

YOU CAN'T SAY YOU CAN'T PLAY*

February 2007

Over the past few weeks, I have heard different children tell one another,
"You can't sit there. I am saving it for my best friend."

"Can I play?" "No, we are not playing." I happen to be nearby and I respond with some questions: "Didn't I just hear a puppy barking?" "I see you are holding a baby. Are you the mother?" "No, she is the mother and I am the sister taking care of her baby." I suggest a few roles that this new child might be able to have. Their response is that there is no room.

This past week a mom and dad relate a story that their child came home and asked for make-up because she was told she could not play because she did not have any make-up on. She felt left out.

"We are best friends. We want to play by ourselves with nobody else."

"Only boys can be up here."

These are the voices of exclusion, children rejecting another child.

This is not a new phenomenon at Saxon Hill School. Over the years, I have noticed that something happens between the ages of four and five with children and their social/personal development. A structure begins to be revealed. Certain children will have the right to limit the social experiences of their classmates. Exclusion is written into the game of play. And play, as we know, will soon be the game of life. You might ask, What have I done about this? I have tried to convince children to be kind and let one another play. I have helped the dejected child find another playmate. I have addressed it as bullying. I have outlawed teams. I have had children divide into light and dark haired groups and only be able to play with like haired children and in certain parts of the room. I have felt that I handled the issues and it occurred less. This year when I noticed it creeping into our class, I remembered buying a new book at the Reggio conference last May. I am beginning a new journey.

I have been reading Vivian Paley's, *You Can't Say You Can't Play*. Vivian begins the first chapter, "Turning sixty, I am more aware of the voices of exclusion in the classroom. 'You can't play' suddenly seems too overbearing and harsh, resounding like a slap from wall to wall. How causally one child determines the fate of another." {Perhaps, this has resonated with me, as I am a year away from 60! I do know that I want to do something different. She gives me the courage to try to break the "Habit of rejection".} She and I agree that play gives pleasure. Play flows out of friendship and vice versa. The relationship works both ways and equally well, yet, children are not convinced that this is so. School is public and children are required to share teachers and materials in a space that belongs to everyone. We have a new concept of open access, sharing intimate friendships, and the habit of full and equal participation. Vivian writes that this notion usually involves everything except *free play* {our choice/explore time}, *which is generally considered a private matter*. Yet, in truth, free acceptance in play, partnerships and teams is what matters most to any child. As you know, we vote on nearly everything in our democratic classroom, yet, somehow we permit the children to empower bosses and reject classmates. This

is what is troublesome to me: the same children are rejected year after year. The burden of being rejected falls on a few children. They are being made to feel like strangers. My intention is to stop this feeling. I am saying that the group must change its attitudes and expectations towards those who are not yet part of the system.

This journey began in October and it is now February. Children are children and they have embraced this new "rule" as an addition to "we take care of ourselves, others and each other." At the same time, we continue to need to revisit it's meaning, answer questions of whether it is fair and review how it effects different situations. I can hear classmates debate various scenarios as to how and when to apply this thinking. I notice them questioning each other to see if their situation is relevant. I see 'outsiders' use the rule to gain entrance. I remember that Vivian describes it as "the key to the kingdom". I watch as children negotiate and renegotiate roles, materials and play to make it work for all. I have needed to reflect on my own thinking, to redefine consequences of behaviors and to tame that bossy characteristic I have. In general, the transition has been easy and straightforward. Children and our classroom are nicer. We have all been rescued from judging others. I sense a new freedom for our children to be whom they are and how they want to develop.

I have had many questions and comments from families along the way. I have been surprised that so many folks have viewed themselves or their children as "outsiders" in life's travels. As many of our children have taken the rule home and have shared it with siblings, much discussion has occurred and more inquiry from our children of when and how the rule works. (Yes, it is that 'cycle of inquiry' that I work continuously with and convey to you.) What is public and private? What about sibling playdates with friends? What if I don't like someone or they make me sad or they hurt me? Some families have revamped homes with common and private corners. Some families have reworked their expectations for playdates. One child described it as a "protector" of play and shared that he was more comfortable at school. A family shared that their child who was often a 'boss' seemed relieved and was enjoying school more. They were seeing new growth. I see our classroom is growing new leaders.

Some folks have pointed out to me that "exclusion" is life. I know that I have been a player. I know that the children I work with are in the intuitive stage of learning and I am hoping that they will internalize "You can't say, you can't play". I believe in new paths and have chosen to take one. I invite you to join me and help break the 'habit' of rejection, to foster some different thinking and support these new leaders. We can make a difference.

You Can't Say You Can't Play by Vivian Paley, First Harvard University Press, 1993.