A Manner of Speaking

My daughter Amy will never be an airplane pilot. And the responsibility for that is painfully mine. At age ten she was talking about what she might like to do when she grew up, envisioning a career in the skies; and in a blundering moment of maternal protectiveness I interjected, “But, Amy, your eyes aren’t good enough. You can’t be a pilot.”

Only days later I read a wonderful bit of parenting advice. The author (forgotten) urged parents to maintain a position of support and love in the lives of their children, leaving the burden for setting obstacles and defining harsh realities to the rest of the world. In my struggle with these impulses to spare and protect, I’ve come to realize that at the heart of protectiveness is the issue of control. It’s an effort to shape what happens for children — our own and others in our care.

There is a fine line between interference (unnecessary control) and guidance. Obviously, there are times when we must try to control the situation; but perhaps those times occur less often than we might think. When is it best to tell a child she has climbed too high and when might it be better to let her see the treetops? When must materials be used only as directed and when can they be used to satisfy a creative energy? How often is there only one right way? And what is a mistake — really?

The issue of control is a complex topic in early childhood programs — so many people, large and small, each with her or his own agenda. Are we making control decisions based on what is best for the children or what makes life easier for the adults? Are our expectations of children supportive and inclusive? Are we focusing on what is most important?

Several years ago my airplane seatmate shared his account of the year he worked in a child care program: “There was one little kid I still think about. He was my big failure. Everyday he wore a different costume to school — and for that day he was that character. He was Superman and Mighty Mouse . . . you could not talk to him except through the character of the day. He never once through the whole year would answer to his name. We tried everything we could think of to the point of bringing other clothes to school and stripping off his costume to try to force him to be himself. He had no identity of his own. I wonder what happened to him.” It would seem that the staff tried harder to make this little boy fit their expectations for him than they tried to understand why he needed to live in costume.

Contrast his story with the wonderful account of the boy who would be a helicopter by Vivian Gussin Paley (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990). In this classroom where storytelling was the basis of the curriculum, a boy named Jason often needed to be a helicopter. His need was accommodated as adults and children made spaces for him in their play so that he can be a helicopter and yet be encouraged and supported as Jason. It’s an excellent story for reflecting on the nature of control.

It’s important to consider issues of control as they relate to the adults in our programs as well. Must all classrooms be organized in the same way? When is it best to offer our own insights and when is it best for teachers to learn by experience? Again, it’s critical to ask: What is really important here?

So I suggest that while we’re defining our issues, while we work on what is control and what is guidance, we learn the value of the thoughtful pause. If each time we are about to say: “Hurry up . . .” or “This is how we do it here . . .” or “That won’t work . . .” or “No, you can’t be a pilot . . .” that we hesitate. During this pause we will perhaps give ourselves time to determine what is really important here — time to make better decisions. By backing off from all those things we know to be true, we will enable others to discover their own truths.

And I apologize to all of you who will be denied the opportunity to travel through the friendly skies in the capable and intelligent hands of Amy Neugebauer.

Bonnie Neugebauer, August 1991