Acknowledging children’s efforts

Three year old Isabel took the marker lid off and started to make careful, intricate circles. Her work in drawing the circles encompassed a good part of her morning play time. There was a humming sound coming from Isabel. Taking a deep breath, her face popped up from the table, full of smile and awe, as if to say, “Wow! I’m tired! I’ve just worked so hard and it was fun!” Will Isabel’s efforts be acknowledged?

To be able to acknowledge effort, you need to be able to not only see the effort, but honor and respect it. Dictionaries show acknowledgement to mean: to express recognition of, to admit existence, to recognize as being valid. This is what you need to give children; to see their efforts as something valid and truthful.

Connecting children’s effort to their development

Isabel’s caregiver observed that she draws for long periods of time and has shifted from schematic scribbling to formative shapes. Isabel has created drawings that now show many forms of representation. She is also continually making attempts at using scissors and spends large chunks of time, with great effort, attempting to cut.

In looking closely at Isabel’s work, her caregiver is able to start connecting her efforts to her overall development. Isabel is exhibiting varying degrees of growth in her fine motor development. Also, she has started to cry when mom or dad say goodbye, which she never did before. In fact, when the teacher asked Isabel to tell her about her circle drawings, she identified the circles as her family (representational drawing) and added that the one that is “Isabel” is crying. “She wants her mommy,” she said. Another connection has been made for the teacher: Isabel is growing and changing in her emotional development.

Young children often spend long periods of time working on skills they are mastering and want to repeat the activity often. Some researchers believe that when children are mastering new skills (cutting, potty learning, reading, etc.) they may become physically tired and drained. This may contribute to Isabel’s emotional changes.
Seeing children’s efforts

It’s up to your eagle eyes and keen thoughts to recognize and acknowledge children’s efforts, their importance, and what they mean to the child, as Isabel’s teacher did. In recognizing the variety of efforts children put forth, consider the following:

• What are they doing (look closely at details and actions)?
• How much time have they spent on the action?
• Is this a repeat choice of action?
• What skills, resources, and steps have they used?
• What areas of development are explored? How?
• What do they seem to know or want to know?

Acknowledgement language

In acknowledging children’s efforts, consider the following:

• Body language – Be near and face the child.
• Eye contact – Show you are paying attention and are interested, but don’t take over.
• Listen – Listen and reflect on what is being said so responses can be meaningful.
• Open-ended questions – Prompt thoughts instead of one response answers, help gather information as well as share the conversation with others.
• Reflect the effort and actions - Provide a playback for the child (“I see you stacked six blocks, with the largest block on the bottom. What do you plan to do next?”).
• Document the effort – Take notes, photographs, videos, and save samples (if possible) of the effort.
• Time – Provide time, materials, and experiences to support child’s efforts.

One of the most valuable forms of acknowledging children’s efforts is to offer ample time for their work and play. Be flexible and provide plenty of time for children’s efforts, even if you have to adjust the schedule.

Polish your skills of recognizing and acknowledging children’s efforts to help guide discovery and contribute to meaningful experiences.