

What is Third Space and How Do we Get There?

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Third space involves moving from dualistic thinking to holistic thinking in the face of what seems to be a contradiction or a paradox. If I disagree with the way you feed your baby or put her to sleep, it's possible that I have a blind spot. My blind spot leads me to consider our differing views a *problem*. What do I do?

First, I should suspend judgment and seek to understand your perspective on what you're doing. I have to put aside ideas about determining which is the one right way. That doesn't mean that all ways are fine, but it does mean that I need to open up my mind, and remind myself that there is always more to learn (Rogoff, 2003).

Phillips and Cooper (1992) write about how caregiving practices (feeding, toilet training, or putting babies to sleep) have patterns of meaning that are shared by and embodied in the lifestyles of a larger group. I need to begin to see the patterns that are involved in my way as well as patterns behind your practice.

It will help if I move from the idea that *you and I have a problem*, to stating the situation "*you and I have different views*. Barrera and Corso, (2003) give me some insight into how to use something they call *third space* in this situation. "A third space perspective does not 'solve the problem.' Rather it changes the arena within which that problem is addressed by increasing the probability of respectful, responsive, and reciprocal interactions. In so doing, an optimal response to the situation becomes more likely" (page 81).

To get to *third space* I have to do three things: 1. believe that it exists. 2. accept that there are multiple realities. 3. dialogue with you instead of arguing. I can use Rumi's advice on how to move from an argument to dialogue. He said, "Out beyond ideas of right doing and wrong doing there lies a field. I'll meet you there."

If you and I go out to the field and talk about our views of how to take care of babies, we may be able to see a reality that is bigger than both of us. We may even be able to move from my way and your way to *our* way as we figure out what to do about our differences in this situation with this baby, in this center. If we do all that, we've reached third space.

Bredekamp and Copple (1997) explained third space without calling it that in the second edition of *Developmentally Appropriate Practice in Early Childhood Programs*. They said, "Some critical reactions to NAEYC's (1987) position statement on developmentally appropriate practice reflect a recurring tendency in the American discourse on education: the polarizing into *either/or* choices of many questions that are more fruitfully seen as *both/and*" (page 23).

They are writing about what I call dualistic thinking where contrasting ideas are looked at as dichotomous. If it's right, it can't be wrong; if it's bad, it can't be good. If it's blue, it can't be yellow. When you move into holistic thinking from dualistic thinking, you don't separate

things like that into opposites. Also, you can see that when blue and yellow come together – they make green! Blue keeps its blueness and yellow keeps its yellowness and together they make something new altogether. Green is an example of third space.

Stephan Covey writes about what he calls *synergy* in the foreword to a book called *Crucial Conversations*, (Patterson et al, 2002) which has excellent strategies for getting to third space. According to Covey, synergy makes for a better decision, better relationship, better decision-making process and increased commitment to implement decisions made. He talks about how synergy transforms people and relationships and creates an entirely new level of bonding producing what Buddhism calls the “middle way” – not a compromise. Not meeting half way between two opposites but a higher middle way like the apex of a triangle. When you produce something with another person that is truly creative, it’s one of the most powerful forms of bonding there is.

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