

For the Classroom

Guiding Children from Expansion to Calm

— Keiko Rothfield

Our days with children follow a rhythm of expansion and contraction, much like breathing in and out. We go from outdoor play to circle time, back to more play, then a morning activity, and onward to snack time—and so the large group dynamic flows.

Even during snack or lunchtime, we experience smaller cycles of expansion and contraction. For instance, we start with handwashing (expansion) and then sit together, singing a blessing song (contraction). We pass the food around, gradually moving into the expansion of eating time. With just twelve children and two teachers, we all sit around the table. Rather than enforcing quiet eating, I encourage light conversation, fostering connection with nearby friends. Sometimes, when children speak in their “One Volume Only” mode, the table gets quite loud as everyone tries to be heard. That’s when I step in for a little “traffic (volume) control”—just like an old-fashioned police officer directing traffic at the center of the podium, using hands, eyes, and facial expression to help everyone communicate smoothly.

We used to have a house rabbit who hopped on the floor of our nursery room. Her cage was by the kitchen sink, so we could give her kitchen scraps. Whenever she felt uncomfortable, she would hop away to her cage. I’d make my eyes bigger and say, “Oh, we’re probably talking too loudly for her sensitive ears!”

Now that she’s no longer with us, I’ve placed a small fountain near the table, behind a curtain. Sometimes, I lean in, cupping my ear, and whisper, “Can anyone hear the fountain? Is it whispering or singing?” This invites everyone to quiet down, listening for the gentle sound of the water.

Creating Calm with Nature and Playful Gestures

When we’re eating at the outdoor table, I’ll often look for birds or hummingbirds visiting the feeder. The children know to stay quiet so they don’t scare the birds. Sometimes, I’ll make a hand gesture where I touch my middle and ring fingers to my thumb, with my pointer and pinky raised—like a bunny with sensitive ears. I softly say, “Oh, bunny, oh, bunny, what do you hear? With your sensitive ears, are we too

loud for you?” I repeat this a couple of times. Then, the “bunnies” (my hands) yawn, scratch their ears, and settle to “sleep” as I rest my hands on my tilted face. This playful gesture speaks to young children through imitation, helping them connect with the idea of caring for others.

I use this when I only have a short time to bring the children to a calm state. If the energy is especially high and I have a bit more time, I act as a “chorus conductor.” We start with an enthusiastic and energetic song, such as “Old MacDonald,” or “Where Is Thumbkin?” I start with big, animated gestures to match their large energy, and then gradually tone it down. For example, with “Old MacDonald,” I introduce many loud animals, but toward the end, I introduce a tortoise. The children’s eyes widen, waiting to hear the tortoise’s sound—only to discover it’s silent! The song then ends softly and quietly.

In my version of “Where Is Thumbkin?” I include “Thumbkin, Pointer, Tallman, Ring-a-ding, and Baby.” For Baby, the lyrics go: “Where is Baby, where is Baby, here I am, here I am. How are you today~?” (omitting the word “sir”). We finish softly with “crawl away” (only goes halfway) “crawl away, crawl away, crawl away” (finally reaching to hide behind my back) followed by “Take a nap” as we rest our hands together by our tilted face, using a gentle voice to help “Baby” fall asleep.

Songs and finger plays are such valuable tools for engaging preschoolers and guiding them from high energy to calm focus. These are just a few of the ways I bring our group together. I’d love to hear any tips you might have, too! ♦

Keiko Rothfield was born and raised in Kyoto, Japan and carries a rich family heritage, having grown up in a culture of Minimalism, Shintoism, and Buddhism but also attended Christian services since a small child. Keiko is a licensed elementary school teacher and graduate of Rudolf Steiner College in CA. She enjoys singing, writing, gardening and traveling. She has been director and lead teacher of Treasure Garden Nursery School in Fair Oaks, CA since 2002.