What's Wrong with Edward the Unready?
Our Responsibility for Readiness

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Rosemary Wells creates characters that enchant children ranging in age from toddler to teen, as well as parents. She has brought us Max, the quirky bunny who challenges all rules; Noisy Nora, who erups in ear-splitting explosions when she has to wait; and Benjamin, who struggles to find ways to cope with Tulip's bullying. Her simple stories and evocative illustrations transport readers to the heart of everyday life, teaching important lessons and helping us see ourselves in a new light. Wells's work has been pivotal in my professional and personal reading relationships with children.

That's why I really looked forward to her series called Edward the Unready. A review in Newsweek captured Wells's Edward:

"Behold the clinging, quaking little bear they call Edward the Unready. He has big white eyes perpetually popping with worry. He wears giant plaid shorts invariably pulled up to his armpits. He's definitely a bed-wetter. Rosemary Wells introduced Edward in three books so touching they will give you heart palpitations. In Edward Unready for School, our reluctant hero is miserable at play school. In Edward's Overwhelming Overnight, he's miserable at his friend Anthony's house. And in Edward in Deep Water, he's miserable at a pool party and is last seen wearing water wings in the bathtub. Edward is a state-of-the-art antihero: afraid of everything and unequal to every challenge. He's there to remind us that we all grow at our own pace, that nobody should judge us when we fail, that there's always cinnamon toast. (Giles 1995, 82–83)"

Thoroughly comical visually and textually, Edward brings a lump to your throat. More importantly, in these books Wells has developed a poster child for the wait-until-ready movement. In this article I will describe how Wells explains children and readiness, explore the problems I see with her message, and suggest new endings that are more supportive of all children.

Wells's portrait of readiness can be seen quite clearly in Edward Unready for School. On his first day of preschool, Edward is the master of delay—he won't dress or feed himself, he forgets his bunny, then he hides under the bed. When he is taken eventually to preschool, Edward is not happy despite a warm teacher and joyous classmates. At the

Let parents know that they need not retreat if they have an "unready" child. Encourage them to remain steadfast in their commitment to make a place for their child and to participate in the child's adjustment. Few families lose if they take a positive, constructive but adamantly pro-child approach with a truly professional early childhood teacher. Does this describe you?
end of the week, Edward’s teacher makes this pronouncement: “Not everyone is ready for the same thing at the same time.”

Now this is something I could print on a sweatshirt and be proud to wear. We aren’t all ready for the same things at the same time. But I wasn’t ready for the next page. “Well, we’ll just take him home until he is ready,” said Edward’s mother and father. As the car pulls away from school, all the ready preschoolers wave and shout, “Be ready soon!” and Edward returns home to the safety of his backyard.

Wells is addressing a very important issue: how do we ease children, particularly those who are shy and a little reticent, into a bustling world? This question has always nagged parents, teachers, and administrators. While the question is vitally important, Wells’s solution, sending Edward back home, is fraught with problems. Why is Edward portrayed as a failure? What is it about our world that makes it so unfriendly to Edward? What is our responsibility to change it?

Wells falls into the classical readiness trap, mistaking variability in development for deficit. Maturationists abound in Edward’s world. He is sent back home when he is slow to warm up in playschool, when he wants his water wings at a swimming party, and when he can’t sleep at a friend’s house. Everywhere Edward turns, he is met with the view that when children are less than enthusiastic they need “the gift of time.”

Removing children from situations that are challenging is motivated by serious concern for children but is shortsighted. This “gift,” which is seen as a way to allow children more time to grow and mature, can also be seen as a theft—of Edward’s opportunity to be part of a group, of his parent’s opportunity to support his growth, and of his teacher’s responsibility to make a place for him. Understanding why requires us to review what we know about readiness, children, and teachers.

The readiness conundrum

Readiness is a murky idea integrally tied to our ideas about how children develop and what we can do to support that process. What we do know is that readiness is very important to children’s success—in preschool, kindergarten, and early elementary school (NAEYC 1990). What is curious about readiness is what does not work. First, we don’t have any indicators that can measure it—no behaviors, no scores on tests, no characteristics. None of them works to help us sort the ready from the unready (Shepard 1990).

In addition, we have not found any interventions that truly enhance readiness. The strategies we’ve used over time—delaying school entry, placing children in extra-year programs, changing school entrance age—provide only negligible and short-lived advantages (Shepard & Smith 1986; Bredekamp & Shepard 1989).

Decisions about readiness that are made for individuals have implications for others. When the Edwards in a classroom are sent back home, the standard for readiness shifts up, subtly but predictably.

More can be asked of the children in the group because no one is holding them back (Bredekamp & Shepard 1989; Graue 1993a). And to add to this escalation, it appears that when an Edward reappears, finally ready to meet the standards of the school, his parents are likely to ask for an even more escalated curriculum (Graue 1993a). They say he has been waiting patiently, becoming more ready, and now is his time to grow! The readiness variability in development should not be mistaken for deficit. Educators need not make evaluative decisions based on rigid entrance and “performance” requirements that allow children into or keep them out of a playschool program because they are “not ready.” What are you willing to do to get ready for Eddie?
machine, which measures children, sorts them, and recalibrates itself to a new standard, makes individual decisions that have group consequences.

Readiness is in the eye of the beholder as much as in the skills, maturity, and abilities of those we behold. If we moved Edward to another classroom or another school, he could be welcomed with open arms and seen as just as ready as his classmates (Smith & Shepard 1988; Graue 1993b). Readiness, like development, is related to the resources and demands of the context (Kagan 1990; Katz 1991; Graue 1993b). Edward’s teacher was right: “Not everyone is ready for the same thing at the same time.” Unfortunately, she—and Wells—forget to explore the other side of the issue. It’s a big, uncomfortable but very exciting question, “How am I ready for Edward?” By not asking that question, we cannot find out how we set Edward up for failure.

**What conditions make Edward unready?**

While Edward’s teacher is kind and engaging throughout his first week at preschool, she ultimately makes a judgment that he doesn’t belong there. We could argue about the appropriateness of a one-week trial period for a young child in a new setting, but that would miss the point. The real issue is that inflexible criteria for success make for more unready children. These criteria are built around an age-bound notion of the ideal child—not the myriad of individuals who challenge us to meet their changing and dynamic needs. Edward needs more time for his teacher and classmates to learn to find a place for him.

Edward is unready when we make it his responsibility for meeting our needs as teachers and parents. By interpreting variability in development as a problem to be solved by time for growing, we miss an opportunity to help him through this challenge. We miss a chance to reflect on how the demands we make on children provide them with only certain opportunities to be successful. Edward’s readiness is connected to our willingness to respect who he is today and to help him become tomorrow what we hope for him.

The Edwards of the world need more hand holding, more support, even different expectations, than do generic, ready children. But expectations should be individual—that’s our job. And the rewards we get from nurturing Edward into readiness, from helping him get comfortable enough to venture into new places, are too wonderful to pass up. “Not everyone is ready for the same things at the same time.” So what do we do?

**New and more equitable endings**

I think a good way to begin is to rewrite Edward’s story—using Rosemary Wells’s delicious characters and illustrations but coming up with a more satisfying ending. I want to return Edward to the tradition from which Wells usually works, whereby individuals get by with the support of their own inner strength, the help of their friends or parents. I want to find some real problem solvers who are willing to give Edward what he deserves—a chance to make it everywhere, not just at home.

Let’s keep Edward’s awkwardness, his panic, his apprehension; those are very real characteristics that we need to learn to deal with. Let’s keep the loving parents who help Edward make his way at home. Let’s keep an exciting playschool with a nurturing teacher and fun-loving playmates. Let’s keep the realization that not everyone is ready for the same things at the same time. But let’s change everyone’s reaction. Let’s ask new questions and be more creative.

When Edward’s teacher makes her wise announcement about all children, not just Edward, an important change in roles is in order. What would the story be like if Edward’s parents and teacher chose to become his advocates instead of his protectors? What kinds of things would we do if we were trying to make the readiness issue our joint responsibility?

Rather than begin with Edward’s responsibilities, we need to see how the adults in Edward’s life can make a better place for him. The adults have more resources for change than Edward does, so it makes sense to expect them to do the hard work. The first question that should be asked is, “How can we work together to make this a place that is ready for Edward?” This kind of question disrupts almost everything we expect.
Several Possible Ways to Ease Edward into His New Learning Environment

- Edward is clearly comforted by his parents. They are willing to fill in gaps in his courage and soothe him through bumpy conditions. Making them a long-term part of his experience at playschool, allowing them to come play on a regular basis, would provide one bridge. The most sensitive preschools already do this. I know, I know, standard early childhood practice says that most children do better once their parents leave. But in reality that policy comes out of expectations and the needs of certain children, their parents, and teachers. We need to explore the idea that these rules are not universal and that we play a part in why they are true or not.

- This boundary crossing could go two ways—Edward’s teacher could visit him at home. Again, many excellent preschools, Head Starts, and kindergartens do do this. Getting to know Edward on his own terms, on his own turf, might ease his way into what seems to be a very scary situation. Plus it would provide his teacher and parents with a wonderful opportunity to share information on what they know about this interesting fellow.

- Edward might need a gradual transition into school—fewer hours, fewer days. That’s not unheard of, and it’s not a fatal flaw; it is just a different way to enter the world of school. Flexibility that takes Edward as the center of practice is more appropriate than ironclad patterns of attendance.

- A myriad of strategies, none of them unknown to expert early childhood teachers, could be used in the classroom to help Edward become comfortable in this setting. His teacher might encourage Edward to bring his beloved Bunny so that he doesn’t feel so alone in this new environment. Or she might find another child in the class who could be his guardian angel—checking in with him, asking him to play, helping to show him around. Many times the child who does this with the most care and grace is last year’s Edward.

- Part of this process involves carefully documenting Edward’s experience with an explicit focus on how the context produces an unhappy Edward. Rather than chronicling a tearful child, we need to look for why the tears come and what we can do to nurture another reaction. How is curriculum developed for an ideal child rather than for Edward and his other classmates?

- The teacher needs to understand why Edward’s parents are so quick to retreat with him to their home. What are the standards against which the parents measure their child, how are these standards communicated, and what role does the teacher play in the process? Is this a community like Lake Wobegon, where all children are above average? How can the teacher work to make sure that all children feel welcome and that the choices of some to wait for readiness do not narrow the opportunities of others?

- Edward’s parents need to remain steadfast in their commitment to make a place for their son. They need to offer support for the teacher while pointing to the potential they all have for making Edward a success. They need to ask lots of questions about his teacher’s willingness to adapt her classroom to Edward. Classroom practice is developed to meet children’s needs, and because children are not all the same, practice often needs to change. Always having done something a certain way is not necessarily a reason to continue with a new group of children and families. Few families can lose if they take a positive, constructive but adamantly pro-child approach with an early childhood professional.

- At some point the family will need to decide whether Edward’s current setting can meet his needs or whether they need an escape hatch. We don’t all fit each other’s temperaments, philosophies, or outlooks. If Edward’s teacher can’t accept him as he is—a perfectly normal preschool-age child who needs a bit of extra help—it might be time to look for another place for him. Another classroom in the same center, another center with different philosophy and practice, or home-based child care to lessen the shock of moving away from home—all of these are possibilities for finding a place that respects what Edward brings to school. But serious attempts to make things work in the current setting often head off the necessity to go hunting for a new spot.
Many times we see our jobs as early childhood educators as bringing children up to an age-appropriate standard. Unfortunately, this often has a homogenizing effect, making children seem more alike than different. But Edward is a reminder that difference is an inherent part of the human condition and that it enriches our lives.

Why we need Edward

It would be a mistake to end this without taking time to reflect on what Edward does for us by being in our midst. Many times we see our jobs as early childhood educators as bringing children up to an age-appropriate standard. Unfortunately, this often has a homogenizing effect, making children seem more alike than different. But Edward is a reminder that difference is an inherent part of the human condition and that it enriches our lives. When celebrated, difference teaches acceptance, nurturing, and an appreciation of all that we are not. We can learn from Edward how to be attuned to the needs of others and how to watch for success. Let's be ready for Edward.

References


For further reading


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