

CARE PRACTICE: Self-Care

by Carol Garboden Murray

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Developing self-awareness while we care

Imagine the difference between the early childhood teacher who treats care as drudgery and the one who treats care as education and honors care as an intellectual exchange. Because it is so common to view care as subordinate to education, we sometimes engage in caring rituals on auto-pilot and with little self-awareness. Once we tune into ourselves, we may notice an internal dialog that does not support caring with joy and certainly does not support our own self-care. How do we examine feelings of exhaustion or resentment? How do we practice care with an open heart without losing ourselves? It is one thing to say, "No one really respects the work I do or understands how important caring is," but it is quite another to find dismissive or shameful thoughts and feelings within oneself. It is with awareness of our inner thoughts that we examine and change our beliefs, and begin to develop a pedagogy of care that starts with self-respect.

Care as burden or care as joy?

Throughout history the word care has been used with conflicting meaning. Care has lent itself to a negative connotation such as to be sacrificed, burdened and heavy-laden with care. Care has also held positive associations and has been linked to loving and providing for another while participating in a reciprocal regenerative exchange. The tension in the extremes of care, with burden at one pole and joy at the other, can help us understand ourselves as we care. It is important to accept our true emotions, and to tell ourselves that it is normal to experience the ups and downs of care. Like all purposeful practices and approaches; care is not perfect, care can be messy, difficulty, uncertain, and challenging at times. This friction between burden and joy lends itself to an understanding of our shared, often mercurial, emotions and experiences as caregivers.

- Does care drag you down or does care lift you up?
- Can you find your place up and down the emotional scale at different times in the day, at different times in your life, within your course of caring for others?
- When you identify that you are feeling burdened or burned out, can you use it as a barometer that it is time to pause, be gentle with yourself and seek self-care?

When we care, we are on a slippery slope. Identifying the tension and the two extreme interpretations of the meaning of care, can help us develop a self-awareness that allows us to turn care inward, and to care for ourselves while we care for others. When care is dragging us down, we've slipped out of balance, out of partnership, out of a place where we can care as an educational pedagogy and practice. I know some early childhood teachers who are experts in care and seem to be nearly super human, but I also think it might be literally impossible to change ten diapers in one hour and not feel that care is a drag. I hope that the contrasting meanings of care give us insight into the weakness and the power of care in a clear-seeing way that allows us to develop agency and accountability for the way we care in our lives.

If you are like me and you have found your way into the profession of caring for young children as a calling and a passion, you must recognize that putting too much pressure on care is not fair. When your purpose and your passion becomes your work it can be a wonderful way to live, but it is only honest to recognize that anything we do full-time and count on for a paycheck will sometimes cause us to fall into a rut—and to feel drudgery or overwhelm is normal and expected part of the 40 hour work week. Again, keeping things in perspective and growing self-awareness are key to finding balance and to holding the goal to care from a place of joy and self-expression.

Care continuum from burden to joy

This continuum from burden to joy is not a measure of right or wrong. It is a tool for self-awareness, for developing a broad compassion for the full range of human experiences in care. We all find ourselves up and down the emotional scale in different times throughout our day, throughout our lives, in our careers of caring.



Place your hand on your heart as an act of self-care

When you feel care dragging you down, try placing your own hand over your heart. This self-care practice is a reminder that when we feel exhausted or resentful, what we really want is to be cared for ourselves. We can give self-care with body posture throughout the day such as placing a hand on our heart, holding our own hands, or folding our arms in a way that feels like a protective gentle hug. Use body posture to comfort and pause as you develop self-awareness, and amplify your reflective thinking process. Place your hand on your heart to remind yourself of your own care needs with the intention to shift into balanced care.

This excerpt is from *Illuminating Care: The Pedagogy and Practice of Care in Early Childhood Communities* by Carol Garboden Murray.

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