“Children are asking for opportunities to test their competence. When that competence is affirmed . . . ego is strengthened, self-esteem blossoms, and children’s sense of personal power . . . is significantly advanced. On the other hand, when can-do needs are thwarted, when adults ‘do for’ young children and thus seriously reduce their options and their fields of endeavor . . . they learn to rely on others to do for them and to help them in their life’s work.” (Selma Wassermann, *Serious Players in the Primary Classroom*, Teachers College Press, 1990)

Watch Matthew. He’s putting the roof on his birdhouse and his concentration is absolute. He holds the nail, gives it a tap, moves his fingers (he’s already smashed his thumb twice), then really whacks the nail. As he checks and observes the new bend in the nail, he lets out a small sigh and looks up.

In the actual scenario, Matthew’s mother rushes in, offers words of comfort, takes the hammer, removes the bent nail, and promptly finishes the roof. In fact, during this project for five year olds, the greatest difficulty was in keeping the ownership of the project with the children. Well-meaning parents bulldozed in to spare their children the frustrations of the process and to achieve for them the perfect birdhouse.

Reflections on this process resulted in several important questions: Why do we consider frustration a negative? When we watch a child struggling to learn a difficult skill, why is our impulse to rush in and help, rather than to glow with admiration for the efforts of this child? How can we best support the efforts and meet the needs of young children? What is the significance of struggle in our whole lives?

Let’s return to Matthew for a minute. We’ll put a minor obstacle in the path of his mother and delay her arrival for just a minute so that we can create a new scenario: Ginny, Matthew’s teacher, notes his frustration and gives him an acknowledging smile. She puts her hand gently on his back as they discuss the bent nail. Ginny offers to take the twist out, demonstrates and verbalizes what she is doing for Matthew, then hands the hammer back to him. She suggests pounding less forcefully to see what happens and bravely holds the nail as Matthew taps away. When the nail is planted, Ginny and Matthew discuss the next step; she gives him a pat on the back and turns to address Sarah’s question.

It’s significant to note that in our ideal scenario, (which is imaginary, so anything is possible), we did not make all of Matthew’s nails go in straight and we did not create for him the perfect birdhouse. Rather, we gave him a supportive adult and a persevering spirit.

Children are born with the determination to master skills that are important to them. We need to remember those early efforts at mastery and hold steadfast a respect for the child who falls down a zillion times before that first step, who utters thousands of unintelligible words before that first perfect “No!” who is born with the perseverance necessary to achieve important goals. As teachers and parents, it becomes our responsibility to support that perseverance and nurture that willingness to struggle. After all, the market for the perfect birdhouse is rather small. The need in our world for people who see struggle as part of life, who tackle the impossible, and who perceive a real problem as a challenge is unlimited.

Now a last peek at the real Matthew — When Matthew’s mom wasn’t around, Matthew took his birdhouse off the project shelf, got out a hammer and some nails, and pounded about 15 nails into that roof. Some of them went in straight, some poked out the side, several bent and were flattened into the wood. He looked at it carefully, assured himself that it would never come off, lettered “Red Robin Hotel” above the door, and returned it to the shelf.

Three cheers for you, Matthew!

*Bonnie Neugebauer, June 1991*