

The Gentle Art of Doing Nothing

-- Mark Renfro

Mark Renfro, has been an instructor at Ringling Brothers and Barnum and Bailey Clown College, and at Clown Camp at the Univ. of Wisconsin. He shared the following at a WCA convention.

[Editor - Shobi's comments are in Brackets.]

“What is it that children want? It’s not face painting -- face paints get washed off. It’s not balloon animals either -- if you’re like me you can’t even get one into the kid’s hand before it pops. Magic tricks? Juggling? Nope. What children want is something much more valid and much more available. What children want is you! The gentle art of doing nothing doesn’t rely on anything you can pull out of a pocket. I believe that character and personality will take you much further than any prop or costume. Superior technique and material will not overcome the inability to communicate well.

“The first step in communication is to know your audience. In this case children. Kids are smart, bright and intelligent. But they are lacking in one thing that often outweighs all others in importance. Children lack experience. Second, children are “little people” in a world built for and run by “big people.” Both of these observations are important for us as kid’s entertainers. Let’s deal with the second one first.

“A large part of the gentle art of doing nothing is reversing that “little people, big people” relationship. Allow the child to create. If you predefine who you are, you limit yourself to that definition, i.e., “big and goofy” “shy and quiet.” Sometimes we get so caught up in creating our fantasy of what a clown should be that we forget our job is to make the kid’s fantasy spring to life. If we will let them, kids will tell us who they want us to be. When you let the audience define who you are, they get exactly what they want.

“**Ask permission.** ‘Can I come over there? Can I be your friend?’ By showing children that they will make the decisions, you are reinforcing the idea that they are in control. Accept their answers. A no means no. Maybe they’ll be ready to play with a clown the next time.

“**Be prepared to back away.** Never work with your back up against a wall.” [Always be ready to back out of the room. Often I have backed out of a room and later the nurse will come looking for me ‘Room 234 wants to see you.’ I’ll go back repeating the whole cautious entry. Sometimes I’ve gone back two or three times before the child agrees to let me in. It is giving them the power. It becomes a game to them, but they are in charge. Even if that’s all that happens, it is communication.]

“**Look at them.** When children come into the area around you, look at them. A quick glance and a wave is all it takes. If they seem hesitant or shy, look away. Here is where their lack of experience comes into play. Perhaps they have never seen a clown before. By looking away and allowing them a moment

to think, you have tipped the scales in their favor. You are telling them you are available, but it is up to them if the relationship will continue. By the time you look back, that shyness may have disappeared.” [In the hospital, you might poke your head around the curtain or in the door and ask if you can come in. Don’t stare down children or pressure them for an answer. Give them time to absorb you by taking your focus slightly off them -- greet a parent or say hello to their teddy bear.]

“**Don’t rush them.** Use their timetable -- not yours. We have the experience, remember? They don’t. It might be a few seconds or a few minutes, but give them all the time they need to decide who and what you are.” [Give them a chance to absorb you. Use the pause to size up the room and the child’s condition. It is time for you to absorb them too.]

“**Let them see you with other children.** How is a child supposed to know that clowns are fun? If a child sees you interacting with other kids in a fun and friendly manner they are much more likely to play along than if you try to tell them how much fun you are.” [In the hospital situation there may be siblings and family members around. Play with them first, so the child can see their reactions. I always check the heart (with my silly stethoscope) of someone else first - maybe a teddy bear if no family or staff are present. Then I ask permission to check their hearts. After seeing what is happening they will usually let you in.]

“**Work low.** Kneepads are the most important part of my costume because they allow me to get down on my knees a hundred times a day. Just by reducing your size you immediately change the nature of the relationship. Time after time I have gotten the positive response I’m looking for simply by getting down on the kid’s level.” [The smaller the kid the more important this becomes. Very often on a pedi floor the kids are walking down the hall pushing their IV stands. After seeing them from a distance, approach slowly and get down on your knees and let the kid approach you. (I squat. Something I learned in India - it gets me even lower than being on my knees.) It’s O.K. to sit on a chair next to the bed, but be careful that the child as with all patients can comfortably see you.]

“**Say something funny or stupid.** Make some verbal mistakes and listen to the children respond. Nothing will make a child feel better about themselves than feeling smarter than the clown.”

“The gentle art of doing nothing is really doing something. It takes a lot of energy and a lot of courage to put down the props and create a special moment with each child. It’s not easy to step up to the line and commit to creating and recreating ourselves for every kid who comes our way. But the rewards are worth it. The memory can last a lifetime. By making the child a partner by clowning with them instead of clowning at them, we can create happy memories. That’s what it’s all about, isn’t it?”

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