Director’s Corner: Careful Communication

This year, I am exploring life lessons from the animal kingdom to broaden my view of novel solutions to some of the common challenges in early childhood learning communities and in families raising young children. At the same time, I am now “Mormor” (Swedish for mother’s mother) to a new granddaughter, Violet, and my other granddaughter, Lucia, has entered “The 4 Club”, as she calls it. Both my Director and Mormor roles are giving me plenty of opportunities to recognize the need for improved communication to better understand the individual children with whom I have the privilege of interacting. Given what I said last month about the benefits of biodiversity, it should come as no surprise that each child will communicate in unique ways, which challenges adults to adjust the communication dance to fit each individual personality and to continually readjust as development changes the child’s capabilities, which then advances their ideas, initiative, and explorations at the edges of both their own and our comfort zones.

Interestingly, the study of animal communication offers several helpful tips for educators and other adult caregivers as we seek to support and guide children in developmentally appropriate ways.

• **Listen more and talk less.** In many animal societies, individuals must observe signals in order to keep track of other group members, and they only send signals for specific purposes related to coordinating behaviors, establishing authority, defending territory, finding mates, and caring for young. For example, understanding a new baby, a new child in a classroom, or even a child entering a new stage, all necessitate focused observation of varied signals: visual (gesture, facial expressions, posture, etc.), auditory (e.g., coos, sighs, cries, and words), physical touch, and body rhythms, etc.

• **Listen carefully.** As with animals, we do well to “listen” to these nuanced signals attentively to fully comprehend the message behind the behavior, such as the wriggling that indicates a toileting need or the “fatigue sillies” that may seem fun but often precede a meltdown. On the positive side, we can “learn to suspend [our] adult agenda to really see children’s perspectives and the amazing ways they experience the world … to engage with children in a more meaningful teaching and learning process.” (Ad for early childhood educator Deb Curtis’s new book, *Really Seeing Children*)

• **Talk purposefully.** During busy days, we often narrow our focus to communicating only about the procedural routines and immediate tasks. While these are important and at times urgent messages, parent & writer Monica Bielanko reminds adults to stop daily to “talk to your children to better understand what’s going on in their world because it makes a world of difference.”

My favorite photo from our Thanksgiving holiday shows my husband (aka “Grampy”) intentionally listening to Lucia’s ideas about what should be included in the story that she asked him to tell her, and that she would then ask to be retold and embellished repeatedly. In just the last few months, he noticed and acknowledged her interest in stories and her need for them to involve a brave character grappling with the challenges of monsters, little sisters, fears, and disappointment. Together, they are building quite a repertoire of tales and, through this careful communication, deepening their relationship and laying a foundation for meaningful conversations in the future. I hope that the winter break will afford you opportunities for such calm and comfortable communication that will yield new insights and joys!