

Nov. 11,

2008 4-1

Hi Everybody,

There are a number of vehicles in the gym that provide room for more than one person, sometimes in pairs and sometimes in small groups. For the sake of clarity in the following descriptions let's give them names: sturdy blue trailer, side by side red and black, three piece red and black, silver carriage and fire engine. On any given day the activity on these bikes can ignite a myriad of opportunities for social interactions even among the most cautious individuals. Often they can nudge kids into trying a ride with someone new. Here's how it works.

A boy in a purple shirt gets on the back seat of the silver carriage and silently waits for a driver to come. It does not occur to him to drive the bike himself or to ask someone to drive. Across the gym a girl in a green shirt is driving the fire engine when someone comes to sit on the back. She is surprised; she didn't want a passenger so this incident prompts her to protest. This small exchange in itself has value, the intrusion has roused her to address another, but it may also be the first time she has considered the possibility of company on her ride. These two kids are slowly waking up to the presence of other kids around them and this is when a teacher can help. With a little encouragement the boy will realize he can ask someone to join and once that realization occurs, he may spend that gym time and several others to come, circulating the gym and practicing how to ask. Even if there are lots of refusals kids don't usually get discouraged at this stage, because it is the power of the words given to an idea that excites them.

Meanwhile among the groups of kids who are already very socially active, there is a blur of motion as they jump from one bike to the next, switch trios and pairs in different combinations, squabble and bicker and finally all on their own work something out. Two girls are on the fire engine. Another comes to join. One flies away. The new girl departs too. The driver is puzzled. She goes to get the new girl back, but she doesn't want to ride any more, so the driver goes looking for a brand new passenger. Across the gym, two boys are scooting in the round moonbuggy. It has only one seat. A girl, special friends with one of the boys, comes to slip under the bars and squeeze in. Protests! "We're squished!" So they scatter, one boy and the girl flee to the side by side red and black. The other boy heads to the three piece red and black to drum up new business. Much of the time it only takes a second for kids to regroup and find an alternative.

One more piece of equipment, the orange boat, allows a maximum of four to sit together. Sometimes others join at each end to tilt and push. One boy and three girls are inside with two additional girls pushing at either end. The passengers shout directions "Go faster!" or "Slow down so she can get in". Now someone hops out and assumes the pusher's position and the original pusher hops in. A different girl who has been pushing steps forward. "Now I want to get on." The boy sitting in the boat turns to the girl next to him and says, "You have to get off." She replies, "No, you get off so I can sit next to her." He complies amiably. They all start chanting "Two against one wins!" Everyone is laughing, passengers and pushers. It builds as they get louder and louder until in unison they all shout "Stop!" And so they do. Everybody piles out and heads for the bikes. The boy heads for a one seat tricycle. His good friend tries to coax him to the side by side red and black. "Let's do a two bike," she says.

During all of this dizzying activity, there are many occasions when one or more kids who have felt their position was secure, suddenly find themselves left out. Two girlfriends are riding on the silver carriage. They both get off, but then one changes her mind, climbs back on and takes off fast! Her friend is chasing behind trying to climb back on the carriage seat, but the driver says the unthinkable "No!" It is at times like these that kids may come to a teacher with complaints that someone is "being mean" to them. When we approach the driver she explains quite reasonably she wants a turn alone. It doesn't last long, soon they are laughing together again on the side by side bike.

However, there will always be intervals where even the best of friends want to challenge their physical skills on the vehicles. Solo means speed. It takes strong legs to pull four on the blue trailer, but what if you want to go fast? Two may have to disembark, but which two? Whoever it is they're going to be mad. Or what if there are three friends and two suddenly switch to a two seater? Depending on who the odd girl out is they may either be stunned or simply shrug and grab another bike to go along. Most of the time there is no intended malice in these disruptions and they happen fast and frequently throughout the gym time, so kids are having multiple opportunities to work on their objections and responses. Talking it through helps kids gain a wider perspective on the intent. When they need assistance teachers try to be ready to help clarify, but lots of times kids are figuring it out themselves.

Next time you're in the gym take a look, it's a feast for the eyes.

*Melinda & Joseph*