

"You Don't Act Like a Jerk When You Have Business Cards"

Lynn Loar, Ph.D., LCSW with
Geoffrey Pott, Sebastian Pott and Noah Carlton*

Discovering maturity and impulse control

"You don't act like a jerk when you have business cards" explained eight-year-old Geoffrey Pott when I asked about his newfound maturity and impulse control. The business cards were one in a series of reinforcers he – and by now members of his staff – had received for stellar behavior in my ice skating class at the Winter Lodge in Palo Alto, California.

The Family Ice Skating Program, featured in the short documentary *TAGs on Ice*,** offers ice skating instruction for children with special needs and their families. It's one of the few programs that entire families can enjoy regardless of the disparate abilities of their several children. A peek at the class through the Winter Lodge's picture window yields the impression of a laboratory testing prototypes for the next generation of Energizer Bunnies, lots of little boys zooming around with no interest in learning to stop – and a few zooming dads, too!

As any elementary school teacher knows, you give the ringleader a job to



harness and redirect all that exuberance. This is how we came to have a Public Information Officer in the Family Ice Skating Program.

Geoffrey, by now a fast and occasionally overly enthusiastic skater, interviewed for the position of Public Information Officer, whose duties include passing out notices, letting people know he was a repository of timely information, answering questions about the schedule of upcoming classes and generally making himself helpful. Following his successful interview, Geoffrey received a written acceptance and a cover letter suitable for sharing with teachers and grandparents. He was asked if he wanted the letters mailed, emailed or if he wanted hard copies he could distribute himself.

To Geoffrey Pott's principal and teachers:

I am pleased to inform you that Geoffrey Pott has been offered and has accepted the volunteer position of Public Information Officer for the Family Ice Skating Program at the Winter Lodge in Palo Alto.

*Geoffrey was offered this position because of his clear and persuasive contribution to the article entitled "Designing Effective Reinforcers,"*** his mastery of the use of positive reinforcement and an event marker, and his maturity and responsibility.*

Geoffrey's duties include:

- *Directing parents and children to resources and materials available at the rink;*
- *Fielding questions, providing answers and referring people to the front desk staff and coaches as appropriate;*
- *Being a role model for the other skaters.*

I am looking forward to doing more writing with Geoffrey, and he will keep you posted on his extracurricular work with me.

Sincerely,

Lynn Loar, Ph.D., LCSW

A few weeks later there were two handouts for the Public Information Officer to distribute, one an article of several pages on 8 ½ x 11 inch paper, the other a short brochure folded in thirds. The Public Information Officer recruited an assistant, his six-year-old brother Sebastian, to follow him around distributing the smaller handout after he awarded the larger article. The boys' teamwork was excellent with Sebastian following right behind and waiting dutifully as Geoffrey announced the availability of new materials. Both boys graciously and efficiently made the rounds in the warming room.

Geoffrey took the initiative to deputize his brother, organize and implement this expansion of the workforce of the Public Information Department of the Family Ice Skating Program, with the result that he had to write a job description for the position of Assistant Public Information Officer:

Assistant Public Information Officer: The assistant will help relay information. This means passing out anything the Public Information Officer needs help with.

Geoffrey Pott – Public Information Officer

Sebastian Pott – Assistant

and his younger brother had to apply in writing (with a little help from his mother) for the new position:

I like passing out things and I like helping my brother.

A letter, again suitable for mass distribution, followed in two versions, one commending Geoffrey for his initiative and another addressed to his principal and teachers.

To Geoffrey Pott's principal and teachers:

I am writing to let you know that Geoffrey has taken the initiative to create the position of "Assistant Public Information Officer" for the Family Ice Skating Program at the Winter Lodge in Palo Alto.

This is a wise decision because the group is large and there is much information to disseminate. Geoffrey wrote a job description for the new position last week. He recruited a suitable candidate, Sebastian Pott, who is writing a letter of application now. Geoffrey is taking full responsibility for training and supervising his deputy.

It is very helpful to me to have such a capable and responsible Public Information Officer. Geoffrey is taking his job seriously and is off to an excellent start.

Sincerely,

Lynn Loar, Ph.D., LCSW

Another round of press release-type letters followed to herald the arrival of the Assistant:

To Sebastian Pott's principal and teachers:

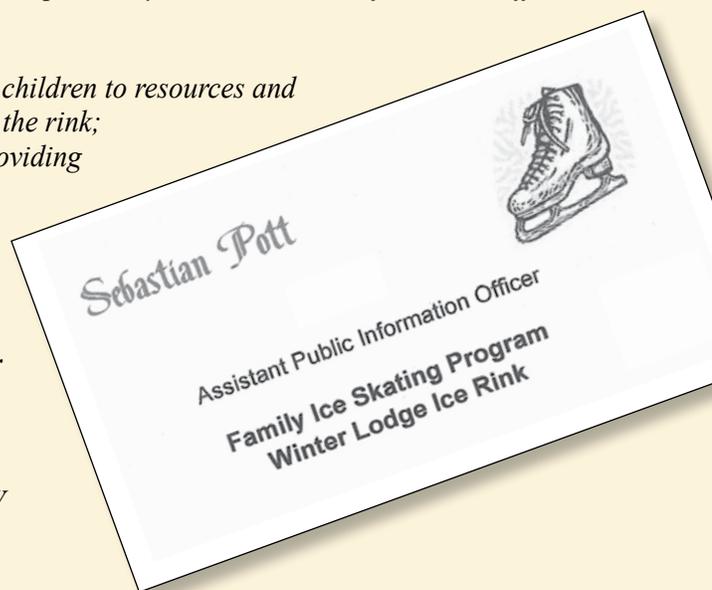
I am pleased to inform you that Sebastian Pott has been offered and has accepted the volunteer position of Assistant Public Information Officer for the Family Ice Skating Program at the Winter Lodge in Palo Alto.

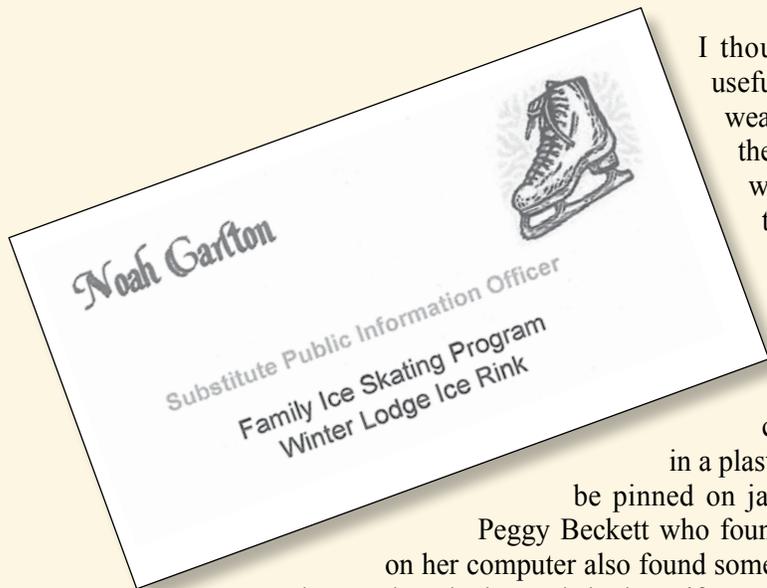
Sebastian was offered this position because of his initiative, sociability and responsibility. He works cooperatively with the Public Information Officer in:

- *Directing parents and children to resources and materials available at the rink;*
- *Fielding questions, providing answers and referring people to the front desk staff and coaches as appropriate;*
- *Being a role model for the other skaters.*

Sincerely,

Lynn Loar, Ph.D., LCSW





I thought it would be useful for the boys to wear name tags with their titles so people would know to take advantage of this new service.

Turns out, it's easy to make a sheet of business cards and put one in a plastic holder that can be pinned on jackets. My friend Peggy Beckett who found this easy to do on her computer also found some clip art of an ice skate and made the cards look terrific.

Following their successful interviews for the new and expanded positions, Geoffrey and Sebastian were each awarded name tags and business cards, which elicited a reinforcing "Oh, wow. This is so cool." They dutifully wore their name tags after that and offered their business cards to parents, teachers and others interested in tangible proofs of public responsibility.

What if the Public Information Officer and the Assistant Public Information Officer couldn't make it one week? "Shouldn't there also be a substitute?" I asked the Public Information Officer. He agreed and thus had to write a job description for the new position of substitute:

Substitute Public Information Officer: This requires you to help by passing out papers from Ms. Lynn, and telling people to get off the ice at the end of the session.

Noah Carlton, the 9-year-old applicant for the new position, read the job description and was interviewed by the Public Information Officer (who was about to become the department head with the expansion of his staff) and by me. Noah acquitted himself well enough during the interview (which took place while on the ice with Noah letting go of the handrail to stay involved in the conversation) that he was asked to apply for the position in writing:

I would like to be the Substitute Public Information Officer. I am good at passing out papers and reminding people.
Noah Carlton

When Noah submitted this application, he added that he would be eager to take on responsibility beyond what was listed in his job description. He demonstrated this enthusiasm at the first opportunity a couple of weeks later by positioning himself in the doorway to make sure he offered everybody a handout. His needs assessment and strategy were documented in a letter to his teacher, suitable for forwarding to parents, grandparents and the media.

To Noah Carlton's teacher:

Noah Carlton and his family participate in my ice skating program at

the Winter Lodge in Palo Alto on Sunday mornings from October through March. In the past year, Noah has learned to skate independently and to maintain focus while skating despite a fair amount of surrounding activity. We mark incremental gains with an event marker and award points generously for these gains. Noah has learned how to earn, save and spend accrued points as well as how to negotiate effectively with his parents about the point system. Indeed, the entire family's skills have soared in this area.

One child in the program became our Public Information Officer at the beginning of the season. His job is to pass out information, remind people of the schedule and be a role model for the less accomplished skaters. He thought it advisable to have an alternate for the sessions he would miss, and Noah applied for the position of Substitute Public Information Officer. Noah was persuasive in the interview and offered to assist on days the Public Information Officer was in attendance as well as assume full responsibility in his absence. Noah followed his excellent performance in the interview with the following written application:

I would like to be the Substitute Public Information Officer. I am good at passing out papers and reminding people.

Noah executed his job with seriousness and professionalism. He stood in the doorway a few minutes before the class ended to make sure he offered everybody handouts and didn't miss anybody. This assessment of the most effective and thorough way to perform his job was entirely his doing. He was also gracious and mature in greeting people and offering them materials. Because of Noah's excellent performance as the Substitute Public Information

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Officer this year, he will be offered a promotion in the fall.

*Sincerely,
Lynn Loar, Ph.D., LCSW*

Geoffrey and Noah then had to work out a system to let each other know who would be in attendance each week, and their plan was the subject of the next letter:

To Geoffrey Pott's principal and teachers:

Geoffrey has taken the responsibility to provide coverage for his position when he is unavailable. Specifically, he created a job description for the position of "Substitute Public Information Officer" for the Family Ice Skating Program at the Winter Lodge in Palo Alto, interviewed a prospective candidate, reviewed and accepted the candidate's application.

Geoffrey and his substitute will set up a way to contact each other by email to confirm who in his department will be in attendance each week. Geoffrey

will be responsible for coordinating this important position both when he is in attendance and by collaborating with his substitute when he is absent. Further, Geoffrey will provide written feedback at the end of the skating season both to his assistant and to his substitute.

It is very helpful to me to have such a capable Public Information Officer. Geoffrey now chairs a department and is responsible for keeping his assistant and his substitute up on their duties.

*Sincerely,
Lynn Loar, Ph.D., LCSW*

Geoffrey's evaluations of his staff:

Noah is doing an excellent job substituting for me. He did great passing out information for me. He might want to interact more with the kids in the class because then Noah can tell them the information too.

Sebastian is doing an excellent job as my assistant. He did not take the paper with information from my hands without asking and that was good. There isn't anything he can improve on except for a bit more impulse control on the ice.

Occasionally, an adult gets into the act, too. Here's the letter Noah's mother wrote to Peggy Beckett, the creator of the business cards:

Dear Peggy,

We wanted to thank you so much for making the business cards for Noah. We cannot tell you how much it meant to him (and us). I wish that you had been there to see the proud look on his face when Lynn gave them to him. He was truly beaming. When we got home that day the first thing he did was call his grandparents to tell them about his job and how he had business cards. They thought that this was the greatest and were thrilled with how enthusiastic and excited he was. They asked him to send them a card. That afternoon he wrote them a letter and enclosed one of HIS CARDS.

We just wanted to let you know what a difference you made for our son. Thank you.

*Sincerely,
Pam and Mike Carlton*



* Identifying information is used with separate written permission from each child and parent, with cover letters to teachers and grandparents consistent with the method presented in this article

** **TAGs on Ice** is available at www.clickertraining.com, www.tagteach.com and www.Amazon.com.

*** "Designing Effective Reinforcers," Latham Letter, Part 1: Summer 2009, Part 2: Fall 2009, reprints available at www.latham.org and www.thepryorfoundation.org.