

Working with Staff Using Baumrind's Parenting Styles Framework

by Hollace Anne Veldhuis

Rosa, the Pre-K Teacher, sits across from me at my desk, her eyes on the floor. As the new director, my first visit to her classroom did not go well. When Rosa rang the bell for clean-up, four-year-old Natalie looked up from a chair in the play house. "Our game just started!" Rosa hesitated for a split second, and Natalie and her friend Evan, both dressed as firefighters, raced out of the play house and across the room. Rosa looked around, but her new assistant Noah had left to check on a child in the bathroom down the hall. Then a fist-fight broke out in the block area, and Rosa had to move quickly to resolve the conflict. Noah returned just in time to stop Stevie from turning over the water table.

Even now, a few hours later, Rosa does not want to talk about it. I try to start on a positive note. "You and Noah both seem to have good relationships with the children," I say. Rosa looks up. "I never saw such wild children," she answers. "I don't see how they expect me to handle them without Lisa. They never should have taken her out of my classroom." As Rosa glares at me in silence, I take a breath. My relationship with this classroom is already off to a challenging start.

Confronted with the chaos in this Pre-K, anyone could be tempted to blame Rosa and Noah. Indeed at this moment, they are not communicating well with each other, their guidance methods are inadequate, and the children in their class are suffering. Change is clearly needed. However our natural tendency to criticize is not a good place to start. With Rosa, for example, even my positive comment provoked her defensiveness and finger-pointing. To work toward solutions, I knew I would have to find a way to gain her cooperation. This is much easier said than done. In fact, it would be easier in many ways to change this classroom by bringing in a brand new team, painful as that would be, than to help Rosa and Noah create a safe place for the children.

This Pre-K classroom was one of three in a small child care program. In assessing the situation, it occurred to me that the entire staff would benefit from additional coaching. That was how I decided to try something that had worked for me before. Rather than targeting Rosa and Noah specifically, I presented a workshop on guidance to all the teachers. Teachers with a variety of styles and experiences had already told me that they looked forward to the monthly staff meetings where they could talk over problems and share solutions. I hoped that my presentation would stimulate a good discussion, and that the conversation would give Rosa and Noah some new ideas for their classroom.



Hollace Anne Veldhuis, Ph.D., is the Director of Saint Philip Preschool in San Francisco. She began working with young children in 1970, and she has since directed a wide variety of ECE programs — in corporate, college, parent co-op, and nonprofit settings.

She has written articles on musical development, learning differences, and working with parents. She has taught administration, music curriculum, and child development at De Anza Community College and San Francisco State University.

An Organizing Framework

My presentation at the staff meeting centered on Diana Baumrind's parenting styles framework (Baumrind, 1967). Baumrind believed that there were four requirements for effective guidance:

nurturing, communication, maturity demands, and control. She rated parents on these four dimensions and identified the pattern of parenting that correlated with the most competent children. In her research she found that the parents of competent children were strong in all

four of the parenting dimensions: Children need a loving parent who takes the time to listen to them and explain things. Children also need firm limits, based on an accurate understanding of their ever-changing abilities. Baumrind called the style which combined all these strengths Authoritative Parenting.

Diana Baumrind's Dimensions of Parenting

<p>Nurturance</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Express love Guarantee child's well-being Take pleasure in child's accomplishments 	<p>Control</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Consistently enforce directives Resist push-back from child Exert influence
<p>Communication</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Use reason to persuade Use non-manipulative techniques to persuade Ask child's opinion, feelings 	<p>Maturity Demands</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Expect child to perform up to ability Offer opportunities for decision making

As I presented this chart to the teachers, I offered examples of each style, using my observations of parents at the school:

In the morning, David's dad often walked into the classroom engaged in a conversation with his son. They talked about breakfast, their cat's funny tricks, or the bus ride to school. Communication was a strength in this father's style. Julie carried her daughter through the door wrapped in a blanket, and sat down with her in the book corner for an affectionate kiss. Hers was a style anchored in nurturance. Virginia, on the other hand, expected both her children to contain their feelings and part with her without ceremony. Her maturity expectations were high.

The teachers began a lively discussion about Virginia's demands: Were they inappropriately controlling or well-suited to her culture and her children? In the process, the teachers began to connect the different par-

enting styles to their own beliefs about teaching. Many of them were able to identify their own strengths as teachers.

Rosa recognized her high expectations of the children and remembered her father telling her, "You can do it. Just keep trying." Noah talked about his own infant daughter and his commitment to nurturing. At the same time, he acknowledged that he had a lot to learn about preschoolers and their need for consistency.

Cindy said, "I can control the children. That is why I am always in charge on the field trips. I know how to keep them safe." To her co-teacher, she said, "Jane, you are the one the children can talk to when they are upset."

In the two-year-old classroom, Charlotte and Anna agreed that Anna's quiet, gentle manner was just what was needed to nurture the young children in their first school experience.

Skill Building

I told the teachers that we would work together on the elements of Baumrind's chart. I wanted them to be strong in all four of these skills. How could they use what they had learned in the meeting to strengthen guidance in their classrooms? I asked each teaching team to work together on their next steps. Then I met with each head teacher and each classroom team separately to deepen the conversation.

Differentiated Coaching

In understanding why Baumrind's theory worked in this context, I was helped by reading Jane Kise's book, *Differentiated Coaching* (2006), in which she describes her work in elementary schools. Kise stresses the importance of highlighting teachers' strengths, rather than challenging their beliefs. Where a list of dos and don'ts might feel insulting, a theory that highlights teachers' strengths shows respect and trust in the teachers' decision-making ability. This

can lessen their resistance to change. Baumrind's model of parenting styles functioned as this kind of a framework for working with Rosa's classroom and the other classrooms at her school.

Kise also believes that the right theory can create a bridge between staff meeting discussions and individual coaching sessions. As I built a partnership with Rosa, Baumrind's theory acted in this way. My presentation at the staff meeting set the stage for follow-up meetings with individuals and classroom teaching teams. Having learned new terminology together, teachers were able to talk with each other — and with me — at another level. Even Noah was able to join in learning with the group.

Evaluating Success

In addition, this method was helpful to Rosa and her colleagues because there was a good match between Baumrind's approach and the conditions at the school. First of all, Baumrind's focus on guidance was a good match for Rosa's immediate concerns. In her classroom, the problem with guidance blocked progress in other areas. Special projects, individualized learning, even field trips had been put on hold. Guidance was a top priority, and Rosa needed advice in this area.

Equally important, Rosa was able to be self-reflective. While initially defensive, Rosa was able to participate in the staff meeting and the discussion that followed in a way that allowed her to save face. Offered respect, she was able to think about her own role in the problem. Because Rosa had this essential skill, she was able to partner with me in facing the challenges in her classroom.

The structure of the weekly staff meetings was also very helpful in making change possible. The teachers were used to regular meetings, and they enjoyed them. They felt ownership in the discussion and were accustomed to learning

new skills that they could use in their work. Talk did not focus on gripes or blame, but instead on solving problems together. When I presented the teachers with Baumrind's ideas, they fell on fertile ground.

Conclusion

In my experience, Rosa and Noah's Pre-K classroom is not unusual. Sadly, many child care programs are paralyzed by problems with guidance. Knowing how to partner with struggling teachers can be the key to ensuring children's physical and emotional safety and can lay the groundwork for improving program quality. To meet this imperative, Baumrind's ideas provide a useful framework for understanding the problem, promoting discussion, and bringing teams together to make change.

References

- Baumrind, D. (1967) Child care practices anteceding three patterns of preschool behavior. *Genetic Psychology Monographs*, 75, 43-88.
- Kise, J. A. G. (2006) *Differentiated coaching: A framework for helping teachers change*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.



The Three-Year-Old Class

Jane and Cindy were eager to work with the new ideas. Their strong partnership was based on talking things through, so our meetings became part of their ongoing discussion. Still it was hard for them to come up with ideas for changing their roles, so they invited me to observe in their classroom.

Watching them together helped me understand their team. Cindy's loud, enthusiastic approach worked well in managing the group, but she frightened some of the more sensitive children. Jane enjoyed being the person who supported those children one on one. When I suggested that they divide the group in two at times, to make it more manageable, both Jane and Cindy objected. Each of them worried about the other's weaknesses.

Despite their protests, over the next couple of weeks they began experimenting with ways to change their roles in the classroom. Jane began stepping up during transitions with her own songs and announcements, and she talked Cindy into going with her to a workshop on "The Shy Child." Their classroom changed slowly but perceptibly, and they felt more comfortable talking about their teaching styles as a part of team meetings.

The Two-Year-Old Class

Charlotte and Anna also tried to put Baumrind's ideas to use, but without success. As a new teacher, Anna was ready to learn, but her head teacher, Charlotte, could not reflect honestly on her own teaching style. In the classroom, she seemed preoccupied and unaware of the children around her. In discussions, she agreed with anything that was said, but on a daily basis her behavior was unchanged. Charlotte's behavior reveals the limitations of such a workshop and coaching method. Charlotte's issues had to be dealt with in a different way.

The Pre-K Class

As a head teacher, Rosa also faced some challenges. We started with a one-on-one discussion of her expectations of the four-year-old children in her classroom. She decided to keep more closely to the routines that had previously made the classroom run smoothly. She remembered how Lisa had expressed confidence in the children's abilities — especially during the transitions of the day. She realized that she needed to take more responsibility for enforcing the routines, now that she had a new and less experienced assistant. In addition, she identified one of the children as needing some additional outside help. Getting a shadow in the classroom gave Rosa more freedom to focus on the rest of the children and on building her team.

As Rosa grew more confident that I would support her work, she was able to think about changing her own communication style. She realized that when she explained the reasons behind her requests to the children, they were more likely to cooperate. It occurred to her that this method might also work with her assistant, Noah.

She met with Noah and started talking through the day's routines and transitions. She realized that she had never taken the time to explain to him how children benefit when the adults in the classroom work together. She told him how the children felt safer when the adults communicate with each other. She described some of the language that she and Lisa had been using to guide the children's behavior. Over a series of meetings, Rosa and Noah began to find a comfortable way to talk to each other. They also saw the children's behavior change. The Pre-K classroom became calmer and more orderly, and everyone could focus on play and learning with fewer interruptions.

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