

The Effects of Hidden Anger in the Classroom

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It is said that we learn the most from our mistakes. I recently went through a period of intense learning, and I would like to share some of what I learned with other kindergarten teachers in hopes that you might learn from my experience.

I was starting my second year in the associate program for early childhood education at Sunbridge College, and had taken a new job teaching in a school half way across the country from where I was previously teaching in a new initiative. This would be my third year of teaching kindergarten, and I eagerly looked forward to teaching full time as part of a faculty in a school, instead of part-time teaching in a rented church room. Things got off to a rather rocky start with a large, rambunctious group of children and two co-teachers. We changed our daily rhythm several times and searched for calmer, easier to follow circles, and stories that would help calm the children. Finally we divided the class into two rooms, and began to enjoy a more peaceful classroom atmosphere with fewer children.

In the midst of my striving to create a wonderful kindergarten, a family crisis between my husband and myself happened which created a lot of unease and anger in me. Unfortunately, the situation erupted just after he had left on a month-long trip out of the country, so I couldn't talk to him about it, or start working on a resolution. During that month I experienced intense unease, sleepless nights, hurt, and anger as I faxed letters to my husband. By the time he returned home and we were able to begin repairing the wounds, the damage had been done in my teaching. (My husband and I went into counseling, and our relationship is now more open, loving, and supportive than ever before! As a bonus, I became pregnant and we now have a beautiful little baby girl who has also helped heal our family.)

What happened in my kindergarten is an example of how hidden emotions of the teacher affect the children, and how important it is for the teacher to be as clear as possible when entering the classroom. Although I knew I was wounded, I thought I was just "hurt," not angry. I tried to bravely carry on, going to school every morning by willing myself to get dressed, forcing some food into my mouth, putting on a cheery smile to cover my puffy eyes, and going through the motions of the day's activities. I had called my mentor and she advised me to do the minimum I needed to do. However, I now know that the children need the maximum from a teacher. At the end of each morning as the last child left the classroom, I would retreat into the closet and let loose the tears that I had been holding in all morning. Then I would go home and collapse, trying to get a little rest because I hadn't slept the night before.

During this time, my colleagues offered me their compassion, their listening ears, and their shoulders to cry upon. What none of us realized, however, was that I should have had a substitute in the classroom, because I was actually too ill to be with the children. My anger was picked up by the more angry of the children, and acted out by them. One morning a little girl, who tended to be rather volatile anyway, threw a tantrum because her blown Easter egg accidentally broke, and she didn't want a different one to color. A little boy who was prone to kicking and hitting other children became harder to handle. Children who had been having difficulty taking part in circle became recalcitrant and pouted angrily when it was circle time. Children became more selfish and unwilling to share their playtime with others. In my effort to hold things together, and also because this was my first year teaching in this school, and I wanted it to go well, I denied there were real problems in the classroom. I concentrated on the positive things that were happening, and indeed all was not "bad" in the classroom. We had some very effective circles, stories, and puppet plays, and some golden moments during free play.

My colleagues finally held a special meeting to speak with me about my needs in the classroom, and to give me some feedback about things they were observing. Their observations indicated that my anger was

coming out in subtle ways to the children, and sometimes not so subtle. They had heard me speak angrily to the children, and they were concerned about some stories I was telling during rest time which were taken from my own childhood experiences, but it seems I was choosing some of the more dark aspects of my childhood to share with them. I was also having difficulty with simple discipline, which I now think was the result of my not being totally present. A large part of my psyche was involved with my personal problems, so I could not be all there for the children.

About a week after my husband returned, I went for my last session in the Associate Program. I returned feeling renewed and stronger, ready to more fully apply myself to my teaching. However, I returned to find that the school was seriously considering not renewing my contract, and they were very concerned about my even continuing in the classroom for the rest of the year! All the strength and self confidence I had gained during my week away dissolved with this news. It was decided that a former teacher would return as head teacher, but I would continue in the classroom as an assistant, along with the assistant I had been working with. In a subsequent meeting with my assistant, I discovered that she had also been hiding a lot of anger as a result of my situation and the fact that I was not being as good a teacher as she had expected. She brought up lots of issues that she had not spoken of before, things that we should have been talking about all along.

The year ended on a positive note, as the former teacher's expertise and love healed a lot of the problems that had arisen in the classroom. I was relieved of the stress of trying to manage the class while I was dealing with my own emotional issues, my husband and I started on the road to reconciliation and renewal of our marriage, and I discovered I was pregnant, so losing my job became a necessity rather than a forced and negative occurrence.

The main lesson I learned from this painful and emotional time in my life is that it is important to recognize anger and not to deny it, especially to ourselves. It is also essential for the teacher and assistant to discuss openly and honestly with each other all the concerns they have, especially if it involves judgments about each other's performance, or feelings of anger. Hidden emotions will be picked up by the children and acted out. We teachers must be as honest as we can be with ourselves, recognizing anger for what it is, and finding ways to release the anger outside of the classroom, so we can come to the children with a pure and loving heart. Once we recognize we cannot bring that love to the children due to our own emotional wounds, we must step aside until we have healed the wounds.