

# A Giraffe in the Classroom

## *How Nonviolent Communication transforms education*

By Michelle Arensberg

*Appreciate you without judging*

*Join you without invading*

*Invite you without demanding*

*Leave you without guilt*

**-Virginia Satir**

When I drop my child off at school, I leave knowing that she is a part of something both unique and necessary: an approach to education that emphasizes partnership, compassion, and the interdependence of all. Her school is in fact founded on the belief that how we handle conflicts, how we speak to one another and think about one another, how we think about ourselves and talk to ourselves, *are* the most vital elements of education. Children are empowered to be full participants in their learning, and can then contribute and receive freely and joyfully, forming relationships with adults, children, and themselves that enrich their learning and their lives.

As parents and educators, we are faced daily with hundreds of moments in which we choose to respond in ways that either result in greater connection with the young people around us, or less. When we are attuned to the quality of that connection, rather than a particular outcome, something wonderful unfolds. Compassion comes alive, often in surprising and unexpected places. As one child aptly put it: "I could tell that he (a classmate) was wanting to meet my needs. And it was like a door opened in me, and I wanted to meet his needs, too!"

Nonviolent Communication- NVC- is taught through the use of a concrete model, and is often referred to as a "language of compassion," but it is much more than a language. The use of NVC requires a fundamental shift in consciousness: rather than rights and wrongs, demands and judgments, attention is focused on:

1. *The feelings and needs motivating each person;* and
2. *What actions might best meet their needs—at no one else's expense \**

The image of a giraffe is sometimes used to playfully represent this heart-based model for communication, the giraffe being the land mammal with the biggest heart. With our "giraffe glasses" or "giraffe ears" on, we can look beyond behaviors we judge to be "disrespectful" or "inappropriate" to the underlying feelings and needs- needs we all share- resulting in them.

In the classroom, this approach differs from doing nothing (a permissive model), and using coercive tactics (an authoritarian model). The focus is on what actions would meet the needs of all; not on getting children to do what we want. This requires cultivating what is often a very small seed of trust- that not

only can we get our own needs met without rewards, punishments, threats, or demands, but that we- and they- will enjoy the closeness, warmth, and heart satisfaction that only comes with knowing your needs and theirs were met at no one else's expense. In this environment, learning occurs naturally, freely, and organically.

How does this look in practice?

### ***Morning meeting: a chance to hear and be heard***

It is 9:45am, and most of the students at Portland Family Freeschool have arrived and settled in. The staff call, "Morning meeting!" and in ones and twos and threes, this group of 3-7 year olds all wander over to the group area. "Problems, Plans, and Sharing" is written up on the white board.

- During morning meeting, Sally says quietly that she has both a sharing AND a problem. The teacher: "So, you have two things to say...which are you wanting to say first?" Sally: "Well, they are together, my sharing IS my problem." Teacher: "Will you tell us more about that?" Sally: " My sharing is that I wrote a book I want to read to everyone. But my problem is...well, sometimes kids make comments about my drawings, saying, "that's doesn't look like a duck!" or "that's not how you draw a house. And I feel really mad!" Teacher: "Oh, so you're excited to share your book with everyone? But you're feeling worried or scared to share it, too, wanting reassurance that your work will be respected and appreciated?" Sally: "Yes! And I'm also feeling annoyed!" Teacher: "You really don't enjoy hearing those kind of comments about your work...do you have a request for the group?" Sally: "Yes...would everyone be willing just to listen to and enjoy my story, but not make comments about my drawings?" The whole group nods quietly. Sally smiles, and jumps to the center of the group, stands happily, and reads her story out loud, showing the pictures to everyone.

### ***Empathy in action***

- Three children arrive at school together, bursting through the doorway with much energy. "We're not coming to group today!" they state, giggling nervously. "We hate group time and we aren't going to come anymore!" The teacher listens, relaxed and open..."Hmm, so there are some things about group that you aren't enjoying, so much that sometimes you really don't want to come?" "Yeah...we won't come!!!!" Teacher: "So today you have a preference; you'd like to choose to do something else during group? I'm curious to hear more about what you aren't enjoying?" "Well, it's too long! And we don't like sitting down, and we just want to play!" "Oh, so sometimes you feel tired of sitting, and would like to have more fun and movement?" "Yeah!" "Are you also maybe wanting to have a choice about being a part of group?" "YES!"

They then run off to eat a snack in the kitchen. A few minutes later, the staff announces Morning Meeting, and two of the children, now done eating, rush over to the group area willingly and happily and flop down asking, "Are we going to play that fun guessing game again?" The third, still munching on a sandwich, says, "Wait! Ask them not to start group without me, I'm not done eating and I don't want to miss anything!"

Every harsh word and judgment diminishes a child's resilience and innate openness, while also diminishing their sense of "rightness" in the world. By choosing to emphasize feelings and needs rather than attaching blame or meting out punishments, we can support children to give that same acceptance and compassion to themselves and others.

Michelle Arensberg is co-founder of a school in NE Portland using NVC, Portland Family Freeschool. Read more about the school at: [www.familyfreeschool.com](http://www.familyfreeschool.com).

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