, most often grow up feeling lonely and worthless, with poor academic and/or mental health outcomes. These local heroes become partners in supporting *essential developmental milestones* of children in schools, and partners in helping them hold those life experiences, which are too heavy for children to hold alone. Local heroes do this even though these powerful contributions to the wellbeing of children are largely unseen and unacknowledged.

If you have studied ERP before, you have heard us talk about giving children a “good mirror”; meaning, using emotionally responsive interactions, language, literacy, and social studies to acknowledge **both** children’s positive **and** hurtful experiences and the range of feelings that result, **while** at the same time, reflecting **all** children in a positive light, so that they can grow up to see themselves that way. This crucial protective factor of the teacher-child relationship is even **more essential** in times like these, when societal mirrors may be distorted, and investment in other protective measures that fight poverty and enhance child mental health begin to shrink. When the nation’s lights are dimmed to *intentionally* minimize access to *those* positive resources that exist, the light in the schoolhouse window must continue to burn bright. The light in the school house window needs to shine brightest during times like these, so that children who happen to be little during this period of time, can grow up seeing themselves as worthy of protection, powerful enough to make change, and having access to a hopeful future.

You may be wondering, “How are we supposed to give children a feeling of safety when **we** might not be feeling safe ourselves? How can we give our schools the power to be emotional sanctuaries for children and families when we as professionals so often feel unheard or unappreciated?” These are important questions. Indeed, it is almost impossible to give what you don’t have, or haven’t experienced. As a start, I am hoping that you will experience today as an emotional sanctuary of sorts, where you can come together with other committed professionals and learn some techniques to nurture/support the well being of children and families, as well as nurturing your **own sense** of well being. I hope you will find that spending time with other “local heroes” helps you to see and appreciate the local hero in yourself. I hope that we can be a “**good mirror**” for your experiences of being with children through difficult times, and that you will respond to our invitation to stay connected with us, and share your own experiences from the field with other local heroes so that you feel that you are doing this work in **good company**. In the coming weeks and months, I hope that you will find a way to make your voices heard, so that your own **real** experiences of being with children in schools during these times, can reach beyond the

school's walls, and become a force for breaking down the walls that divide
us.