

“You Are Bad!”

Supporting Children with Strong Emotions

Matthew Lawrence, with Deb Curtis



Read the following stories and teacher reflections from Matthew Lawrence, and use the Reflective Questions on page 8 to deepen your own thinking and shape your teaching practices.

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Telling someone “You are bad” has been spreading through our group of 3-year-olds. They regularly use this phrase when there is a tense moment between them, such as when one child doesn’t let another child into a game or share a toy.

One morning, I announced that it was snack time and that smoothies were on the day’s menu. Whether or not to eat snack is a choice in our room, and the children know they might miss out on snack if they don’t come when it’s time. This particular day, many children dropped their individual activities to come to the snack table, while other children chose to continue playing. A short while later, Emily decided to pause her game, come to the table, and have a smoothie. When she arrived, there was just a little left. Seeing this, Sawyer immediately wanted to have more, and he attempted to grab the pitcher. But Emily was quick enough to get to the pitcher first. Sawyer got close to Emily, pointed at her, and yelled, “You are bad! You are bad!” and burst into tears. Then Emily, too, burst into tears and fired back, “No, you are bad!”

Another incident involving Emily occurred when Opal caught a glimpse of Emily and Yveline in the loft window, playing with baby dolls. Opal put her book down and headed over to the loft. As she reached the top of the loft stairs, Emily announced, “No, you can’t come in!” Opal tried to move past Emily. “No, you can’t come in,” Emily repeated, attempting to block Opal’s way. Opal pushed through and made it into the loft. “No, no, no! You are bad!” yelled Emily. Both Emily and Opal burst into tears. Opal then called to me, “Mr. Matthew, Emily called me bad.” Walking over to the loft, I saw a silent, teary-eyed Emily distancing herself from Opal.

Matthew’s reflections: Most children in our group have experienced both calling others bad and being called bad themselves. The words seem to offer the children a way to feel powerful as they express strong emotions in heated moments. When children are called bad, they feel deeply hurt. I have heard different children use phrases like, “You can’t come to my birthday” or “I won’t invite you to my house” as bargaining chips to negotiate relationships and work through conflicts. I think children say “You are bad” for similar reasons, but these three hurtful words seem to evoke much stronger feelings. Parents and teachers also have big reactions and are very concerned about the children calling each other bad.

My coworkers and I have been discussing what being “bad” may mean to the children and what they get out of using these words with each other. I find it interesting that the children seem to be experiencing different emotions at the time that they say it, but they still use the same words to express these varied feelings. We have also been wondering together where the children got the idea to use “You are

bad” as a means of expressing and working through anger, frustration, and sadness, and why it has spread to the entire group. As we think through these questions, we are looking for ways to be more responsive and helpful to children.

I’ve been trying many different approaches to support the children, and I question what the right balance is between stepping in to help and letting them work things out on their own. I’ve suggested to children that they know they aren’t bad, and I offer them alternative words for responding to each other and sharing their upsets and feelings (“I’m frustrated”).

Reading books about feelings also gives children words and ways to share and express their feelings. We’ve used our

daily gathering or circle time to help the children understand their emotions and how to express them. Since we started doing this, children who have observed a conflict between two friends have stepped in and shown support. The children either comfort the friend who was called bad or remind the other friend that it is not okay to call anyone bad.

I don’t want to dismiss conflict by making rules or using quick fixes. I want to continue helping the children expand their emotional vocabulary so they can recognize and express strong emotions. Although these situations are intense and often difficult, I believe helping children accept and express their feelings is the most important work I do. **TYC**

REFLECTIVE QUESTIONS

Use the following questions from the Thinking Lens™ to reflect alone or with a colleague.

Know yourself

- How do you respond when children express strong emotions?
- Do you react differently to different kinds of emotions (anger, sadness, frustration)? Which emotions do you feel comfortable expressing, and which make you more uncomfortable? How does reflecting on these responses help you learn more about yourself and the role you play with children?
- What do you think about your work helping children understand and express their strong emotions? Are you quick to react or do you wait and let events unfold? Why?

Find examples of children’s competence

- How does showing a range of emotions reflect children’s competence?
- What competencies do you see the children in Matthew’s group demonstrating? What do they already know about expressing and communicating their emotions?

Seek children’s points of view

- What do you think about how the children understand and use the phrase “You are bad”?
- Why might they have such a strong reaction to being called “bad”?
- How do the children see themselves and each other in these moments?

Consider opportunities and possibilities for next steps

- Observe how children in your group express emotions. What do you think they already know about expressing and communicating emotions?
- Notice your role in helping children communicate strong emotions. How do you respond to the children, and how do they respond to you?
- Try stepping back to see how children negotiate conflict on their own.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Consider reading more about children’s social and emotional development:

Center on the Social and Emotional Foundations for Early Learning <http://csefel.vanderbilt.edu/resources/family.html>

Emotional Intelligence: Why It Can Matter More Than IQ, by Daniel Goleman (Bantam 2005).

Mind in the Making: The Seven Essential Life Skills Every Child Needs, by Ellen Galinsky (HarperCollins 2010).