



Everyone Do It This Way! Young Children Who Are Leaders

a newsletter for people who care about self-esteem

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Dear Readers,

Welcome to **WE**, a newsletter for and about groups of people who get together for the purpose of giving each other personal support, examining attitudes, and learning new skills.

Marilyn Grevstad's research about young leaders and the difference between five-year-old leaders and bullies fascinates me, so I am delighted that she consented to write about it for *WE*.

It should be comforting to those of us who have had mixed feelings of satisfaction about a child's assertive social skills and discomfort about what seems to be bossiness. Perhaps you will get some insight into the important skills of children you know who resemble Alison, Drew, and Kayla, who were bossy but not bullying. Perhaps you have watched a child like Stefan whose grandiose starting attempts at leadership later developed into workable skills. Surely, for the welfare of our democratic society, we need to be paying more attention to fostering tomorrow's leaders and Marilyn has some suggestions about how to do that.

Marilyn Grevstad has a Masters in Human Development, is a preschool teacher, and parent instructor. She is married to Ben and has five grown children and two granddaughters.

Thank you Marilyn.

Sincerely,

"Okay Everyone Do It This Way!"

Leadership in Young Children
by Marilyn Grevstad

Kayla Organizes the Castle

As her mother and I watched, Kayla was busy playing in the pretend castle with her friends. She barked out constant orders to her two playmates, "Hang up all the dress up clothes over there. Let's make this like a princess castle should be!" The other girls were quite willing to do whatever Kayla asked. Her mother, who was embarrassed as she watched her daughter bossing other children, protested, "I don't talk to her that way." She wondered if there was something wrong with Kayla. I reassured this mother that Kayla had many social skills and was a strong leader for this group of girls. They couldn't wait to play with each other every day.

During twenty-five years of early childhood teaching, I have observed one, two, or three children each year who seem to naturally take over management of groups of children. In 1994 I was looking for a thesis topic, and the development of leadership in young children seemed a rich area for research, so as a graduate student at Pacific Oaks College I took on the study of leadership.

Are Leaders Born or Made?

Are leaders born or made? There are children who seem naturally, from a young age, to take charge during social play. These children seem born to

lead. There are also children who hang back in early social groups, and blossom into leaders later. These children seem to have learned to lead. Although I had often observed the results of influential leadership in preschool children, what exactly did these young leaders do and how did they come to have these skills? This is what a study of leadership might reveal. I couldn't think of a better way to spend my time than to observe and video tape preschool leaders at play. I knew three children who would make excellent subjects, Alison, Drew, and Kayla.

Leadership in Children

Leadership is an important facility for the welfare of our country. Many people are concerned about the lack of leadership at high government levels; and books on leadership, such as *In Search of Excellence* (Peters and Waterman, 1982) become best sellers. Yet, we know little of how children develop leadership skills. This aspect of children's social play until very recently, has received little attention.

That this fascinating childhood behavior has not been fully studied is surprising, given the tremendous relevance of the topic to adult life in a democratic society.
(Trawick-Smith 1988 p.51)

Effective leadership is necessary for a well run society and it starts

when children are very young. When groups of children play, one or two will usually take over the leadership. Leadership is a necessary quality for a rich play experience.

Skilled play leaders suggest new roles of play themes, add greater detail and complexity to enactments, enhance the make-believe duality of play, and regulate the social interaction of players within a group.
(Trawick-Smith, p.51 1988)

Bullies, Isolates, and Bootlickers

Not every child is successful at leadership. Trawick-Smith labels three types who are ineffective at leadership: bullies, isolates, and bootlickers (1988).

Bullies, originally described by Elkind and Weiner (1978), are children who continually attempt to dominate peers through verbal or physical aggression due to feelings of inadequacy.

Isolates are relatively uninvolved in group play and make few attempts to lead others.

Bootlickers (Elkind and Weiner 1978) are easily manipulated to the point of humiliation. They are, unlike isolates, very interested in participating in social play.



2.

Leadership Skills

What are the root skills of leadership, the behaviors used by young children to influence playmates? To find out, I studied three preschool leaders, Alison, Drew, and Kayla. During free play sessions at North City Cooperative Preschool in Seattle I made written observations and video tapes of these influential five-year-olds as they engaged in directing the play of their friends. A code for measuring leadership traits included skills such as:

1. giving directives
2. seeking agreement
3. assigning roles

I found that Alison, Drew, and Kayla, each possessed similar skills.

There seem to be certain skills characteristic of children who lead. The top five leadership characteristics of my subjects were:

1. They made declarations about themselves as they played. They often described to the other children, what they were doing, thinking or feeling. They carried on a running monologue.
2. They were enthusiastic idea givers and often influenced new directions in the play. They made the play interesting and fun.
3. They gave out new information. They knew a lot and shared this knowledge with their play mates.

4. They gave directives, ordering others about.
5. They clowned around, and made jokes to amuse their friends.

Similarities

Alison, Drew, and Kayla, were close in age. Each of these leaders had turned five early in the school year so they were at the upper end of the age group of a three to five-year-old class. They came from middle class families, and this seems to be where the similarities ended.

Differences

The three children had very dissimilar family situations. The sibling position was different for each child. Drew was the youngest of two children, Kayla was an only child, and Alison was the oldest of two children.

Their family structures were different. Drew lived with both parents. Kayla and Alison's parents were separated. Kayla lived with her mother and Alison lived with her mother and aunt. Their school experience was varied. It was Drew's fifth year of preschool, Kayla's second, and Alison's first. These three children with such varied backgrounds, had each developed effective leadership skills. Kayla and Drew each led their own fairly constant small group of children (usually one to four followers.) Alison managed to lead whomever she was

around and didn't have a consistent group. Every day these young leaders came to school eager to join their groups. Kayla played mostly with two other girls, Drew usually played with three other boys, and Alison seemed to enjoy playing with everyone. She was very kind and thought of all the kids in the class as her friends.

Bossiness

I see leadership as the ability to influence others. What I describe as leadership was not always pleasant. Although I saw some fine negotiation, use of convincing logic, and agreement seeking, I also saw what could most easily be described as bossing around. And the followers, although they sometimes put up arguments, usually complied.

Why do children put up with so many demands from their leaders? Probably because the leaders lend a certain excitement to the play. Leaders like Kayla, Drew, and Alison are full of good ideas and their followers are willing to sacrifice some autonomy for the sake of adventure.

Competition for Leadership

Usually the three leaders played with their own group of friends

but one day Anna, Kayla's best friend decided to switch play groups. She told Kayla that she was going to play with Alison. It was more than Kayla could handle. She tried to convince Anna to stay. She pleaded, she bribed, and then this usually controlled girl had a tantrum, screaming, "I hate you," and finally bursting into tears. Anna was persuaded to return to Kayla. The boys group joined

into the fight and took Kayla's side. A confused Alison chewed her fingernail as the boys told her she was mean to Kayla.

The next day the two leaders Kayla and Alison played

happily in the play house. Kayla was there first. When Alison approached, Kayla gave her the ultimate role: mother of the family, and then took a back seat as Alison directed the play. Kayla was still the undisputed leader. Had she given this prime position to Alison as a peace offering?

The Merger

One of Drew's friends enjoyed playing with the girls and more and more the boys group and the girls groups began to merge. I wondered who would lead this merged group. The first time Drew's friends decided to play house with the girls, he was at a loss. His important role as leader

Leaders like Kayla, Drew, and Alison are full of good ideas and their followers are willing to sacrifice some autonomy for the sake of adventure.

was gone and he didn't know how to play as a follower. He spent most of one play time session looking in the play house window, not knowing what to do. Later he learned to watch for a while, figure out what was going on, and then ask to be the brother (or some other needed role).

By the end of the school year a large group of two or three boys and four girls were playing beautifully together. They created elaborate, imaginative play themes with Kayla or Alison as leaders. Although Drew now only led when the boys played alone, he enjoyed playing with this larger group.

Exclusion

Parents and teachers are often displeased with two characteristics of leaders: their bossiness and their exclusion of others. Giving directives is simply one aspect of leadership. Grown up leaders do it too. As far as exclusion goes, children exclude others because as leaders, they can only manage a small group. Adult groups also make decisions about limiting their size. It is probably more helpful to teach those who are excluded to deal with feelings of rejection than to insist that children play with peers they don't like. You can make suggestions to children of ways to make their requests less bossy, but sometimes this only succeeds in interrupting the flow of the play and is an unwelcome

interruption to both leaders and followers.

Bullies

Bullies are not leaders. They don't have willing followers. Bullies, in spite of all their bravado, are usually very unsure of themselves. When they are not being tough, you often see fearful looks on their faces. Other children avoid bullies. Because of this, bullies often need professional help. Without help they may experience a spiral of rejection: rejection by peers, teachers, and principals. This may continue all through their school years.

There is a difference between leaders and bullies. A leader might seem very demanding to adults, but have willing followers. If other children follow willingly, we are seeing effective leadership even though we might wish for a more democratic style. Children follow bullies because they are scared or don't know how not to.

Bribery

Another candidate for professional help would be the child who constantly bribes others (usually younger) to play. If a child can only get playmates by bribery he or she needs intervention. Other children

avoid this type of playmate also. The three preschool leaders I studied did occasionally resort to bribery to get a child to do what they wished, but this was one of many tools used; a technique to be pulled out as a last resort.

Confidence

Bullies and bribers lack self-esteem. The leaders that I studied were very confident and capable children. An important quality of leadership is confidence in one's ability to influence others. My subjects all believed in their ability to be influential. They were creative thinkers with high self-esteem.

Bossing Adults

Another type of child behavior which may concern adults can also be described as bossy. They make demands of adults. This is a very normal thing for a child to do especially those exploring their own autonomy (18 months to three years) and power (3 to 6 years). These demands usually center around a conflict of needs between adult and child, i.e. child wants to go someplace and adult doesn't, or adult wants to go someplace and child doesn't. It is irritating, but not abnormal. As an adult, you still have the upper hand. You may be willing to be influenced and

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choose to negotiate, but you make the final decision, because you are the leader. If you were a follower to your child's constant control, professional help would be needed. This doesn't mean that we never give in to our children's demands, it just means that we make the final decision about whether to give in or hang tight.

How Leadership is Developed

How is leadership developed in children, and how can adults help? Leadership, like creativity, flourishes in certain environments. Leadership is a social skill, and children learn to lead and to follow when they have long periods of unstructured social play in which to practice. As a parent or teacher you must demand that children in schools have long periods of uninterrupted play time.

Young children use interaction to comprehend people's identities, predict behavior, and gain a sense of competence and control in social interaction.
(Edwards, 1986, p.3)

School systems are now considering developmentally appropriate education, and sociodramatic play (pretend play with other children) as the appropriate way for young children to learn. Smilansky (1968) found skilled sociodramatic play to be an indicator of children's school

success. Those preschoolers who were good at sociodramatic play did better with social and cognitive tasks in kindergarten. If we want children to perfect leadership skills, they need *time* to do this during free play.

Contexts for Leadership

Contexts seem to make a difference in children's leadership abilities. Although some children achieve leadership with peers, most children are more likely to assume leadership of younger children. They are most likely to assume a follower role (even natural leaders) when they are placed with older youngsters. A familial grouping is ideal for developing social skills. A familial classroom has a wide range of ages grouped together. It is easy for the oldest children to develop leadership skills as they interact with the younger ones. As the youngest watch the older students, they too learn how to lead. The youngest are able to try out their leadership skills as they age.

Robin Becomes a Leader

One of Drew's followers was another five year old named Robin. Sometimes Robin would object to always doing things Drew's way, but in the end he would concede, because basically he liked Drew and enjoyed playing with him. As a four-year-old Robin had been very shy. When he was four I took Robin and a few friends to

McDonalds for lunch. Robin was so shy in the play space, he would only venture onto play equipment if it was empty or occupied by someone he knew. He steered away from any unknown children. When he was five, I again took Robin to McDonalds with friends. He acted like a different child. He took over the play scene, declaring it a castle, and giving orders to all the unknown children who were playing there.

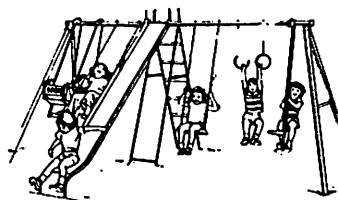
"Where did this come from?" I wondered about this boy who had taken orders from Drew all year. I decided that Robin had been studying leadership from Drew for the whole year, and he had learned his lessons well. When his chance came, he led with gusto. Because a child assumes a follower role doesn't mean he is unable to lead.

Attempts to Lead Are Not Always Successful

The three-year-old class (1 1/2 to 3 years old) went to a park for a pumpkin hunt. When we had been there about half an hour, Molly showed up with her five-year-old kindergarten son Stefan. He is the older brother of Ivana, one member of the class. During our time at the park, I observed Stefan's struggle to lead the whole group.

Stefan loves to talk to people. He will talk non-stop. He was following Tammy, one of the mothers, around the play area, talking to her. Usually he picks

me to be his listener. He usually talks excitedly about Jurassic Park (which he has never seen) or a TV show, Temple of Doom. (Something like that.) All of the young children were swinging, sliding, climbing or wandering around. I was pushing Curtis on a swing. Other adults were pushing kids on swings, helping kids slide or chatting. Some kids were swinging by themselves on their tummies, while dragging their feet in the mud puddles.



Stefan came over near the swings and shouted at all of us, "Everyone freeze. You must freeze or T. Rex will get you. T. Rex is sensitive to movement so you must freeze so he won't sense you and get you." I froze. No one else paid any attention. Stefan kept shouting his message to all of us in the park. There were 13 children and 13 women in our group. He tried desperately to get our compliance. His Mom stifled her giggles. One parent told him it was hard to freeze when you were on a swing. She was talking about the kids, but I think Stefan was more interested in gaining the cooperation of the adults. He went over to one adult whom he had never met and tried to convince her that she should freeze. She did so half-heartedly.

After trying repeatedly to organize our whole group without success, Stefan came

over and told me that T. Rex was actually only sensitive to animal movement. He changed his story to fit the fact that he could not get us to obey. I was amazed that Stefan had undertaken such a monumental task: to try to get 26 people to play his game. He shouted and he kept trying over and over; he went to individual members, all of this without success. In a "sour grapes" attitude, he changed his story.

I wonder what made Stefan think that he could get 13 adults and 13 toddlers to play his way. Has he tried this before? Maybe when he is on the playground with his kindergarten class, he is successful. This is an example of a leader trying to lead a resistant group in a direction they didn't want to go and it didn't work.

Ways to Foster Leadership

Direct instruction is usually ineffective when it comes to social skills. Here are some ways adults working or living with children can foster leadership:

1. model democratic leadership
2. provide environments where children have lots of time to play with others
3. arrange for children to be with a variety of age groups
4. appreciate children's attempts at leadership

Remember some leadership may be quite rough around the edges. A wait-and-see policy on the part of the adults (but be available if needed) may be best when children are working out their social structure. What we hope for, ultimately, is effective social participation for all the children in the group.

Still, leading and following are viewed here as essential aspects of effective social participation. Never to lead is never to be heard, never to have ideas carefully considered by others, and never to have an impact on the behaviors of thinking of peers. Never to follow, on the other hand, is never to benefit from the ideas of others or be swayed to another's viewpoint. (Trawick-Smith, 1988 P.58)

Tomorrow's Leaders

For each and every child, we can hope for the opportunity to develop the skills of leading and the skills of following. They are equally important to a society. And the next time you see a bossy child, remember, that child may turn out to be tomorrow's great leader.

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You may write to Marilyn Grevstad about this article at: 1655 NE 196th, Seattle, WA 98155.

Book Review



The Play's the Thing by Elizabeth Jones and Gretchen Reynolds, Columbia University, NY: Teachers College Press, 1992.

After years of observing adult interactions with children at play, Betty Jones and Gretchen Reynolds decided to write a book to help teachers who knew play was important, but felt useless as children played. *The Play's the Thing* is a book that tells adults what they can do to support children's play.

The Play's the Thing describes stages of play. Because of new skills which develop at each age, children's play takes different

forms. Babies and toddlers take joy in movement and sensory exploration of the things in their world. Preschoolers in addition to the joys of toddler hood, also pretend with friends. School age children add rules and structure to their former ways of playing and games become popular.

At each age play is the most important thing children do.

It is the way children develop their thinking powers and their ability to get along with other people. Most adults seem to understand that there is value to children's play, but what do adults do while they play? "A lot!" say Jones and Reynolds. They describe many roles for teachers. We'll look at three of them.

Stage Manager

The teacher sets the stage for play, provides props (classroom materials designed for play), sets them out to attract experimentation and creativity, and keeps them accessible.

Mediator

The teacher teaches conflict resolution skills in a way that sustains the play. A time out interrupts play and does not teach children how to resolve conflicts. Helping children understand the feelings and play needs of the other child sustains the play and therefore the learning.

Scribe

The teacher has opportunities to write down what children say or

do. This takes many forms: from making written observations, to writing the communications children need in their play. Teachers can make signs for children, write their comments about a given experience, write down their stories, or even draw block structures they have built. This form of representation is an important link to literacy.

Teachers who support children's play are supporting the highest form of learning. Jones and Reynolds claim, *The critical and divergent thinking that children practice in play and problem solving contribute significantly to the higher-level thinking skills they will later need in school...*

With this book in hand teachers will not only appreciate the play of young children, but will also value the role of the teacher who supports it. The authors suggest, "SLOW DOWN" as advice to keep in mind. We shortchange young children when we hurry them. We learn most about them, and help them learn most, when we pay attention to what is happening for them as they play."

--Reviewed by Marilyn Grevstad

Jean Clarke says, "This book is written for teachers, but I found it equally helpful for parents and grandparents."

Article Review



The Mystery of Humpty's Fall: Primary-School Children as Playmakers

If you are interested in the role of creative dramatics as a way to enhance children's creativity, social growth, self awareness, empathy, and communication skills, read the article *The Mystery of Humpty's Fall: Primary-School Children as Playmakers* in the September '96 issue of YOUNG CHILDREN, the journal of the National Association for the Education of Young Children.

Authors Dusty Brown Cline and David Ingerson describe the various elements of creative play in enough detail and with enough examples to encourage people who work with preschool children to give it a try. The children become players, audience, and play makers. To promote this activity the teacher/leader selects the plot and then alternately guides the children's play making with a close hand and encourages their free creative expression with an open hand.

The authors have found that keeping the boundaries secure is crucial to the success of the process. By keeping a distinct physical boundary between the stage and the audience, both the audience and the players develop respect for the stage and what is happening on it. The teacher also respects and encourages children's decisions as long as they fit within the boundaries.

The authors' summary of several research studies indicates that pretend play is

- a critical component of cognitive development,
- an important aid in social development,
- a way of developing reciprocal relationships, and
- an opportunity to learn that other people have different points of view.

The article includes 39 interesting looking references on helping children develop creative play. I hope you enjoy this experimentation with the nursery rhyme Humpty Dumpty as much as I have.

--Reviewed by Jean Illsley Clarke

Suggested Activity I

Find the Young Leaders

For an individual or a group

Go to a place where young children are engaged in free play. Notice which child seems to be leading.

- Look for the three leadership skills identified in the article:
 1. giving directions
 2. seeking agreement
 3. assigning roles
- Also look for examples of the five leadership characteristics described in the article.
- Notice whether the children who are following seem willing or whether they seem fearful or compliant without willingness.
- If there is a child who is bullying, contrast that child's behavior with the behavior of the leader child.

Suggested Activity II

Supporting the Growth of Young Leaders

For a group

- Ask the group to list *reasons* that developing leadership skills in children is important.
- Ask the group to list *qualities* they admire in leaders.
- Ask the group to identify the *ages* at which they think the ability to lead can be noticed and ways adults can *support* children in the development of leadership skills.
- Hand out copies of the article *Okay Everyone Do It My Way*. Ask people to highlight skills and behaviors young leaders display as you read the article aloud.
- Compare the skills and behaviors identified by Marilyn Grevstad with the list made earlier of leadership qualities people admire.
- Discuss ways these early attempts at leadership can become refined skills in adult leaders.
- Ask the group if they agree with the author's position that all children need to learn to be both leaders and followers.
- Ask people to identify ways they can support the growth of leadership skills in young children they know.



Everyone Do It This Way!
Young Children Who Are Leaders

This space is for your observations about how children develop leader skills.

Opening Activity
For Supporting Leadership Skills in Young Children

Hand out name tags and ask people to:

- Choose a partner. Make a name tag for him and ask him to tell you three leadership skills he admires most.
- Introduce your partner and tell the group what leadership skills he admires most if he is willing for you to share that information.

Closing Activity
That Encourages People to Claim Their Learning

At the end of the meeting, briefly review the activities of the meeting.

- Ask several people to share any new thoughts about noticing and supporting leadership skills in young children.
- Ask for Resentments. Listen to resentments, do not defend or explain.
- Ask for Appreciations.

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WE

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Edited by Jean Illsley Clarke

* Ideas and activities or materials to use individually or in support groups.

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