

Too young for respect? Realising respect for young children in their everyday environments

A cross-cultural analysis

By Shanti George



54

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*Too young for respect?
Realising respect for young
children in their everyday
environments*

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Executive summary

‘Children should be seen and not heard’. Dismissive statements like this one about children, especially young children, are heard in various societies and express a trivialisation of childhood that is often taken as justified.

This paper challenges such routine disrespect shown to young children in everyday life, both in word and deed, in cultures around the world. It highlights the conceptual disrespect towards young children upon which much theorising about ‘respect’ – for adults – has been premised from the secular philosophies of the ‘Enlightenment’ until today.

General Comment 7 of the Committee on the Rights of the Child urges that the youngest children should be respected as persons in their own right, within an environment of reliable and affectionate relationships based on respect and understanding. But what do such environments look like on the ground? Two case studies are presented, one pertaining to children from birth to three years in day care environments, and the other focusing on children above the age of four years in primary school settings.

Introduction: How disrespect towards young children can appear to be routine

We have all seen it, no matter which society we live in. In fact, often we do not notice it anymore because it is a manifestation of power relations that we come to take for granted, the power that adults wield over children – particularly young children – through their control of resources and their greater size and strength.

We have all seen young children pulled by the hand in a direction that they do not wish to go, or in societies where cars are common we have passed a protesting child being wrestled into a car seat – and we may even have exchanged knowing glances with the unknown adult in a general spirit of solidarity (implicitly saying ‘How else can you deal with them when they are too young to understand that they have to do as we say?’).

Many of us who would balk at the use of force under most circumstances have developed a blind spot to adults routinely exerting their greater physical strength to coerce young children. We may even overlook a ‘gentle little smack’ or so, when we ourselves would be shaken and outraged if any physical violence were used against us in contemporary societies that are premised upon protection of citizens from violence. Sometimes the battle is not one of relative physical strength but what is called ‘a clash of wills’, which can persist until an unhappy or even a crying child complies with an order to do such-and-such. Afterwards,

adults often say of their children to each other: ‘They have to learn to obey’ or ‘She shouldn’t feel she can get away with it’ or ‘He mustn’t think he can do just as he likes.’

Parents generally have the best interests of their children at heart and try to act with them in mind. All the same, the traditions in which parents themselves grew up have often not imbued them with an active appreciation of children as individuals, who have their own ideas, wishes, ambitions and values.

A West African author reports: “Failures in learning are verbally admonished, usually with a terse proverb or verbal abuse and [are] sometimes punished by the withdrawal of privileges – usually food – and by spanking” (Nsamenang 2008: 16).

We may rationalise situations on the street or in the home by saying that most of the behaviour towards children described above is exhibited by adults without any exposure to formal training in child development or pedagogy. One case study of childcare centres in a European town (Priebe 2008a), however, highlights similar behaviour by professional caregivers, who feed very young children on the principle of “It is not you who decides when you have had enough but me” (p. 1), sometimes spooning food into a child’s mouth while standing behind the child and supervising the class at

the same time, taking no notice that “the child is pressing her lips together and moving her head away” (p. 2). Similarly, caregivers may prevent young children from sitting on their potties when they show a desire to do so, and instead make them wait until ‘toilet time’, when the entire group of children is herded towards a row or circle of potties (Priebe 2008b: 2). No adult would tolerate such control of their bodily functions under normal circumstances.

Scripture is sometimes invoked to sanction disrespect towards young children, and this is something that many different religions have in common. Supposed Bible-based advocacy of the use of corporal punishment for children is active across continents with strong Christian groups, notably – in alphabetical order – Africa, Australia and North America, and also in countries like Britain (Martin 2008). Countervailing voices from within Christian theology speak out against corporal punishment of children – again based on citation of Biblical texts – and strengthen “the children’s rights/academic researchers/human rights community who are advocating against corporal punishment on the basis of solid scientific data” (Martin 2008: 1).

The objections of vocal Christian groups to restrictions on parental spanking have been identified as central to the USA’s resistance to ratify the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (Martin 2008: 1). A prominent North American organisation that promotes spanking by parents calls itself ‘Focus on the Family’, with a publication titled *Dare to Discipline* that purportedly embraces Biblical

texts (quoted in Martin 2008: 2). Spanking then becomes a technical issue: “Should a child be spanked with a hand or [a] neutral object?” (p. 3), to which the author of *Dare to Discipline* responds with personal anecdotes: the “small switch” his mother used on him, and his own story about the boy of some friends who was “just asking for it” and got an “overdue spanking; in a parking lot, which he had ... been begging for and expecting as his rightful due from his parents (who did not disappoint)” (p. 3). Similar organisations promote the “belief that spanking is a necessary part of child-rearing” (p. 4).

Here and in many other cases, children are clearly believed to be ‘too young for respect.’ It is partly their size that allows adults to literally overpower young children – i.e. they are seen as ‘too small for respect.’ Children’s smaller size is generally considered an external manifestation of their internal immaturity. Young children, the received wisdom goes, represent human material that is still in the process of being shaped by superior adults – in other words, young children are considered ‘too immature for respect.’

The people cited above, who claim to be adherents of the Bible’s teachings, view children as being at an early stage of moral and spiritual development, and urge responsible adults to use spanking as one means of education through to moral and spiritual maturity. Chapter 1 of this paper highlights how the secular philosophies of the Enlightenment – which are usually considered to be more impartial than some

extreme religious views – nonetheless echo the view that young children are too immature for respect.

Chapter 2 portrays a different view of children's development, based on the premise that children have the same rights as adults, as affirmed by the United Nations' Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1989: respect begins at birth, and young children are full persons already and should be treated as such (UNICEF et al. 2006). While it might not be difficult to elicit token acknowledgement of this statement, translating acknowledgement into everyday practice in homes, childcare centres, schools and public places is a different matter. Adults who shudder at media reports on child abuse in various horrific forms do not realise that they are operating at the lower end of the spectrum of exploiting their relative size and strength and power when they coerce a resisting child into a garment that he or she does not want to wear.

Chapters 3 and 4 draw on two case studies from different parts of the world that seek to create a social order where adults and young children interact in relationships of mutual respect in the micro-arena of day care centres and the early school years. Experiments with building such relationships provide important lessons – which arise from failures as well as from successes. Then, the Conclusion draws

together arguments from relevant literature and experiences from real life that will help us move a little further towards a world where respect for young children is routine and taken as natural.

Mutual respect will be emphasised throughout this paper, to pre-empt what is often a knee-jerk response in adults to any talk about respect for children and their rights. This response includes such objections as “Oh, so now they are to become the bosses?” and the fear that there will be a reversal of what children are often told by adults: “You have to listen to me but I don't have to listen to you.” To anticipate some of these voices (cited later), Sennett emphasises that respect goes beyond an “adversarial model” (2004: 254); it does not come in fixed quantities, and it is not a “zero-sum game” (p. 46) in which more respect for children will mean less respect for adults. Instead, he notes “reciprocity is the foundation of mutual respect” (p. 219). Lansdown cites a series of cases from South Asia that “found that respecting what children say does not lead to lack of respect for parents. Indeed, many parents and children cited improved family relationships, greater respect for parents and contributions to the local community as positive outcomes” (2005: 17). In brief, “when children's own rights are respected, they learn to respect the rights of others” (2005: 7).

Chapter 1: Conceptualising ‘respect’ – Challenging the conceptual bias against young children

“Respect seems so fundamental to our experience of social relations and self that we ought to define more clearly what it is,” writes Sennett (2004: 49), in a rare book-length analysis of the concept of respect. He notes that far too often respect is paid by lip service rather than being actually practised, even among adults – let alone with children.

Although his focus is on the lack of respect shown to people from racial or religious minorities and to those living below the poverty line, much of the discussion can be extended to children; for example in his description that “he or she is not *seen* – as a full human being whose presence matters” (Sennett 2004: 3).

Recognition is a key element of respect, Sennett argues (p. 54). The literature on recognition is growing, but the author of a recent book on the subject points out “no widely recognised philosophical work of high repute has been published with the title *Recognition*” (Ricoeur 2005: 1). Although discussions about the politics of recognition do not include children among categories that merit greater recognition, some descriptions of ‘non-recognition’ and ‘disrespect’ apply very clearly to young children, e.g. “being rendered invisible in the authoritative communicative practices” and “being disparaged in stereotypic public cultural representations or in everyday life interactions” (Fraser, quoted in Kymlicka 2002: 332–333).

The thinkers of the Enlightenment – and the modern scholars who build on their arguments – have certainly moved the frontiers of respect and recognition forward. Sennett highlights several of these thinkers, including the philosopher Fichte, who first cast recognition into legal language, exploring how laws can be framed so that the needs of strangers, foreigners and migrants are acknowledged in a constitution; Rousseau, who enlarged the discussion of recognition to include the street as well as the court, arguing for mutual acknowledgement as a matter of social behaviour as much as a legal right; John Rawls, in whose writings recognition meant respecting the needs of those who are unequal; and Jurgen Habermas, for whom recognition meant respecting the views of those whose interests lead them to disagree (Sennett 2004: 54).

Disturbingly, however, Sennett reveals that the powerful thinkers from the Enlightenment explicitly excluded children from the categories of people to whom respect is due. These philosophers recast the concept of respect, but did so in a manner that emphasised adulthood as the basis for full respect. As Sennett notes, “this is to make childhood and adulthood, immaturity and maturity, into political categories” (Sennett 2004: 104).

Thus, thinkers from the Enlightenment onwards may have moved forward the frontiers of respect

by challenging the unfair exclusion of certain social classes and racial groups, but the arguments they used deny full respect and recognition to young children.

“The belief that dependence demeans derives ... from a concept of adulthood ... a longstanding argument in political thought which could be called the ‘infantilisation thesis.’ Liberal thinkers have supposed that dependency ... makes adults behave like children. Kant dramatically and succinctly put forward the infantilisation thesis... ‘Enlightenment is Man’s emergence from his self-incurred immaturity. Immaturity is the inability to use one’s own understanding without the guidance of another’”

(Sennett 2004: 102–103)

This stigmatisation of infancy is given a powerful image: “Of all those who have invoked the shame of dependence, it could justly be said that they have a horror of the primal maternal scene: the infant sucking at the mother’s breast” (Sennett 2004: 107).¹

The starting point of human life is therefore invoked as shameful in philosophical debates

about respect. Why are infancy and childhood debased in this way?

“Locke accepted the reign of a father over his children as one of just dominion and submission ... because the capacity to reason independently is undeveloped in the child.”

(Sennett 2004: 104).

“The issue is adult self-sovereignty. ... The liberal fathers drew a sharp contrast between childhood and adulthood. ... That sharp contrast supposed that human maturation into the adult public realm is akin to a moth emerging from a chrysalis.”

(Sennett 2004: 113).

This view of children as emergent and incomplete human beings was echoed in the 1970s by an influential American senator arguing against the welfare state, when he said that dependency “is an incomplete state in life: normal in the child, abnormal in the adult” (Moynihan 1973: 17).

Sennett argues strongly against this demeaning of adult dependency, especially as expressed in the routine disrespect experienced by families

¹ A novel about India published in the last decade is titled *The Mammarys of the Welfare State* (Chatterjee 2000). Such imagery is often criticised for being sexist in denigrating a breastfeeding woman; less commented on is the offensive portrayal of the infant who is being breastfed. A book by Benjamin R. Barber (2007) bears the title *Consumed: How Markets Corrupt Children, Infantilise Adults and Swallow Citizens Whole*. This title already uses the term ‘infantilise’ pejoratively in the subtitle. The Dutch translation of the book goes further by moving the pejorative use to the main title, viz. *De Infantiele Consument* or ‘*The Infantile Consumer*.’ Ironically, the case study presented in Chapter 3 of this paper about children below the age of three suggests that infants do know when they have consumed enough and signal this by turning their faces away or pressing their lips shut – after which controlling adults may then force further consumption on them! The suggestion in the title of Barber’s book that adults behave like infants when they consume indiscriminately is therefore not based on an accurate portrayal of infant behaviour but instead represents an unfair depiction of infant behaviour by adults.

living on welfare or other forms of state support. Here he draws on his own childhood experience with a single mother in a housing project in Chicago where residents “were demeaned because they were treated like children” (Sennett 2004: 106).

People may be dependent, he argues, but their autonomy should not be denied to them because of their dependence; the same can be said about children’s necessary dependence on adults. Sennett in fact cites child psychologists Erikson and Winnicott to reinforce his arguments about the “psychological possibility of combining dependency and autonomy” (p. 172). He argues against imposing “a demeaning, willing passivity ... blind obedience” (p. 107) on those who are dependent in one way or another, similar to the willing passivity and blind obedience that are expected of children. Those who are committed to respecting young children can use Sennett’s arguments that the issue is “passivity, not dependency” (p. 176) and follow his invoking of Keynes’ aspiration to “what might be called a democratic form of dependency” (p. 174) that does not presuppose that children have to be passive because of their dependence, nor do adults need to be disrespectful of children’s feelings and opinions. The case study in Chapter 3 illustrates respectful behaviour

towards children below the age of three years and begins by reconceptualising the relationship between dependence, autonomy, respect and democracy.

If “the inequalities of class and race clearly mak[e] it difficult to treat each other with respect” (Sennett 2004: 46–47), so do the inequalities of age and size that separate adults from young children. For adults to treat children with respect on a routine basis, “people would have to break down in certain ways their own tacit assumptions and shared pictures of the world” (Sennett 2004: 246), such as the tacit assumption and shared view that only adults are citizens and deserve the respect due to citizens, whereas children are not mature enough to merit respect in their own right.

“The liberal fathers meant to establish the dignity of citizens, as adults” (Sennett 2004: 113). The fact that children too are citizens has been increasingly asserted since the Convention on the Rights of the Child came into being 20 years ago. The following sections draw first on the debates affirming that children are full persons and therefore deserve full respect, and then on efforts to transform that belief into everyday interactions based on mutual respect between children and adults.

Chapter 2: Respect for young children is central to their rights and participation

“The Convention requires that children, including the very youngest children, be respected as persons in their own right,” asserts General Comment 7 of the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child (UNICEF et al. 2006: 36). The Committee encourages recognition that young children are holders of all rights affirmed in the Convention.

“Young children require nurturance, care, guidance and protection, in ways that are respectful of their individuality and growing capacities” (UNICEF et al. 2006: 37). If “respecting young children’s evolving capacities is crucial for realisation of their rights” - then the notion of “evolving capacities” acts as an “enabling principle” that refers to “processes of maturation and learning whereby children progressively acquire knowledge, competencies and understanding” (p. 42). This is a radically different approach to childhood and adulthood from those outlined in the previous section, in which children were considered too young and too immature for respect or dignity; in contrast, General Comment 7 encourages “respect for the feelings and views of the young child” (p. 40) and “respect for the child’s dignity” within “an environment of reliable and affectionate relationships based on respect and understanding” (p. 47).

Such a position upholds a “philosophy of respect” that “challenges the view that the early years are merely a preparation for later

childhood and adulthood. ... It necessarily counters the power relations that are inherent in adult–child relations” (Lansdown 2005: 1). Philosophies of respect have to find concrete expression in “respectful environments” (p. 19) where interactions are “rooted in respect for children and their abilities” (p. 23). These interactions should express democracy with a small ‘d’; “a democratic ethos of listening and dialogue with young children” (Moss 2007: 13).

“[T]reating others with respect doesn’t just happen, even with the best will in the world: to convey respect means finding the words and gestures which make it felt and convincing,” Sennett notes (p. 207). In the following section, we look at attempts to create respectful environments in young children’s everyday lives, environments that embody a ‘democratic ethos’.

We focus on two detailed cases below, one concerning children from birth to three years and the other discussing younger children in primary school environments. If children aged six years and below are considered to be too young for respect, they are certainly not seen as too young for violent and disruptive behaviour, nor for the exercise of sanctions as severe as suspension and exclusion from school, as illustrated by this recent report from England:

“Under-fives suspended from schools. Thousands of children aged five and under were

suspended from schools in England last year for assaulting fellow pupils and teachers, new figures show. In the last 12 months, 580 five-year-olds, 300 four-year-olds and 120 three-year-olds were given fixed-period exclusions for attacking another pupil, according to official Government data. And 10 pupils aged two and under were suspended for physically assaulting another child. In addition, 890 five-year-olds were suspended for assaulting an adult, along with 420 four-year-olds and 140 three-year-olds. The figures were obtained in response to a parliamentary question by shadow schools secretary Michael Gove.

In total, more than 4,000 children aged five and under were handed fixed-period exclusions for a variety of reasons. The data showed that 10 five-year-olds were suspended for bullying, while a further 20 were suspended for sexual misconduct. Just under 1,000 under-fives were suspended for persistent disruptive behaviour.

Mr Gove said: ‘The number of young children being suspended from school is shocking. Teachers need the powers to maintain order in the classroom and clamp down on bad behaviour before it escalates into violence. Ministers have eroded teachers’ ability to keep order by restricting their powers to deal with disruptive and violent children.’”

(Eurochild 2008)

This report – with its endorsement of additional ‘powers’ to be bestowed on teachers in order

to ‘clamp down’ on young children and ‘keep order’ – provides a striking contrast to positions that uphold young children’s rights and participation. Lansdown, in contrast, gives an example of a junior school “in a particularly deprived area of the UK ... characterised by high levels of violence, disaffection, bullying and truancy” (Alderson, quoted in Lansdown 2005: 22). This school was ‘turned around’ by a new head teacher who consulted with the entire school community – including the children – and introduced mechanisms that enabled children to participate fully and constructively in school life. “As a result of these changes, the school became very popular, the children were happier, achieved better educational results, and acquired considerable skills of negotiation, democratic decision-making and social responsibility” (Alderson, quoted in Lansdown 2005: 22). The case study in Chapter 4 below takes this discussion further, covering nine schools in different cultural contexts within a single country, and drawing some wider conclusions about respect for young children in their everyday environments.

The two cases that follow represent systematic efforts to create ‘respectful environments’ for young children from birth onwards. Both these endeavours bear names that resonate with the discussion above: ‘Living democracy in day nurseries’ and ‘Young children and the Human Dignity Initiative’. Both endeavours are set in macro-political environments where respect in general is problematic: the first in the former socialist eastern part of Germany and the second in Israel.

Chapter 3: From acknowledging the need for respect to practising it: Children below the age of three years – ‘Living Democracy’ (Demokratie Leben) in day care centres and schools, eastern Germany

The very phrase ‘the child’s dignity’ – used in General Comment 7 on the Convention on the Rights of the Child – usually brings a smile to adult lips in response to what seems an oxymoron: ‘dignity’ is generally associated with venerable age or outstanding achievement or wealth, not with a five-year-old playing in the sand, let alone a baby whose diaper has to be changed.

Can respect really be coupled with dependency in the case of children in general, and the very youngest children in particular? The discussion in preceding sections of this paper has already cited Sennett on the refusal of many social theorists from the time of the Enlightenment until today to acknowledge respect for those who are dependent, whether adults (such as those on income support) or children. Sennett however followed Keynes in aspiring to a democratic position whereby being dependent does not demean a human being, and turned to child psychologists like Erikson and Winnicott for approaches that recognise that dependency does not mean the denial of autonomy.

The ‘Living Democracy’ project in day nurseries in one town in eastern Germany explicitly

involves recognising and respecting the autonomy of young children from their first year of life up to the age of three years. Priebe, who has evaluated the project, writes:

“Participation of children five or eight years of age takes a form that is very different from participation of children who are one year old. Teachers may take the premise that older children can address their needs autonomously for granted but dismiss the same premise when it comes to younger children on grounds that this premise is not age-appropriate” (2008a: 1).²

Autonomy is defined as “the self-determination of a person, to the ability to make decisions about quintessential matters concerning him or her directly. Generally, this refers to the ‘right of a person to make decisions without inappropriate interference by others’” (Pauer-Studer, quoted in Priebe 2008a: 2). “Autonomy does not mean that everybody does whatever he or she wants. ... [T]he idea that autonomy means a complete dissociation from the rules and norms of society ... describes anomie or anarchy, rather than autonomy” (p. 3). “[T]he point is to grant children their autonomy and

² All quotations from Priebe are from English translations kindly supplied by him, and the page numbers given here refer to these translations and not to the original German text.

to realise that children pursue autonomy from the moment they are born. Children have the right to be granted and awarded autonomy” (p. 4). “The urge for autonomy ... is present in children right from the start. But there are psychological and physical developments that need to be considered so that excessive demands are not placed on the child. Usually the child signals the pace of development and shows what he would like to be able to do by himself. It is clear that not every attempt is successful from the start and patient teachers will show understanding. Young children need space and time to try out their abilities and to explore” (Priebe 2008c: 2).

What does respecting the autonomy of children aged one and two years – who are dependent on adults for assistance with eating and excretion – look like ‘on the ground’ in nurseries that are part of the ‘Demokratie Leben project’? Priebe gives us a detailed description:

“For example, when a child signals while she is being fed that she has had enough and the caregiver stops feeding her, the child is ... granted autonomy regarding her food intake. At the same time, she experiences that her ‘opinion’ is noticed and considered. The child realises that her actions lead to a consequence and will continue expressing her opinion. When a child experiences circumstances in which her expressions or opinions are not noticed or disregarded, and the feeding continues regardless of what she does, it is possible that she will perceive her expressions as futile. ... No wonder that some children stuff themselves with sweets

and fast food later without being distracted by feelings of satiety. A different reaction is present when a child develops anorexia. This is often a rebellion with which a child tries to regain autonomy at least over her own body. Children with anorexia are often described as especially well behaved and conforming children who ‘have barely learned to shape their surroundings and themselves in an active manner’ [quoting Habermas]. ‘These children often come from families that allow only very little autonomy’ [quoting Bents]. ... The highest attention should therefore be paid to perceive the child’s signals and to react to them in an appropriate manner, not only verbally but also in one’s actions. This, of course, is not easy as it is with older children because the younger children can’t express themselves through well-chosen words but rather communicate non-verbally. Still, it is possible to clearly understand what the child is trying to communicate, for example when a child is pressing her lips together and moves the head away when she is being fed. It is necessary that the caregiver has constant eye contact with the child during feeding.”

(Priebe 2008b: 1–2).

“Before changing a child’s diaper, one has to establish contact with the child and ask – if it is age appropriate – whether one should change his diaper now. This is not solely a yes/no question, it is rather used to talk the child through it and explain why changing the diaper is necessary from a certain point in time for hygiene. Children often don’t want to relinquish the content of their

diapers immediately, which does not mean that they want to evade the diaper-changing situation as such but rather that they want to keep their 'product' for a while longer. There should be an agreement with the child, when the diaper will be changed. This point in time is accepted by the child and a postponement – even if it's only a matter of minutes – is often enough to grant a child his autonomy and possibly gives him the opportunity to finish a game or an activity. This also lets the child feel included in the diaper-changing situation. ... The caregiver should always tell the child during the diaper changing process what she is doing. This is something we, as adults, also appreciate. When we are, for example, on the dentist's chair and the dentist explains to us what is happening in our mouths. The child should not feel at someone's mercy at any point during the diaper changing process. It is self evident that the privacy of the child has to be protected during the diaper changing process... There should be an opportunity to shield the child from the eyes of other children or adults present, this is achieved by putting a cloth over the diaper-changing table."

(Priebe 2008c: 3).

Feeding with respect a child who is not yet old enough to feed her or himself, and changing a diaper in a respectful and interactive manner

(rather than a task carried out as if on some animate object while engaging in conversation with other caregivers) shows respect for the integrity of human bodies, regardless of age.³ As Sennett points out, "Fichte built his concept of human rights on respect for the integrity of the body, as Thomas Jefferson did also in the American Enlightenment" (Sennett 2004: 57).

In this case, respect is not only shown to individual young children but is encouraged within the entire configuration of relationships at the day care centre, as is illustrated below:

"The caregiver asks the children what opportunities they have for their activities in the afternoon. To play outside was impossible because it was too cold and too slippery. The children made different suggestions: the relaxation room, the gymnastics room or the video room. The caregiver explained that another group was using the gymnastics room already. This limited the choice to the relaxation room and the video room. The majority of the children wanted to use the relaxation room, but some voted for the video room. The teacher asked the children how one could solve the problem when the teacher had to keep an eye on everybody. The children suggested that I (the observer in the evaluation) would look after the children in the video room while the teacher would go to the relaxation room. The caregiver said

³ Although the specific cases cited of children's feeding and excretion are from a culture where spoons are used for feeding and diapers for hygiene, the author's personal observation in contexts where children are fed by hand and where diapers are not used (in various parts of India and Zimbabwe, for example) is that here too adults tend to handle these activities as something 'done to' children or 'done for' them rather than as activities done with them.

this wasn't possible since I wasn't a caregiver and could thus not look after the children. One boy suggested to go to the relaxation room first and then to the video room. The caregiver said this was a great suggestion. She asked the children whether they agreed to follow the boy's suggestion. Two children don't agree. They only want to go to the video room. The caregiver then suggests that the children who only want to go to the video room may go with the caregiver from the other group in the adjacent room. She tells one child that she could go and ask her. The children go with her to the video room. The example above was observed in a group of older children. For younger children, materials like photo cards on which different activities are depicted, are well suited to let them choose what activity they would like to engage in. This makes it easier for children who can't talk yet to participate. The cards could – for example – show pictures of the video room and the gymnastics room. If children put play stones on the picture that shows the preferred activity, a picture of the wishes and preferences of the group emerges that is also understood by the younger children.

The teacher negotiates with the children what they should do in the afternoon. This shows that negotiating means more than just voting. When the vote decides, the majority is always content but in a

worst case scenario almost half the group is unhappy or – like in this example – only two children. But two discontented children are already two too many. The goals of negotiation processes are that nobody is left behind or sidelined. This happens especially if the same child is repeatedly unable to get his preference granted in a voting process. Negotiation until a consensus is reached is, naturally, a perfected art. But it is always worth trying.”

(Priebe 2008d: 2).⁴

This last discussion highlights the relationship between mutual respect and democracy. Here are some broader reflections on the relationship based on this case: “Democracy and day nursery are two terms that are not immediately associated with each other. But where and when does democracy start? In pre-school? In day care? In school? Or only when people are old enough to vote? Knowledge and insights gained from the evaluation of the project ‘Living democracy in day care centres’ show that the basis for a democratic everyday culture can indeed already be formed in the day nursery” (Priebe 2008a: 1). Such reflections flesh out what Moss has described as “the ‘democratic profile’ of a nursery” (2007: 13), in his arguments about early childhood education as democratic practice.

The study summarised above is intended “to provide pointers and to indicate directions, in which the work with children under three

⁴ The order of the last two paragraphs has been reversed to facilitate the wider argument.

years of age may be developed to facilitate their autonomy and to let them participate in matters concerning them at an early age” (Priebe 2008a: 1). Children who are less than a year old usually have to be fed at home as well as at the day nursery, and need to have their diapers changed there as well, thus the discussion above has relevance to parents as well as to caregivers. At the day nursery, beyond activities centred on eating and hygiene, the dynamics of several young children clustered together in the care of

a few adults generates possibilities for exploring relationships of respect beyond the home and the neighbourhood. At some point after their third or fourth birthdays, young children graduate from day care to pre-school or kindergarten or to the early grades of school, and their social world expands dramatically. The following case study addresses the challenges of a continuum of respectful behaviour towards young children, in the exponentially larger and more complex social setting of a school.

Chapter 4: From acknowledging the need for respect to practising it: Children aged four to eight years – The Human Dignity Initiative in primary schools in Israel⁵

Violence is of great concern in schools in Israel, as elsewhere in the world, related to individual children behaving violently as well as generalised violence among and across groups of children. The situation in one of the schools discussed below was summarised as follows by the Human Dignity Initiative Team: “Cursing and hitting were part of routine, in addition to damaging property – robberies and breaking into lockers.” In such situations, younger children in schools are at serious risk of being bullied by older ones and, in a vicious spiral, of growing up to be bullies themselves as they progress to the higher grades.

The project ‘Young Children and the Human Dignity Initiative’ covered nine primary schools located in neighbourhoods that are disadvantaged socially, politically or economically. Many were disadvantaged on many levels and were usually in similarly disadvantaged urban locations in various parts of Israel.

The problem analysis did not present primary school-age children as ‘little hooligans’ in urgent need of discipline. The focus was instead on schools as organisations, and each school was approached as a complex system of relationships

that must become imbued with respect for every individual’s dignity. The goal was that the behaviour of all actors – principal, staff, parents and children – would become mutually respectful. The only new resource introduced into a school by the project was a facilitator from the Human Dignity Initiative team, who was expected, over a period of three years, to mobilise and institutionalise resources for respect and empathy that were already present among the various actors in the school. To what extent this actually occurred on a sustained basis is analysed at the end of the case study.

The project exemplified respect for early childhood, children’s rights and children’s participation by:

- explicitly recognising the personhood and dignity of young children;
- establishing symmetrical relationships of respect between children and adults, rather than the more usual asymmetrical relationships;
- translating abstract rights – a child’s own rights as well as other people’s – into tangible everyday behaviour;
- encouraging each child to understand the intrinsic value of his or her self, as well as

⁵ *The discussion of this case is an adaptation of Human Dignity Initiative (2005).*

the value of another person's self; and

- promoting early exposure to values of human dignity and behaviour oriented towards respect.

The nine schools represented a range of challenging environments, for example:

- In Arab schools, the Human Dignity project had to establish credibility with teachers who routinely waited for hours at roadblocks and who experienced disrespectful treatment by soldiers.
- One secular Jewish school was explicitly based on 'democratic principles' between staff and students, with children from kindergarten onwards involved in the discussions and the voting that decided the school's daily life. The issue in this school was how to agree on boundaries that staff, students and parents had to respect.
- A religious Jewish school saw Human Dignity work as based on values enshrined in scripture, but struggled to develop appropriate behaviour based on those values for different categories of actors within the school.
- An Arab school proved successful in invoking attitudes towards the 'other' in Islam as a means to increase respect towards young children with impaired hearing among first grade pupils.

In such different cultural contexts, the project had to seek universally acceptable norms while respecting diversity. Examples of such norms were the unacceptability of corporal punish-

ment, and a situation where a teacher boasted: "children do not dare raise their eyes to me" exemplified not respect but repression.

Respect begins at the top. Some principals were found to use verbal violence against both staff and children, routinely resorting to public humiliation.

- The project was to be inaugurated in one school with a display of balloons on which children had written messages expressing respect, but their excitement took a little time to subside, during which time the principal and one teacher had already begun screaming 'Where is your respect?' and 'Shut up!' at the children, not perceiving the contradictions in their behaviour.
- One principal used her power of office to enforce respectful relationships (a contradiction in terms). At a workshop for teachers conducted by the facilitator, this principal tried to bully the facilitator, but – to her credit – later acknowledged that this was inappropriate.
- A school principal had begun 'values education' activities based on Jewish scripture that endorsed and promoted respect, but he did not include teachers who removed their head covering after the school day because he did not consider them role models.

Leaders need to serve as personal examples, principals were told, and the eyes of others in the organisation are constantly on them, assessing to what extent the leaders exemplify in their daily behaviours the values being

promoted. Most principals involved in the project showed a capacity to learn and to grow in respectful behaviour. They were aware of their central role; in one school, levels of violence decreased significantly after a new principal took over, even before this school joined the Human Dignity Initiative. Also, principals may be at the apex of power within a school, but in dealing with the world outside, they too are vulnerable to the arrogant use of power by 'superiors.' From the nine schools, for example, there were reports of the local head of the Education Department arriving at a major meeting very late, and of a school inspector chastising a school principal in front of staff.

Power relationships at various levels mirrored those between the teacher and children. "Often, teachers fear the child's behaviours," project staff noted. "The teacher's response to this fear is to 'show the child who's the boss', to demonstrate to the child how strong the teacher is and how small the child is. One of the project's purposes is to enlarge a teacher's ability to contain the children's behaviour and feelings, without resorting to the use of power." Fear of loss of authority and the felt need to 'show who's the boss' is also what motivated principals to humiliate teachers in public, and in turn moved officials from the Education Department to 'put down' school principals. At these levels, disrespect was verbal, not physical, but physical violence was sometimes used by teachers against students.

In one school, the facilitator noticed that many teachers carried small sticks or short lengths of

rubber hoses in their briefcases. Many apparently brandished these 'weapons' to threaten children and maintain order, and – according to informal talks that the facilitator initiated with students – some of the teachers actually used them to punish unruly children. During the second workshop, the facilitator worked with the teachers on the ways in which they confronted misbehaviour, and the issue of the sticks and hoses came up. As the teachers reluctantly acknowledged that corporal punishment contradicts human dignity, the facilitator placed a wastebasket in the centre of the room and asked that the teachers demonstrate their commitment to dignity by depositing the hoses and sticks in the wastebasket. Everyone complied.

The sticks and hoses clearly served a purpose and apparently gave the teachers a sense of security. The facilitator's act was bold. Should such an act have been better undertaken by the principal rather than the facilitator? The facilitator felt that the principal's tenuous authority with the staff had prevented him taking such action to date. When a defence mechanism was challenged (and here, surrendered, in one dramatic moment), the teachers needed to be provided with new tools and abilities for confronting the fears that prompted the earlier carrying of 'weapons.' The facilitator explored with the teachers how they might maintain order without using threats of corporal punishment.

Disrespectful speech is verbal violence. Irritated teachers have said to a child, "When God distributed brains, he skipped you," or "I knew you wouldn't get it." Many teachers seemed

convinced that empathy, listening and understanding are antithetical to maintaining order and setting limits. Teachers angrily demanded “What do we need all this soft stuff for?” or “How can we be empathic towards a kid who hits other kids or who uses profane language?” Animated discussions took place during workshops about the place of empathy in the setting of limits:

- A teacher remembered her childhood and being hurt by her teacher’s authoritarian style. Having understood her own experience, she changed her approach to students. She was at first opposed to listening empathically to a violent child, but later agreed to listen to the child without necessarily condoning bad behaviour.
 - Another teacher reported a successful shift to a facilitative style, and that shortly thereafter: “A child asked me how I am feeling, something that has never happened in the past.”
 - During a workshop on ‘dignified’ and ‘undignified’ behaviour, one teacher cried, and later reported that she had realised that her marital relationship was not based on human dignity. She raised the subject with her husband and they resolved the ensuing crisis. The school principal saw this as demonstrating the project’s success. The facilitator commented: “I was flattered that I had managed to reach people with the message, although I had not intended that the workshops should affect relationships in this way.”
- Children in the nine schools were influenced when their teachers exemplified respectful behaviour and used strategies that facilitate problem analysis, anger management and development of empathy.
- A kindergarten teacher interrupted a physical fight between two children and asked them to sit down and discuss the cause of their dispute, in what way each of them had been responsible for its occurrence and what could be done differently the next time such a conflict arose. The two returned calmly, with an agreed analysis, and were friends again.
 - Children in one school did not seem to have a vocabulary for discussing emotions. This seemed part of a wider communication problem. Teachers exclaimed, “We never realised how little we listen to the kids, how little we know about them, because we never really talk to them.” Clear measures of progress have been developed; for example to have as a goal at the end of first grade [age six] that children will be able to identify and name their feelings.
 - Children may be told, for example, “Yossi listened when you spoke, now you must listen when he speaks.” Children are encouraged to develop the ability to restrain themselves and to experience the accomplishment of having done so.
 - Schoolyard play can be characterised by indiscipline, even anarchy, and sometimes serious injuries can be sustained. Younger children fear violence and bullying by the

older ones. In one setting, play areas were divided according to age, and each week one class took responsibility to prepare a special activity for the others. Teachers found ways to make supervision more effective without increasing their 'on duty' time.

Positive situations did not emerge automatically, and teachers had to develop facilitative skills. A fourth grade student once asked for the responsibility of distributing bread at lunch break to his class, but then announced that he would keep the sack of bread for himself. When reasoning failed, the teacher snatched the sack from him and he ran out of class, humiliated. At a workshop, teachers analysed this incident in terms of possible alternative behaviours for the teacher, for example sending another child to the neighbouring class for additional bread that could be distributed to the hungry children and then talking to the errant boy without the pressure of immediate action.

Encouraging one set of adults in children's everyday environments at school (i.e. the teachers and school staff) to behave respectfully towards them was an important part of the Human Dignity project, but adults in the daily environment of the home (i.e. parents and relatives) needed to do the same.

- Parents are sometimes violent. The school telephoned a father to say that his son was behaving badly. The father's response: "So hit the kid and he'll get the message." Teachers sometimes hesitate to contact parents

whose children are in trouble, for fear of such a response.

- In another school within the project, a child reported that after a classroom discussion of human dignity, he went home and told his father what he had learned, and the father then said that he would never hit the child again.
- Before a 'parents' evening' in one school, the staff decided to go beyond the conventional routine of presenting the children's grades. Instead, they tried to empathise with parents who came in feeling defensive about their parenting, and to use the meetings as significant opportunities for personal contact. Staff reported considerable improvement in the quality of the meetings.
- A teacher reported offence and anger when a parent upbraided her for not giving her child a solo role in a play, although no solo roles had been assigned to allow all children to participate equally. A workshop used this example to analyse how a negative event could be made to yield positive outcomes through a reaction based on careful thought in the split seconds available. Teachers were encouraged to analyse difficult situations using the technique 'event – thought – reaction – outcome.' Fairly soon afterwards, a meeting was held between one of the teachers at the workshop and some parents who had filed a complaint against her, in the presence of the principal and the inspector of schools. The teacher used the 'event – thought – reaction – outcome' analysis, and presented her version of the situation in a

- manner that generated a workable solution.
- The initiatives described above are examples of how the grey area of shared and different responsibilities between educators and parents can be addressed to the benefit of all concerned, especially children. Other examples can be given from the project of how parental willingness to use corporal punishment was contained by teachers and how teachers dealt sensitively with problems that arose within the home environment.

The Human Dignity Initiative ran from 2004 to 2007 in the nine schools, after which it was established that, by and large: (a) increasingly positive relationships had developed among pupils, among staff and between pupils and staff, (b) violence among pupils was reduced and (c) pupils' academic achievements had improved as had the professional achievements of staff. The final year was devoted to trying to ensure that these positive changes would last even after the project had ended and the facilitators had withdrawn from the schools.

In order to investigate in which schools the improvements had endured and in which they had not, and why in both cases, a 'one year after the project' evaluation was carried out in 2008 (Person to Person 2008). One of the nine schools was an 'out-of-the-box' case where almost one third of the student population had special needs: here it was demonstrated that there is more than one road to mutual respect and dignity, because drama, dance, music and craft activities had been used rather than the workshops described above, and these

had proved successful. In the remaining eight schools, where workshops had been relied upon, four schools demonstrated a continuing commitment to respect and dignity, one school showed enduring commitment at the individual level but not in terms of overall school climate, and in the remaining three schools the school culture had returned to what it had been before the project or had even further deteriorated. This was because expectations had been created during the project without a shared base of the behavioural codes required to sustain them.

The four schools in which mutually respectful behaviour had been lastingly enhanced had (a) adopted a system-wide approach to respectful problem solving, and (b) succeeded in making this become part of the school's routine: "At these schools, individuals who were not present during the programme implementation, even if they have no knowledge that the Human Dignity Programme ever took place, are nonetheless aware of the school's commitment to the values and behaviours of human dignity and have adopted them as part of the school's way of life" (Person to Person 2008: 7). The four schools included the two Arab schools among the total of nine schools, and two secular Jewish schools.

One key manifestation was special attention paid to the schools' youngest students, in kindergartens if these were attached to the schools or in the early grades, to ensure that the youngest were treated with respect by all members of the school community and to encourage these youngest pupils in turn to behave respectfully towards others. The successful schools had

incorporated – among the mechanisms set up to promote human dignity – procedures that specifically addressed the needs and rights of the youngest children. Here is an example from one school:

“[A] ‘Buddy’ programme was instigated between the older classes and the younger, through which sixth graders were paired with young ‘buddies’ from grade one. ... During the interview with the older children, they said that when they had been in the lower grades, kids from the higher grades used to be ‘more selfish, talk nastily, curse us and make fun of us.’ Today, they claimed, thanks to the Buddy programme, the situation is much better.”

(Person to Person 2008: 36).

A fifth grade student from another school where the programme had been successful, who had been in the early grades when the programme began and had moved upwards during the three years of the programme, said “You have to think twice, to control yourself. If I want to be respected, I also have to know how to respect others” (Person to Person 2008: 9). Contrast this with the situation one year after the Human Dignity programme had ended in one of the schools where the programme had not succeeded:

“The walls showed no trace of the Human Dignity Programme, save a single poster, hung askew and hidden behind a column. ... Although a minority of teachers claimed that the programme did have a positive effect on relations between teachers and students, the students, for their part, stated that teachers frequently raise their voices at them and treat them with contempt, and that even the principal is given to publicly reprimanding, yelling and sometimes even physically grabbing hold of students as a means of enforcing discipline. The violent behaviours exhibited by several of the students during our visit went largely unintended, and sometimes even unnoticed, by the teaching staff. During our interview with them, the students, a selected group from the Student Council, called each other names, interrupted one another in mid-sentence and even shoved each other occasionally. ... At the close of the interview with the students, a little girl who had remained largely silent throughout the discussion and whose amiable, intelligent demeanour and manner of speaking immediately revealed the potential she might have realised in a more favourable environment, said simply: ‘I hate this school and I would leave it if I could’”.

(Person to Person 2008: 14).⁶

⁶ For a complete account of the situation in the nine schools one year after the Human Dignity programme ended, please see *Person to Person 2009*.



Conclusion: Towards a world where respect for young children is routine

“Treating people with respect cannot occur simply by commanding that it should happen. Mutual respect has to be negotiated. ... Respect is an expressive performance. That is, treating others with respect doesn’t just happen, even with the best will in the world: to convey respect means finding the words and gestures which make it felt and convincing.”

(Sennett 2004: 260, 207)

The inequalities of age differ in one striking way from the much-discussed inequalities of class, gender, race and culture. Relatively few people cross these other categories; there is the occasional case of upward mobility or religious conversion and the more rare sex change operations or surgery to remove racial characteristics. However, we have all been children once, as teachers were reminded in the workshops conducted under the Human Dignity Initiative described above, sometimes very effectively, as they remembered the slights that they had suffered at their own teachers’ hands and then amended their behaviour towards pupils after the workshops. What Sennett says, citing the anthropologist Levi-Strauss, about “people who can remember where they come from even while accepting they can no longer live there ... a journey in which there is change but not forgetting” (Sennett 2004: 230) could be applied to all adults, especially parents and educators, in the hope that their memories

of childhood will encourage greater respect towards young children.

This paper has drawn attention to manifestations all around us (and across cultures) of routine disrespect to young children in everyday life. It has highlighted how this disrespect is based on the greater physical size and strength and control over resources associated with adults, and has drawn attention to how children are dismissed as too young for respect, too small for respect, too immature for respect and too dependent for respect, whether in everyday interactions, in scriptural injunction, by the ‘great minds’ of the Enlightenment, by contemporary social theorists or by conservative politicians.

To counter this, we have applied to young children Sennett’s arguments that dependency should not be marked by the denial of respect or the withholding of autonomy, and we have drawn on Priebe’s propositions about autonomy and democracy in the case of children in the first years following birth who are extremely dependent on adults. In addition to Priebe’s theoretical formulations, we have used his empirical observations in the day nurseries of the Living Democracy project to show (a) respectful responses to very young children who are dependent on adults for food and clean diapers and (b) democratic practices as everyday experience for children aged three years and

below. We then moved to children aged four years and above in primary school, drawing on the Human Dignity Initiative to demonstrate that respect can act as “real social glue” (Sennett 2004: 213) between older and younger children and between children and adults, whether teachers or parents, if the concept of respect is translated into shared behavioural codes that become routine in daily life.

Sennett speaks about “the social vocabulary of respect” (2003: 49). Political correctness does not extend as yet to speech about children. Adults use the word ‘childish’ to indicate what they consider trivial behaviour, and people refer to children as ‘kids’ (i.e. young goats) in English, or ‘calves’ in Malayalam, although

nowadays they would hesitate to call women ‘chicks’ in feminist company. Even within the field of early childhood studies, we talk about ‘child-rearing’ as if children were indeed young animals to be reared or about ‘raising children’ as if they were crops, when we should instead acknowledge that children grow up with adult support and that they have the right to develop as individuals. The day is far, alas, when young children will be treated across cultures with the respect that is due to them, whether in terms of words or deeds. However, words such as those in General Comment 7 on the Convention on the Rights of the Child, and deeds such as those embodied in the two cases described above, help bring us closer to that day.

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The Bernard van Leer Foundation funds and shares knowledge about work in early childhood development. The foundation was established in 1949 and is based in the Netherlands. Our income is derived from the bequest of Bernard van Leer, a Dutch industrialist and philanthropist, who lived from 1883 to 1958.

Our mission is to improve opportunities for children up to age 8 who are growing up in socially and economically difficult circumstances. We see this both as a valuable end in itself and as a long-term means to promoting more cohesive, considerate and creative societies with equality of opportunity and rights for all.

We work primarily by supporting programmes implemented by partners in the field. These include public, private, and community-based organisations. Our strategy of working through partnerships is intended to build local capacity, promote innovation and flexibility, and help to ensure that the work we fund is culturally and contextually appropriate.

We currently support about 140 major projects. We focus our grantmaking on 21 countries in which we have built up experience over the years. These include both developing and industrialised countries and represent a geographical range that encompasses Africa, Asia, Europe and the Americas.

We work in three issue areas:

- Through “Strengthening the Care Environment” we aim to build the capacity of vulnerable

parents, families and communities to care for their children.

- Through “Successful Transitions: The Continuum from Home to School” we aim to help young children make the transition from their home environment to daycare, preschool and school.
- Through “Social Inclusion and Respect for Diversity” we aim to promote equal opportunities and skills that will help children to live in diverse societies.

Also central to our work is the ongoing effort to document and analyse the projects we support, with the twin aims of learning lessons for our future grantmaking activities and generating knowledge we can share. Through our evidence-based advocacy and publications, we aim to inform and influence policy and practice both in the countries where we operate and beyond.

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Working Papers in Early Childhood Development is a ‘work in progress’ series that presents relevant findings and reflection on issues relating to early childhood care and development. The series acts primarily as a forum for the exchange of ideas, often arising out of field work, evaluations and training experiences. As ‘think pieces’ we hope these papers will evoke responses and lead to further information sharing from among the readership.

The findings, interpretations, conclusions and opinions expressed in this series are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the Bernard van Leer Foundation.

