

THE TRICYCLE SOLUTION

**Teachable Moments for
Parents and Preschoolers**

Featuring Effie Kuriloff

A film by Marcia Jarmel and Ken Schneider

COMPANION TO THE FILM





Whether dealing with a conflict over a wagon in a nursery school or a rivalry between siblings in our family, we are confronted daily with situations that require our assessment and action. As parents and teachers we must make decisions to intervene or not, to speak or to remain silent. How can we learn to see clearly the child in her world? How can we affect the world the child lives in? To address these issues we must learn to “see” both the child and ourselves. Every social transaction—whether on a playground, in the classroom, or on a bus—is a teachable moment. Each interaction offers another chance to learn, to change and to grow for both the teacher and the child.

—Effie Kuriloff, from *Democratic Schools for Our Democracy*, Dr. Mary B. Lane
(San Jose: Writers Club Press, 2001), p. 105

INTRODUCTION

The *Tricycle Solution: Teachable Moments for Parents and Preschoolers* is a documentary film shot over the course of a year at a cooperative nursery school. The film shows children, parents, and teachers experiencing a spectrum of interactions and emotions as they arise in the course of a school day. You will observe children playing, creating, discovering, crying, fighting, and resolving their disagreements. These scenes are accompanied by comments from school director Effie Kuriloff, who practices a way of working with children and parents together that is both child- and parent-centered.

ROCKY MOUNTAIN PARTICIPATION NURSERY SCHOOL

Founded in 1948, Rocky Mountain is a cooperative nursery school with a dedicated focus on parent education. Affiliated with City College of San Francisco, the school's director is a paid instructor through City College, and the school's program is listed as a non-credit City College course for parents. Parent requirements include participating a minimum of five hours a week at the school, including one three-hour morning session and a weekly two-hour evening class in child development, as well as preparing a nourishing snack for the nursery school once a month. The current director of Rocky Mountain is Linda Mickelson. The former director, Effie Kuriloff, is featured in this film.

EFFIE KURILOFF

Effie Kuriloff taught at Rocky Mountain for thirty-five years. She earned a master's degree in Early Childhood Education from Bank Street College of Education in New York City and a bachelor's degree in sociology from Douglass College, Rutgers University. She now consults with parents, schools, senior groups, and educators.



Parent education is the reason we exist. Our school is a lab experience where everyone is teaching and learning, children and adults. I encourage the parents to play. Parents get to paint, build with blocks, work with play doh, and that often frees up their son or daughter to explore, experiment, paint and build. Parents are willing to take an inner journey that reconnects them with the landscape of their own childhood as they're involved with the nurturing of their children.... The nursery school setting provides a [safe] and appropriate place for this material to be accessed and shared. As the parents tune into themselves, they refine their own ability to listen and know their child. This investment in quality engagement and relationship is expected to continue throughout their lives.

—Effie Kuriloff, from *Finding a Preschool for Your Child in San Francisco*, Lori Rifkin, et. al. (San Francisco: Learning Associates, 2000), pp. 154–155

ROCKY MOUNTAIN PHILOSOPHY

MISSION STATEMENT

The mission of Rocky Mountain Participation Nursery School is to provide a classroom laboratory for parents and children which is emotionally and physically safe; where the truth of each person's experience is welcomed; where respect for one's own ideas, respect for mother earth, and respect for all sentient beings is valued; where conflicts and issues are brought into the open for clarification and resolution; where communication of thoughts and feelings are encouraged as a means for learning about oneself and others; and where creativity is nurtured. Participation in the school is a hands-on empowering experience that parents and children take with them into their daily living and enhances the quality of every relationship.

ROCKY MOUNTAIN GUIDING BELIEFS:

- Parents are invited to bring their whole selves into the school—their history, their issues, their emotions. Just as we seek to nurture the “whole child,” we must nurture the “whole parent.” Shame, blame, guilt, and fear as well as joy and talent can be expressed within this community of peers.
- Parents are invited to become aware, observant, vigilant. At school as at home, we learn how to watch our children interact with others. We become aware of patterns we see developing. The understanding we gain we invest in appropriate tools that, in turn, empower our children.
- The nursery school community provides the tools to recognize and build on parents' strengths and to recognize and discard non-productive ways of parenting.
- The nursery school community addresses parents where they are. We acknowledge that the choices parents and teachers make depend on their circumstances and their level of self-awareness and self-knowledge.

EXPLORING THE FILM'S IDEAS

As you watch the film, observe the children's actions, expressions, and emotions. Observe also the parents' reactions to the children. Compare the methods for problem solving demonstrated in the film with the methods you use in your home or in your child's school.

1. What is your overall impression? What did you like? What did you question? Did you identify with any of what happens? Did anything trigger memory of experiences when you were 3, 4, and 5 years old?



2. Is there one idea that inspired you? What practices do you question or have doubts about? What issues were not addressed?

3. How do you feel about the following statements by Kuriloff?

- “I’m going to help her talk less. I think when we talk we take up the space....”
- “Our job as parents, I feel, is to avoid interrupting, that’s a hard one—to stay back and watch them, and appreciate them and to marvel.”
- “Distraction is not where we want to go....”
- “Does anyone know why Elan is so angry and is hitting his mother?”
- “Specialing is special attention, special love....”
- “Our job as parents is to make sure that we honor the child’s decisions....”
- “We take care of it here and now; we’re not carrying around unfinished business.”
- “Notice what you are feeling inside. Notice all the feelings that come up for you. This is not only your child’s first day, it is your first day. It might bring up feelings that happened when you came to school the very first day in your kindergarten or nursery school with your moms, the grandmothers and (grand) fathers of these children.”



ROCKY MOUNTAIN PRACTICES

Here you will find practices you can try in your home, school, or community. These practices are given in no particular order; choose one that appeals to you. Try it. Then add another.

Practice: Ways to Build Community

We build community by communicating with each person, child and adult, on a daily basis. These communications build self-esteem. By acknowledging each person in our morning circle, by asking for their news, by giving adults as well as children special time, by scheduling home visits with the teacher and family, we signal that each person is important to the community.

Daily Newspaper:

As children and parents arrive at school, write down whatever news they have to share; “no news” is news. A parent may be tired, or even angry. A child may have a new toy. We share information as a way of acknowledging each other and learning about each other’s lives; in this way, relationships and community grow.

Morning Circle:

Start each day by gathering together in a circle as people have done from time immemorial. The shape of a circle signifies inclusiveness. The teacher invites everyone to notice the “beautiful faces in our circle.” As we look at each other, we sing each person’s name, adult as well as child, and something about them. This information is available to us from the Daily Newspaper. For example: “Who came to school today, Effie, Effie, who came to school today, Effie did. Who has on new red shoes, Sabina, Sabina, who has on new red shoes,



Sabina does. Who is going off to work,” etc. Any tune or words will work as long as information about each person can be easily integrated into it.

Announcements:

During the day, we keep the community aware of what is going on by raising our hands and saying “attention all workers!” With this gesture play stops, and everyone listens to the announcer. We announce when children have 5 minutes to “finish their work” before transition to snack or circle. We also may announce that “Danny’s mom is leaving” or that Zoe is crying because her mommy went to work. We ask, “Who else misses their mommy?” As we inform the community, we build trust.

Elders’ Circle:

At the end of the day, while the children are read a story, adults gather for fifteen minutes. This is time to share our emotions, perceptions, and concerns about our children, our families, and the school program—what works, and what needs to change. Through this conversation we acknowledge that we are at school for ourselves, as well as for our children.

Practice: Parents Caring for Themselves

To better care for children, parents learn to care for themselves. Parents are loved so they can better love their children. We encourage parents to ask, "What do I feel right now? What do I want right now?" When children ask parents to help, we encourage parents to use language like, "I'm willing to..." or "I'm unwilling to..." An angry, tired, frustrated parent is not a good caretaker for children.

"I remember a day when I came in tired, frustrated, and crabby and Effie sat me in the middle of a pile of pillows and had the other parents there bring me tea and take care of ME! It was *exactly* what I needed then. From that simple deed, I really learned it was not only okay to care for myself, but necessary for the well-being of my whole family."

—Paula McShane Conway, mother of Dan Conway,
1992 graduate of Rocky Mountain





Practice: Specialing

“Specialing” or special love is for the child who is withdrawn and shy as well as the child who is out of bounds. The technique is to stay close to the child. One adult volunteers, staying about 3 or 4 feet away from the child, but in a peripheral rather than focal way. That is, the adult does not particularly talk with or look at the child, but instead parallel plays close by. For example, the adult might make her own sand sculpture if the child is in the sandbox, or might hang up outfits that have fallen if the child is playing dress-up.

At all times the adult who is specialing the child stays near enough to intercede if that child strikes out. The adult becomes the control, assuring that the child is not hurting or compromising another. All the children, as well as the adults, are aware that a child is being given this special attention. For example, in the film, the entire group is told that Gabriel is going to be “specialied” today. There is no shame attached to it. It is just the reality at the time.

The special attention is sometimes repeated for 2 to 3 days, which is often enough time to bring the child back into harmony with herself and the community of adults and children.

Practice: Solving Our Own Problems

Both children and parents create problems. We may not understand the need that allows the problem to arise. Instead, we allow each person to own their problem, to have their tears over it. In time, perhaps they will find a socially acceptable solution. We encourage children and adults to solve their own problems by:

- *Creating an atmosphere in which discipline issues are brought into the open.* In the film, at circle time, children are reminded to protect their work; Effie reminds them that “Ray may take your toys because he took Shanti’s doll yesterday.” The children listen and Ray listens. There is no shame. We are just transmitting a fact. All preschool children go out of bounds some time. And so do parents.
- *Insuring that children do not have the opportunity to hurt each other.* Adults use materials alongside children, close enough to intervene when necessary. In the film, for example, when Gabriel hits Truro, a dad is close by and able to stop Gabriel from throwing a second punch.
- *Allowing the situation to be non-judgmental.* There is no blame, no fault. We listen and observe, and announce our observations. “Gabriel hit Tru.” We inquire. “Does anyone know what is happening here?”
- *Providing children with opportunities to make their own choices.* We create a safe space while children make their choices. “I want to sit next to Joey and away from Mary.” “I want to use all the red blocks by myself.” “I want this low rider.” These are legitimate feelings which an adult may amplify to the group while holding a safe space. In the film, Effie amplifies the trike conflict by letting everyone know two boys want the same low rider, and sits on the tricycle to hold a safe space while the boys discuss who will use it. Such adult support helps each child honor his or her own decisions, so s/he will continue to grow more ideas with which to engage him/herself.



Practice: Acknowledging Anger

Too often, we are ashamed or embarrassed by our child's behavior and emotions. We think it is our problem. But our child's anger or frustration is not our problem. We do not fix it. As we acknowledge the anger without blame, shame, or judgment, we validate the child's emotions.

In the film, Effie asks the community, adults and children together, "Does anybody know why Elan is so angry and is hitting his mother?" Just an inquiry. The teacher gives voice to the child's anger as the new parent sits quietly. In the film, the mother responds, "He doesn't want me to wear my sign (nametag)." Effie: "This happens a lot, when the child wants one thing and the parent wants something else." The whole community is reminded and reassured that this kind of eruption is no big deal, just life with preschoolers and their parents. The teacher's calmness takes the charge out of the problem, and it evaporates. Notice that Effie brings the issue up again at circle time, when Elan is introduced as "the child who didn't want his mommy to wear her nametag." We do not "fix it"; instead, we validate his objection. The process of acknowledgment becomes the focal point.

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