

TURN CHILDREN INTO CITIZENS

Author Dan Gartrell on Social-Emotional Skills and "The Power of Guidance."

By Matt Alderton

If children are our future, then child care is our best insurance policy. That's what Dr. Dan Gartrell believes. A former Head Start teacher, Gartrell is a professor of early childhood and elementary education at Bemidji State University in Minnesota, where he also is director of the Child Development Training Program. The author of several books, including *A Guidance Approach for the Encouraging Classroom* and, most recently, *The Power of Guidance: Teaching Social-Emotional Skills in Early Childhood Classrooms*, Gartrell is an ambassador for the guidance approach to education, whereby students are not just test scores, but healthy, productive people.

SAM'S CLUB® Source™ recently sat down with Gartrell to talk about children, early childhood development and the future of child care in America.

SAM'S CLUB Source: What is your philosophy of education?

Gartrell: That for children to become healthy individuals and productive citizens, they need to learn certain democratic life skills – how to function in a democracy. Basically, if you're using guidance, your main concern isn't just to make children obedient to your program, but to actively teach them those democratic life skills.

I think it's important to think of children as months old, rather than years old. A 3-year-old is really only 36 months old. Even a big 5-year-old is just 60 months old. We're wanting children to learn high-level skills that, as we all know, not even all adults have mastered. And in the process of learning those high-level skills, children, like all of us, are going to make mistakes. One of the key ideas in guidance is that we don't punish children for making mistakes in their behavior, but we help them learn positive lessons from their mistakes. That's what guidance is about.

SAM'S CLUB Source: What exactly are democratic life skills?

Gartrell: One is accepting oneself as a worthwhile individual. A second is

expressing strong emotions in non-hurting ways. A third one is working cooperatively with others to solve problems.

There are two big sets of research findings that go along with the fact that, in their preschool years, children's brain development is occurring more fully and more quickly than at any other time in their lives:

The first is kind of scary – that if children don't learn the social-emotional skills they need to function productively in group situations, by the time they make that transition from preschool to kindergarten they are much more likely to be at risk for failure in school and for having significant behavioral problems that will follow them into their adult lives.

The second is that perhaps the most important tool for helping children learn to become socially productive is a positive attachment with caring adults. Ideally, those adults are the child's family members, but teachers also can form those productive attachments with children and make a significant difference in the students' ability to develop social and emotional competence. That's why preschool teachers are so very, very important, because in the time that children are with them they really can affect the social-emotional skill set that preschoolers learn.

SAM'S CLUB Source: What are some strategies that child care providers can employ to instill these positive social-emotional skills in their children?

Gartrell: The big global strategy is that the child care provider must figure out a way to develop a positive relationship with every child in his or her group. The second thing is to make social and emotional skills a part of the daily educational program. The third thing is to have developmentally appropriate education programs in which every child can experience success with learning.

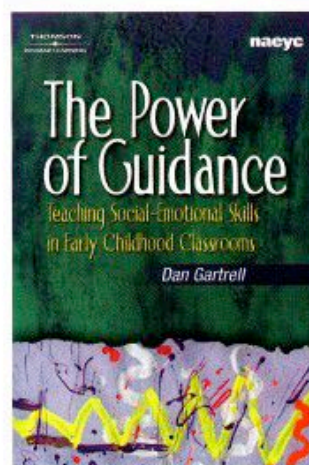
SAM'S CLUB Source: What challenges does child care face in the coming years?

Gartrell: The two big difficulties that child care faces is that, one, family life for children is getting more and more complex and that child care providers are having to do more in providing those emotional attachments with children than ever before. The second challenge is that, unless your child care operation is in a wealthy community where parents can afford the actual cost of child care, providers have to subsidize some of the cost of care out of salaries and fringe benefits and program resources.

SAM'S CLUB Source: Why should the United States invest more in child care?

Gartrell: There is more and more public recognition of the research that shows that investing fully in quality preschool programs pays big economic and social dividends down the road because our young adults will be happier and more productive citizens. Funding quality early childhood programs is the best investment society can make if we want long-term social and economic success for the country. **S**

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The Power of Guidance

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