

Oregonauthor.com

Jon Remmerde

Published in *The Christian Science Monitor*

1,115 words

A Conspiracy to Join Forces against Authority

Morgan stands up on the mat she's supposed to be lying down on, resting or going to sleep. She yells, "Hey. Hey. Hey." She's four. Her actions inspire Daja, who is three, and Daja crawls off her mat and crawls rapidly across the room, weaving her way between the mats of the other six children, who obey my admonition, "Stay on your mats." I stand up, put down the book I've been reading aloud from, pick Daja up, and return her to her mat. I tell her, "Daja, you said if I put your mat over here, you would stay on it for rest time. Do you remember that?"

She nods. She wants to cooperate, but she doesn't think her friend, Morgan, should act up on her own. She needs support, and Daja is her most likely support. Daja obviously feels some conflict about the situation. Me too. I feel conflict. I like being with the children, but I often feel less than effective, and I'm considering quitting this job.

Jeremiah decides staying still and obedient while chaos rises in the room is beyond his interest or ability. He rolls off his mat and hugs Nicolas, who was willing to sleep but begins to think it might be more fun to play, or then again, he is tired and had been looking forward to sleep, so he starts crying.

I say, "Jeremiah," and when he looks at me, I point to his mat. He rolls back onto his mat. He might decide my admonitions are meaningless, but so far he hasn't thought of that possibility.

Taking care of these children during the weekly staff meeting so Jan Willem's assistant can attend the meeting doesn't work very well. Two and a half hours one day a week is not long enough to establish patterns. The children know me, and I know them, but they don't know me well enough to predict what I'm going to do. They want to find out more about who I am and what I'll do, so they explore our relationship instead of resting or sleeping, as they're scheduled to do.

A rule at this private school where I'm helping says a child is never spanked or in any other way physically punished. I think that's a good rule. We raised our two daughters without physical punishment, but with firm and loving discipline, and it worked very well. Another rule, which I think is more of a recommended procedure than a rule is, "always sing your

instructions to the children.” I’ve had difficulty with that rule, maybe because my style of singing sounds more like some strange combination of jazz, rock and rap than a lullaby for preschoolers and kindergartners.

I watched eight children in the fenced play area outside recently. I said, “Dustin and Pasha, get down out of that tree, now. I don’t care if school rules say children can climb trees. There are rocks under that tree. If you fall, you might break yourself. When I’m taking care of you, we go by my rules. My rules are, you do not climb trees, and you play where I can see all of you all the time.” I spoke firmly and gently, but I didn’t sing to them. Pasha and Dustin got down from the tree, and they stayed close enough to the rest of the children so I could see all of them.

The money I earn for two and a half hours of work a week is not much more than my expenses for driving to and from work, so economically, the job isn’t worth holding. But the real reason I might quit is that I feel ineffective with these children.

Right now, during rest time inside, I’m not concerned about singing. I’m concerned because Daja and Morgan just ran outside, over all my objections. Since I can’t leave the children in the building unattended, and Jan is tending children on a nature walk, I open the door to the room where the staff meets, and I explain my situation. Dana leaves the meeting, walks out, speaks to Daja and Morgan, and brings them back inside. I ask her, “Why does your voice of authority get a response, but mine doesn’t?”

“I’m with them every day. They know my boundaries. They’re testing you.”

“Yes, exactly what I would have said.”

The rest of the day goes well. After rest time, we go out into the yard. Jan Willem and the older children walk over the hill to irrigate part of the pasture.

Morgan takes her shoes off. That’s fine in the sandbox, but in other areas, she has to have her shoes on, to protect her feet from injuries, a school rule, and it makes sense to me. She leaves the sandbox, and I tell her she has to put her shoes on.

She says, “No.”

I say, “Morgan, I’m supposed to make sure you keep your shoes on when you’re out of the sandbox. Teacher Jan is going to be mad at me because you don’t have your shoes on. I don’t like to be in trouble with teacher Jan, do you?”

Morgan sits down on a log, and we get her shoes on and tied. For the rest of the afternoon, Morgan obeys, and she helps me keep Daja in line.

Morgan and I took a very small step for mankind but a giant step for us. Morgan accepted me into her world when she realized I could also be in trouble with authority figures. She maintained her independent and strong personality, but she was willing to work with me, and I sometimes found her beside me, reaching for my hand, just to be close for a few minutes. In the next few weeks, it became apparent that the change would last.

The children looked at me quizzically when I started singing their rest time stories in my own style, bluesjazzrockrap, complete with elaborate improvisations for some of the stories, but they quickly accepted my approach as the way teacher Jon does things and sometimes asked, "Do it again?" when I finished a story.

Now that the children know me better, I see that quitting the school might not be the best solution for the "too little time to get to know each other" problem. More time together might be a better solution.

Summer will change everyone's schedules. I'll be away for several weeks, visiting family and friends. When the fall schedule begins to settle into place, I think I will ask the appropriate authority figures if they can use me in child care four or more hours per day, two or three days a week.