

Setting Limits: The Child Who Won't Respect Others Possessions

“She took my seat!”

How to work with the child who doesn't respect other children's space and belongings
by Polly Greenberg

Dear Polly, I have a child in my class, Nancy, who takes other children's things. She is 5-years-old, so I wouldn't say she steals, but that is what it would be called if she were older. She also trashes other children's activities, and her mother says that she takes her teenage sister's special things and hides her mother's work. If Nancy wants to sit where someone is already sitting, she aggressively but laughingly sits on his lap until he moves and she gets the place. After 15 years of teaching, I know this behavior is not normal. So far, my ideas haven't worked? Do you have any suggestions?

Pose Some Questions

While this behavior isn't typical of young children, neither is it unheard of. It's one of those things that teachers, collaborating with parents, have to handle wisely and consistently until the problem subsides. Does everyone at school and at home respect Nancy's possessions and space? I would use this issue as the topic of a class meeting. Questions that may draw out children's thinking might be “Nancy, did either of your sisters ever take any of your things? Did either of them ever mess up something you were playing with? Did anybody at school ever take something of yours or wreck something you had made?” (If so, ask Nancy how she felt about it. Go around the group asking the same questions, and gathering answers.) “Do you think it's OK to take another person's things?” (Don't moralize, just ask each contributor to the conversation why or why not.)

Establish the fact that no one likes to have her things taken or disturbed. This is pestering and annoying, and nobody likes that. It's amazing how many of these conflicts go on, and in countless homes. These quarrels often take place without an adult intervening to help find a solution or protect siblings' rights. It's entirely possible that Nancy has had her space and things encroached upon at home. Conclude the meeting by saying that we all need to practice respect for other people's possessions and activities.

Talk It Out

Talk with Nancy when the other children aren't in the room, in a friendly, neutral manner. Avoid “you always” comments. You could begin by saying, I've noticed that sometimes you take other children's things, or ruin what someone is doing. I saw this happen when you took Peter's crayon and stood on the puzzle Patty was doing so she

couldn't put in the pieces. Do you think you do that so the children will notice you and pay attention to you? After Nancy answers, say, "I wonder if you want [name of child in class] to like you and play with you but you need help in learning how to make that happen."

Respect any response. Ask Nancy if she thinks that taking people's things and getting in their way is working. "Do these things seem to be making other children feel friendly toward you?" End the conference by saying that you're going to help her with this problem.

What You Can Do

- Every day, structure a small social situation that you think will be positive for Nancy. Choose several accepting children and invite them to do a job, play in the block area, or play a game together. Don't single Nancy out, but be sure to invite her to this activity, too.
- Have another group meeting where the topic is, What do I do to be friendly? What can I do when I want to play with someone? Solicit children's insights. Write the ideas on an easel chart. Invite everyone to try these ideas.
- Several times a week, stand near Nancy, coaching and helping as needed to ensure some small successes.
- Confer with her parents. First, listen to what they say and the ideas they have about the behaviors you see at school. Then ask what, if anything, they've tried at home (and if they're willing to join you in your plan). Present your suggestions as an experiment).

Many teachers will feel overwhelmed when it comes to problems like this. Others will become more disciplinary out of a fear of losing control of the class. The best thing to do is become an advocate for any child with an obvious social problem like Nancy's.

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