

Sue Grossman

Sue Grossman is Professor,  
Department of Teacher Educa-  
tion, Eastern Michigan University,  
Ypsilanti.

# “I Just Don’t Like That Kid”

## Confronting and Managing Personal Feelings About Children

**A**ll good teachers try hard to treat each child fairly and kindly, with care and concern. Indeed, we are ethically obliged to do so (National Association for the Education of Young Children [NAEYC], 2005). As we are human, however, we may occasionally meet a child to whom we react negatively (Maxim, 1997). This was certainly true for me as a kindergarten teacher. It is not something to be proud of, but we must admit it honestly in order to work through it and thus ensure fair treatment of each child. The subject is only sparsely addressed in the early childhood literature (Checkley, 2006), and only a few references to teachers’ feelings about specific children can be found (Katz, 1995; Maxim, 1997). This is unfortunate; if ignored or denied, such feelings have the potential to do harm. Like steam in a pipe, feelings unexpressed or ignored will escape somewhere and may result in an outburst toward an undeserving child (Checkley, 2006).

Many of us have been taught throughout our lives to be “nice,” and that it is unacceptable to have negative feelings, especially about children. We are condemned as heartless and cruel if we do not like all of the children we teach. Yet it simply may not be possible to like all children. As an acquaintance of mine once said, If there is even one child whose absence from school pleases you, you do not love all children!

### Being Forced to Face Feelings

Passive children were always a challenge for me. I much preferred the rambunctious, out-of-bounds ones with spunk and energy, even if they needed to be reined in a bit. Alice Ann appeared to be a typical 5-year-old as I observed her at play with other kindergartners. When I spoke to her, however, she would stare at me, mouth a bit open, silently unresponsive. She seemed intimidated by me, yet I thought of myself as a nice person and a reasonably good teacher whom children should like and certainly have no reason to fear! How a child responds to you has an effect on how you respond to him or her.

One day, the children were sitting on the rug at my feet as we discussed rhyming words. I was asking individuals to suggest examples, so I said,

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“Alice Ann, can you think of a word that rhymes with ‘house’?” As usual, she stared at me agape and remained silent. I swallowed my feelings of irritation. William, another child, looked up at me and pronounced confidently, “We don’t like Alice Ann, do we?” I was stunned, momentarily speechless. I wondered what unspoken communication of mine he might have picked up on. Recovering, I said something officiously inane, like, “Of course we do! We like everyone here!”

Despite my efforts, I could not hide my true feelings from William—or, most likely, from the other kindergartners. Young children may be more perceptive in general than most adults. Their first language is nonverbal; long before they understand words, infants communicate productively and receptively through facial expression, muscle contraction, and voice intonation and timbre (Trawick-Smith, 2003). Even when they acquire language, they do not lose those first communication skills.

### Children Are Perceptive and Sensitive

Children sense excitement and change. Many parents report that increased tension in the home leads to changes in their children’s behavior. Marriage problems, illness, and loss of employment, even when the adults try hard to protect children from the reality of the situation, often will affect children’s demeanor and actions. Even happy events, such as an impending vacation trip or birthday party, can generate stress. And many a teacher can talk about the effects of inclement weather or the approach of the December holiday season on the behavior of schoolchildren. Carefully laid curriculum plans may have to be scrapped in favor of a longer outdoor playtime and more sensory activities, such as water and sand play.

### Favored Child Status

Ethical standards require the equitable treatment of every child (Katz, 1995; NAEYC, 2005). Therefore, the converse to disliking a child—the “teacher’s pet” situation—is equally unacceptable. However, most educators will recall certain children whom they were particularly fond of, who stood out from the rest and remained in their memories for years. In an ideal world, of course, every child would feel like the “pet,” but favoring a child does have the potential to cause problems. Others in the class will sense this and resent the favored status. The “pet” may not be held to the same standards as others, and thus be cheated, as a result of lowered expectations, out of opportunities to grow and achieve.

Trying to hide our feelings may be perilous, so what is a teacher to do? How do we manage those feelings we are not proud of?

### Managing Feelings

When wrestling with personal feelings about a child, it may help to keep the following suggestions in mind:

- **Be Honest With Yourself.** This is rule number one! If Mr. Jenkins has a serious antipathy toward Andy, the first step for him is to accept this and admit how he feels (Henniger, 2005). There may be no need for him to tell another soul about his feelings, but lying to himself or denying the fact simply will not work. That feeling exists; pushing it out of sight at one point will only force it to erupt at another, like a Whack-a-Mole game. We teach children to describe and label their feelings, and we would be hypocrites not to do the same ourselves.

- **Own the Feeling.** I was aware that my antagonism toward Alice Ann was *my* feeling and not her fault. By admitting my feelings and taking responsibility for them, I could consciously work at treating her fairly, not excluding her, not making unkind, offhand remarks, not blaming her for things she did not do, and not making excuses for any inappropriate behavior on my part. Such practices may occur when we deny our feelings. I am thankful, at least, that the incident I described is the only one I remember when my true feelings toward her surfaced—or at least, when anyone brought them to my attention!

- **Separate Feelings From Behavior.** Emotions come to us unbidden. It is difficult, perhaps impossible in some cases, to change or control a feeling, but we do have nearly total control of our actions. Occasionally, I have expressed a strong feeling and had someone say to me, “You have no right to feel that way.” There is no such thing as the right to a feeling; this is an illogical concept. I will feel hungry or cold regardless of anyone’s belief in my right to do so. And my emotions are as much a part of who I am as any physical need. So, there is no “right” to like or dislike a child. Feelings exist—they just *are*. In a particular situation, I may or may not have a right to eat when I am hungry or to turn up the heat when I am cold. The critical issue is what we *do* with the feelings—how we behave.

- **Remember That Feelings Can Change.** Our feelings do have the potential to change. My university students often make an initial impression on me—good or not so good—on the first day of class. As I work with them throughout the semester, I find my feelings about them changing—sometimes becoming more positive, sometimes more negative. This happens as I get to know the students, and learn more about and interact with them. By the same token, it is important to get to know children well. The child we find difficult may seem less so as we understand him or her better.

- **Realize That Your Feelings May Not Be Shared.** Even though Mr. Jenkins does not like Andy, other adults may not feel the same way. As stated earlier, I preferred the active, rule-testing children to the passive, quiet ones. Many teachers feel the opposite! So I was glad to get the busy ones that another teacher might reject. In my first teaching position, my class and that of the other kindergarten teacher were unequal in numbers at the beginning of the school year. Therefore, the other teacher was directed to transfer one child to me. She chose Ricky—tall and gawky, with a gap-toothed grin, and hair that stood up in spikes. I felt a surge of anger, as I believed she wished to remove this child from her class because of his appearance. I realized, however, that it was better for Ricky to be with me if the other teacher felt that way about him. Ricky might have a difficult time if he remained in her classroom for the entire school year. I knew I would work hard at treating him fairly. In fact, I remember having no problems with him throughout the year. I think there is such a thing as a teacher-child match; thus, moving a child to another classroom may, if all else fails, be the best thing for the child—who is, after all, the most important factor in the equation.

- **Identify the Cause of the Dislike** (Checkley, 2006; Maxim, 1997). Is it the child's appearance that is upsetting? Does he or she have a handicapping condition that makes you uncomfortable? Is it a behavior, such as whining? Do you disapprove of something you have heard about the family, such as their chosen lifestyle? Have other teachers' opinions influenced your feelings? Does the child remind you of someone else you have had difficulties with in the past? Does he or she belong to a racial or ethnic group you have some unexamined negative feelings about? We cannot hope to change our feelings or monitor our behavior until we face the truth about how we feel and why.

- **Recognize Your Own Level of Development.** We all grow and change, and our feelings for and understanding of children do not remain static. The more we mature and learn, the more tolerant we may become of individual differences and the unique qualities of children. I find that many things that bothered me at a younger age no longer trouble me. Perhaps wisdom really does come with age!

## Classroom Strategies

The following strategies may be helpful in the classroom:

- **Get To Know Each Child Very Well.** The more information Mr. Jenkins has about Andy, the more he may understand and accept him. Mr. Jenkins can talk with his parents, perhaps visit Andy's home, tour the neighborhood where he lives, and talk in a professional

manner to Andy's previous teachers. And, of course, he must spend time with Andy himself, listening carefully to what he has to say and observing him in the classroom and with other children.

- **Strive To Find Something Appealing About the Child.** No child is utterly without merit. It may take some time and extra effort, but it is your responsibility as the teacher to find his or her positive qualities and focus on them, rather than the traits that you find bothersome. Children should never have to spend an entire school year facing a teacher who rejects them every day.

- **Partner the Child With Other Children.** Just because you find a child off-putting does not mean that other children will feel the same way—especially if you are careful to treat all children with respect. A child with a friend or two may become more appealing to you over time. I could see that Alice Ann had friends in the group, so I knew that other children liked her; this helped me to focus on her positive qualities.

- **Encourage Relationships Between the Child and Other Adults.** Teaching assistants, high school students, or parent volunteers may have an easier time connecting with the child. Arranging for these adults to spend time with the child will create opportunities for the child to develop beneficial relationships with other adults.

## Summary

All children deserve to be treated fairly, and with kindness and respect. Sometimes, however, our feelings about a particular child make that obligation a challenging task. We must move past denial of the challenge in order to confront and analyze our feelings as a precursor to ensuring a psychologically and emotionally safe classroom environment for every child.

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