

# THEY'RE LEARNING TO GET ALONG

Dean Children's Center focuses young minds on creative conflict resolution

FRANKLIN — Paula Waite has been successfully teaching a select group how to resolve conflicts and disagreements: First, those involved should remain calm. Second, make sure everyone is heard. Third, choose a solution together, and finally, be prepared for follow-up and support.

Does Waite instruct diplomats or business leaders? No, she works with pre-schoolers at the Dean College Children's Center in Franklin.

The 25-year teaching veteran is assistant director of the school, and was herself a graduate of Dean College and Framingham State College. Her three children, now grown, also attended the Children's School.

"What I see is that what works to solve problems and resolve conflicts with pre-schoolers, works for all age groups, including adults," she explained. "We get testimonials from parents that this approach works for them in family situations, and that children who know the technique are well prepared for elementary school."

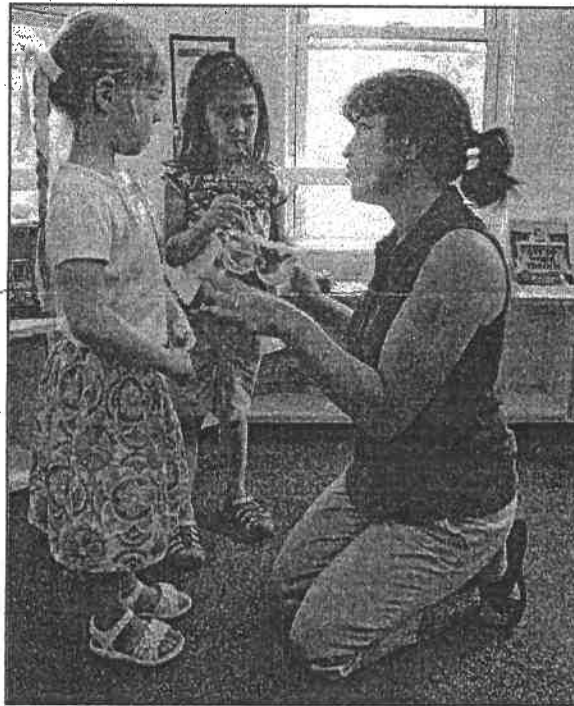
Kate Barba, R.N. at Massachusetts General Hospital and a Franklin resident sent her two children to the Center.

"We found this curriculum very helpful to both of my children," she said. "It really focused on their social skills as they entered school."

All of the educators at the Children's Center are educators in the High Scope curriculum, she said. "All of the children and teachers use the same approach over and over again, and it works," she explained. "What I especially like is that the center is a laboratory school connected with the College. The Dean students bring so much energy and enthusiasm to the classrooms, and Dean's international students who work at the Center bring some additional diversity to this program."

Barba also noted that she found that all of the preschool teachers are always up to date with the latest literature and research, and the School's director shares that with parents.

"The Center offers a lot of training to parents and the community, and there is a very strong parent committee. Being connected to the College also presents many opportunities to the children that other schools don't have," she noted. "There are sessions in dance movement,



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Dean College Children's Center Instructor Paula Waite works with two students at the center on resolving a problem by working together to come up with a solution.

music, and field trips right on the College grounds."

Barba also noted that the staff does a very good job of noticing developmental delays or learning differences with children, and have the knowledge to refer children who may need additional services before they reach elementary school.

Meg Jacobs, of Franklin, sent her two children now in elementary and middle school, and she still volunteers at the Center.

"I sent my son when he was 4, and I volunteered so I could get a feel for the classroom and what he was doing," she explained. "I just loved it. The teachers do everything right there from the approach they take with the children, to play, to problem solving."

Jacobs usually volunteers one session a week, mostly with the pre-kindergarten group, but she also substitutes there. "I like to be there as much as possible," though she works at an educational children's toy store she said. "Through the center, I've received vouchers to take classes in early childhood education at Dean, for skills both as a parent and as a stay-at-home mom," she said.

"The problem solving really taught all of us to deal with day-to-day problems with our children and students, instead of

being frustrated," she said. "That has helped enormously. It acknowledges that the children have a part in solving their own problems, and a say in how those problems can be resolved. I have a degree in English and studied psychology, but then you have kids and you realize you don't know everything," she smiled.

In the 1980s, the Children's Center adopted the "High Scope" curriculum philosophy, which incorporates problem and conflict solving techniques, explained the Children's Center Director Faith Nickolas. "This particular model fit right into what was already happening here and what we believe works best for children."

"People see it working," said Nickolas. "We teach the children, student teachers, and parents."

"What frequently happens with children in different settings, is that the adult supervising them thinks it will be easier to just solve the problem, rather than letting this be a learning opportunity for children to learn how to negotiate the problem," said Waite. "We encourage the children to bring up issues, to state what is happening and work together to hear everyone's suggestions for a solution."

The school staff works to de-

velop empathy through this technique. "We want the children to look at how others feel and identify their own feelings. Children are very capable and eager to use the technique," said Waite. "Yet once they are familiar with the process, and they've seen how well it works, they use it themselves. We guide and facilitate the problem solving at the Children's Center, including asking the children come up with the solutions."

One goal at the Center is that when the children leave and go to elementary school, they are able to solve problems without an adult.

"Of course not everything is an open discussion," said Waite. "Respect and safety are key, and unkind words or destruction of materials is not allowed nor tolerated. You get to know the children's physical and intellectual capabilities, and you create the expectation for them to come up with a solution. Even very young children can be taught this method."

She described a recent incident between two younger children. "We were having a clean-up outside, and two of the children wanted to use the wheelbarrow," she explained. "After talking, the children came up with a solution: Each child would take one handle of the wheelbarrow." Ms. Nickolas adds, "We could have easily told them that solution, but instead prefer to help them discover that as one of the many viable solutions!"

For many teachers and parents, it feels like you are giving up a little bit of control, but in the long run, you learn to trust the children to come up with solutions that are satisfactory to everyone involved.

"Piaget said 'If you tell a child what to do, you rob them of the opportunity to figure it out and own the solution,'" said Waite.

Waite was born and raised in Franklin. As she completed her education, she did work in the Children's Center which is a teaching laboratory. She sent her own children there, and has been at Dean for 13 years.

The Center is staffed by Nickolas, the director, and Waite, the assistant director, in addition to four additional teachers and many Dean student teachers who are majoring in Early Childhood Education. There are also parents and volunteers who work alongside the teachers each session.