

# You Can't Say, "You Can't Play"

by Tracy Rysavy, writing for Yes! Online magazine  
posted Nov 02, 1998

Veteran teacher Vivian Gussin Paley witnessed a peculiar phenomenon in her kindergarten classroom year after year – without fail, a caste system developed within each group of students. Certain children were granted the status of “boss” by their peers, giving them the power to create the games, make the rules, and determine who would be allowed to join the group and who would be consistently excluded from those games.

Year after year, the drama was the same, with only the names changing – Clara would hide in her cubby hole during playtime rather than face rejection, Nelson would run away from the other boys in tears, Angelo would withdraw into his own world instead of reaching out to others. All victims of three simple words: “You can't play.”

“Turning 60,” writes Paley, “I am more aware of the voices of exclusion in the classroom. ‘You can't play’ suddenly seems too overbearing and harsh, resounding like a slap from wall to wall. How casually one child determines the fate of another.”

Compelled to find out if the exclusion of one group for the benefit of another was inevitable, Paley posted a sign in her classroom with a single proposed rule written on it: “You can't say, ‘You can't play.’”

In her new book of the same name, Paley recounts the long process she and her students went through to determine whether or not such a rule was “fair” and could work.

On the surface, the debate seems to have two sides – the “bosses,” or the children who make up the games and decide who can play versus the rejected children who, for one reason or another, might spoil everyone's game. But caught in the middle are those who just want to fit in and be liked. Those who fear sticking up for the outcasts because one day they, too, might be told, “You can't play.”

“I could play alone,” says popular Lisa during one class discussion. “Why can't Clara play alone?”

“I think that's pretty sad,” replies the self-sufficient Angelo. “People that is alone, they has water in their eyes.”

“I'm more sad if someone comes that I don't want to play with,” says Lisa.

Paley intervenes with a question, “Who is sadder, the one who isn't allowed to play, or the one who has to play with someone he or she doesn't want to play with?”

“It's more sadder if you can't play,” Clara pipes up.

“The other one is the same sadder,” says Lisa.

“It has to be Clara, because she puts herself away in her cubby. And Lisa can still play every time,” says Angelo.

Through many such discussions, Paley and her students decide to test the rule, “You can't say, ‘You can't play,’” which results in a very changed dynamic among the kindergartners.

“I can't believe that the transition to the new rule is so straightforward and easy,” says Paley after the rule has been in place for a week. “When the children are reminded of the rule, they comply so readily that it is as if they've been rescued. From what? Perhaps from the ordeal of deciding whether or not someone can play. ...

“Each time a cause for sadness is removed for even one child, we all rise in stature. ... When I was in a first-grade classroom 55 years ago, it would have been an enormous relief to me if the fat girl with only one dress had been treated kindly.”

The new rule also works wonders on the self-confidence of those used to being outcasts. Instead of hiding in her cubby in the face of rejection, shy Clara finds her voice under the new rule:

Clara comes upon Lisa and Cynthia as they cover the entrance to their dwelling with scarves and manages to narrate her way in without disrupting the play.

“Pretend we're newborn baby princess mousies,” Lisa says to Cynthia.

“And pretend I'm a girl kitty that is lost and I see you,” Clara offers hopefully.

“Then you find your sister, Clara, in a different woods and you run away.”

“No,” says Clara firmly. “Me and my sister see a trail of cheese and it's your cheese and we come to live in your mousie house.”

In the end, the rule passes the test and stays. The following school year, “You can't say, ‘You can't play’” will not be a new rule for the incoming kindergartners, but, as Paley says, it will be “the rule.”

“Words do make a difference,” she says. “The children are learning that it is far easier to open the doors than to keep people out.”

***You Can't Say, “You Can't Play” is available from Harvard University Press and from Amazon.com***