



How children learn about responsibility “Tuakana-teina”



by Nikki Grazier and Dr Anne Meade

Background

Daisies is a small, ‘boutique’ early childhood centre situated in Johnsonville, Wellington which opened in October 2008. Daisies has a separate flexible space for infants, however most children are within a mixed-age grouping, which allows for the younger and older children to play with and alongside each other.

Tuakana-teina

*Tuakana-teina refers to the relationship between an older (tuakana) and a younger (teina) person and is specific to teaching and learning in the Māori context.*¹

After Daisies had been opened for some months it became obvious to the teachers that many of the older children and some of the toddlers wanted to contribute to the well-being of the younger children. This provided impetus for us to work toward the goal for children’s well-being in the early childhood curriculum, *Te Whāriki* (1996).

As Daisies’ teachers had embraced the value of “whanaungatanga” in their philosophy of practice, they agreed that a key objective should be to strengthen “tuakana-teina” in the centre – children guiding each other.



Whanaungatanga is about collective responsibility for people and the environment. This linked well with another objective: building the older children’s independence and self-help skills, for example, with them increasingly helping to keep the centre environment pleasing for play and for learning.

A child shares his learning journal and a book with a doll.

¹ www.tki.org.nz/r/hpe/exploring_te_ao_kori/planning/methods_e.php. Nowadays, educationists in many contexts use the term tuakana-teina, even when ako would be the more appropriate concept. Ako can mean both to learn and to teach. Both concepts connect with the principle of whanaungatanga.

A framework for responsibility

As a framework for considering how best to develop the children's competencies in relation to tuakana/teina relationships and to responsibility, the teachers adapted the "four responsibilities of leadership" model for use in our planning. It was designed by the early childhood education centre called Te Kōpae Piripono², which was a participant in the Ministry of Education's Centres of Innovation programme . These four responsibilities can be summarised as:

Te whai takohanga - having responsibility - having designated roles and positions of responsibility.

Te mouri takohanga - being responsible - refers to an individual's attitude and actions.

Te kawē takohanga - taking responsibility - is about courage, risk-taking, having a go, trying new things.

Te tuku takohanga - sharing responsibility - is about relationships, interaction and engagement with others, sharing power, and asking for and providing assistance."

The concept of shared leadership in a community of learners by educationist L. Lambert³ also fitted ours:

... leadership becomes "manifest within the relationships in a community, manifest in the spaces, the fields among the participants, rather than in a set of behaviours performed by an individual leader."

² <http://www.educate.ece.govt.nz/Programmes/CentresOfInnovation/DocumentsandResources/ServiceSpecific/Nga-TakohangaWha.aspx>

³ Cited by the Te Kōpae Piripono authors.

Developing strategies for fostering tuakana-teina and responsibility

The Daisies philosophy of learning underpins how the teachers plan the education programmes. The plans are the recorded parts of teachers' responses to children's interests, so teachers are ready to provide a range of opportunities to strengthen children's love of learning and relevant content learning.

Our starting point therefore was to closely observe what the children were already doing and record some observations. Then plans were developed.

The first strategy in implementing the plan was to recognise anyone taking or sharing responsibility by publicly acknowledging and describing the helping behaviours. These descriptions would reinforce the behaviours and enrich children's vocabulary about relating to each other. A subsequent strategy was to document responsibility-in-action in a wall display.

We discussed strategies that teachers could use to strengthen the older children's leadership skills, such as teachers recalling past episodes, making it fun to be in charge of tidying a room, and generally being mindful of new opportunities for children to share responsibilities. For instance we had noticed a strong interest in babies and dolls amongst some children and we knew that we had a younger baby enrolling soon. We predicted this could add rich learning opportunities for older children in caring for babies, and thought about the ways we would support them to do this.



Some of the older children introduce themselves to our new baby. This led to them undertaking a care-giving routine for him.

Implementing the strategies

A cornerstone strategy was to role-model tuakana-teina relationships, responsibility and respectfulness. Other teachers acknowledged any teacher who shared responsibility: “Thank you for fetching that just when I needed it.” When we noticed the children taking responsibility we used positive feedback, for example: “I really like the way you took responsibility for getting the drinks, without anyone asking you.” Teachers consolidated learning by asking children about their ideas on what they were doing and why; for example, when children helped to wipe the tables before morning tea. Their responses indicated that their learning was about both social responsibility and mathematics (to do with ‘area’).

Teachers encouraged children to use each other as a resource and ask for help, so that children with skills, (for example in joining Duplo™ pieces together), could demonstrate and explain these skills to their less-skilled peers. Children soon took responsibility for coaching their peers to learn new skills themselves. Older children who helped the babies were given guidance about ‘listening’ to the babies (for example, when they turned their heads away as food was proffered), and to respect a baby’s wishes. We closely observed the nuances of children’s sharing interactions and respected the children’s efforts to take responsibility for behaviour that was fair and just, praising resolutions that were worked out by the children themselves.

Daisies bought some resources that invited sharing, for example, wooden food and ‘found’ tea-sets. We also implemented systems for empowering the children to help keep the centre tidy, for example placing a box outside for them to put equipment that needed to go inside, and moving the shoe rack into a better position for children to take their own (or other’s) shoes off.



The teachers investigated the best conditions for children to share the responsibility connected to meals and snacks, and found a round table is better than an oblong one. Children learned that 6 to 8 children was the best seating plan. Teachers used their honed observations of children's schema fascinations when fostering leadership. For example, children who loved to carry objects (transporting schemes of action) were invited to wait on table, whilst children who explored the enveloping schema a lot were invited to spray and wet wipe the whole area of the table. The "mathematicians" were invited to set the places at table.

Teachers documented their observations using photos, learning stories and anecdotes of children who were helping each other and taking responsibility for the environment. The wall display enabled children, parents and teachers to reflect back the leadership roles and responsibilities the children were taking on.

Because the teachers were more focused on the children caring for themselves, each other and the environment, our responses to the children became more encouraging of this. A cycle of positive feedback became common practice amongst the teaching team. Over the months the teachers' language changed, and this impacted on what the children focused on in their interactions with others.



The children help each other with socks and shoes.

Did the strategies work?

Our 'tests' of teaching effectiveness were: frequency of responsible behaviour, wide take up, changes in behaviour in other settings, and mindfulness. The frequency of having and taking responsibility has noticeably increased throughout Daisies. We agree there has been a large shift in our centre culture and mindfulness resulting in most children taking more responsibility in many ways.

Teachers have also noted a significant change in the children's language with each other. There is much more negotiation and compromise. The children's attitude towards helping themselves and others has improved. The development of their own self-help skills has empowered them to help their peers. An example of this is the sock and shoe putting on – children who are competent in putting on their own shoes and socks are more willing and able to help others.

Other examples that were observed and noted include:

- Children helping to set-up resources and challenge courses
- Children using construction equipment together and offering pieces to others
- Older children taking responsibility for organising games, and encouraging younger children on the outside equipment: "You did it!"
- Children sharing responsibilities at meal-times: setting the table, pouring water, serving up and tidying up (wiping tables, sweeping up)
- Children taking more responsibility for dressing themselves, and each other
- Children being more responsible for their own belongings
- Children sharing special dress-up clothes
- Older children playing gently with babies
- Children starting new relationships with children they normally didn't associate with
- Children spontaneously offering to become a buddy to a new child
- More children playing at family care-giving by dressing dolls and teddies and giving them food.

Conclusion

Young children engage in powerful learning through their relationships with others and the environment. Teachers helped develop this at Daisies with our planned focus on creating a responsible community. Collectively, we responded to children whenever they took responsibility for others and our place, mindful of the group effects from our teaching.

Valuing children's contributions to others' learning is a feature of New Zealand's early childhood education curriculum - and at Daisies. We think that when the teachers fostered interdependence, and tuakana-teina relationships, and collective responsibility for the Daisies' community, individual children learnt more specific skills and the disposition to contribute - to willingly help others. This was confirmed by positive comments about Nikki's son's caring behaviour when he moved from Daisies to a different centre in Auckland.

“Ko koe ki tēnā kīwai, ko au ki tēnei kīwai o te kete”

– you carry your handle and I'll carry my handle of our kete.⁴

4. www.educationcounts.govt.nz/publications/ece/22551/34825/34830

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