



## Enabling Environments

**"Early childhood professionals who want to prevent conflicts often choose to simply forbid certain activities. Instead I encourage you to ask, "How can I make sure a positive experience happens?" rather than "Should I permit this experience at all?"** Dan Hodgins, author of *Boys: Changing The Classroom not the Child*, wrote that profound statement. If you are an early childhood professional, parent, keeper of the children, or any of the sort, I encourage you to ponder this. Personally, everything about this is impactful, even the title of the book screams at me as our first question at ABC Head Start when we are struggling in the classroom is: how can the environment be changed to make things more positive. Truly this is what we can control. We cannot control the child's reaction or even their interactions, but we have great power in shaping their experiences through environments to make it the most enabling, positive daily adventures they can have.

I walked into an ABC Head Start classroom recently just as "free play" was beginning. Some of the structured activities were over and now the children were free to choose what, where and with whom they'd like to play. I noticed three boys rush over to an area with a play garage and mat lined with roads. A teacher was standing by the area and they all walked up and politely asked if they could have a car to play with. The teacher reached up to the top of the shelf and pulled down the basket of cars. She then said, "Yes, you can choose a car."

At first I thought '*Well this is rather restrictive,*' but before opening my mouth I watched it unfold. Generally the basket of cars is placed on the floor for the children to dig through, switch cars at will. I watched as each child carefully chose a car to play with. I then watched the boys engage in some of the most cooperative play I had ever witnessed. They were talking, and setting up scenarios, and taking turns using the roads, and interacting. I then approached the teacher and said, "Can I ask why you only let them have one car each?"

She responded, "Well when we introduced this activity to this particular group there was a lot of conflict. Children would take multiple cars, shove them in their pockets, they were struggling to share. They were really not engaging in the activity as they were so worried that someone was going to 'steal' one of their cars. So one day we decided to change the activity and ask them to choose one car, then if they wanted to switch cars they would have to ask a friend. We coached them through this and it is honestly like watching a different group of children play together."

I continued to observe and the teacher was right. I had witnessed the conflict and power struggles in the past between the children and despite coaching them to share it was still a challenge when the whole basket of cars were present. But what I loved most about this moment was that the teachers did not give up. They did not put the cars and garage in storage, as I have seen so many times before, and say "It's just never going to work with this group of children." They continued to make changes to the environment until they found something that worked. They didn't deprive the children from experiencing the activity all together, they challenged themselves to find the solution.