**Director’s Corner:**
**Fostering Interaction & Cooperation**

The Children’s School’s “developmental goals” for interaction and cooperation provide a systematic framework for design details in all aspects of our early childhood programs. To clarify the intentionality of our design decisions, as well as to support families in fostering their children’s development, I will share the theories underlying our philosophy and their implications for our approaches.

### Interaction & Cooperation

- **promoting children's social skills for diverse adult and peer relations, including listening, turn-taking, following directions, rules and routines, group participation, care for shared materials, and conflict resolution.**

In many respects, young children can learn social skills as they develop self-esteem and independence – by exploration within a safe and encouraging environment. But, social learning theories also emphasize the importance of adults modeling appropriate interactions and acknowledging or reinforcing the behaviors that children need to practice in order to become effectively integrated into a family, a class, a team, etc. Sociocultural theories highlight the need for a supportive context where adults offer scaffolding to help ensure children’s successful participation. Cognitive information-processing theories, such as those guiding much of the research in Carnegie Mellon’s Psychology Department, stress the detailed specification of the knowledge and skills children need for each task and the explicit instruction and feedback relative to those specifications. For these reasons, Children’s School educators 1) purposefully model respectful interactions with children, families, colleagues, undergraduates, researchers, and university personnel, 2) intentionally teach children the steps to take and words to use for both routine and challenging interactions, and 3) coach children through the process repeatedly until they can effectively interact on their own. We also embed directions, rules, and location cues within the environment with signs, visual schedules, photographs, etc.

Within each theme, educators emphasize the necessary interactions and implications of cooperation. For example, preschoolers recently learned about the Community Helpers that work together to help everyone live safely at Carnegie Mellon and in Pittsburgh. They also learned how our efforts to reduce, reuse, and recycle benefit our environment so that everyone can live well. At the same time, our kindergartners were learning about the many ways that Native Americans collaborated with each other and their environment to meet the human needs without negatively impacting the environment.

Even fostering mathematics skills can involve social interaction. Children practice counting and timing skills when they follow the rules for the number of children in each center or use a timer to take turns on the computer. They also collect and record data about their classmates, such as when the kindergarten “clipboard helper” conducts the weekly survey and reports the results to the group.

Families can promote interaction and cooperation by using a similar mix of careful modeling, direct discussion of social expectations and strategies, and coaching in the context of natural interactions. Basic manners, social conventions for meeting and greeting people, and appropriate ways to make requests or handle disagreements are all important to practice at home and in the community. You can help children by reviewing in advance and adding just one new skill at a time. The successful interaction will provide its own reinforcement, particularly when others respond positively!