Connect with Me
Promoting Early Social & Emotional Development

Part of the CIRCLE Infant & Toddler Teacher Training: Play with Me series

companion workbook

This workbook belongs to:

This workbook will help you review:

- instructional strategies viewed in the workshop
- social and emotional development topics discussed by experts in the theater
- social and emotional milestones, theories, and academic outcomes from the library
Introduction

As infants and toddlers develop through the first three years of life, they are increasingly able to explore the world, interact with other people, and begin to become independent, unique little people. Tiny infants need to learn basic “state regulation,” which means being able to move smoothly through cycles of being awake and alert, calm and relaxed, sleepy and asleep. They start to express contentment by smiling, cooing, and watching with interest. They show distress by grimacing, fussing, or crying. They may also fall asleep as a way to shut out too much stimulation. As older babies and toddlers watch, listen, move, play, and form relationships, they experience and express more distinct emotions, such as curiosity, anxiety, frustration, and joy. These feelings and experiences can be mild and manageable or intense and overwhelming.

We might compare children's ability to regulate their levels of emotional intensity to an inflatable balloon. A balloon works best when it is full of air, but not so full that it pops. Sometimes the balloon might need more air, and sometimes it might need air released gradually so that it will not burst. It needs to maintain this balance of “just right” inflation. We can think about children's emotional intensity in a similar way: All children have times when they feel sad, mad, or fearful, and children who tend to be passive or anxious may need extra support to explore their environment, generate excitement, and try new things. With help from responsive caregivers, most children are able to keep their emotional balloon inflated enough to be actively engaged and happy more often than not, rather than being mostly withdrawn, sad, and “deflated.” Still, there will be times when children's emotional intensity may become like an over-inflated balloon that pops—frustration, anger, or fear may overwhelm children with distress. With their limited language skills and increasing desire to make their own choices, infants and toddlers use the skills they have, which include crying and tantrums, to express their needs and wants. Their struggles are a normal and important part of their social and emotional development as they begin to learn how to self-regulate. We can think of self-regulation as being able to keep the “just right” amount of air in their balloons by adding more or letting some out safely as needed. It takes many years and lots of practice to build self-regulation skills.

Sometimes children’s strong needs and desires lead to behaviors that are unsafe or harmful to themselves or others. When this happens, or preferably before this happens, they need help from adults to get back to a calmer state, and they need adults to set limits on their behaviors. Yet it can be challenging for early childhood teachers to know how to support children's development of self-regulation skills. This manual will present some common infant and toddler behaviors that often need intervention from adults. This section will:

• describe the behavior,
• talk about typical reasons for the behavior,
• describe ways to prevent or minimize the behavior through classroom structure and routines, and
• identify social and emotional support strategies that can be used when the behavior happens.

Examples will help illustrate these processes, and tips for communicating with parents about behavior will also be provided.
Infant Distress

Young babies have very limited ways of communicating their needs. The most common way they communicate distress is by crying.

Causes

Infants may cry because they are hungry, scared, tired, wet or soiled, sick, hot, cold, or otherwise physically uncomfortable. When caregivers know their babies very well, they may be able to hear differences in a baby’s cries. For example, they may be able to tell the difference between a “hungry cry” and a “tired cry.”

Preventing or Minimizing

Infants need attention, gentle stimulation, and physical care throughout the day. Teachers can prevent or minimize infant distress and crying by being attentive to each infant, making sure that the infant is dry, clean, and appropriately dressed for the indoor or outdoor temperature. Infants need to be fed according to their individual cycles and put down to sleep when they show signs of sleepiness. Teachers can also pay close attention to the baby’s state, looking for signals that tell you what the baby may need. For example, after a nap and a diaper change, the baby may be in an alert, attentive state and will be ready for play. This is a good time to introduce a game such as peek-a-boo, a picture book, or toys to play with. After lunch, a baby who is rubbing her eyes, yawning, and fussing may be ready for a nap. Anticipating the baby’s needs, following familiar routines, and responding promptly to the baby’s signals will help minimize prolonged crying and distress.

Responding

Despite caregivers’ best efforts, all babies cry. Some young infants go through a period of colic or fussiness around the same time each day. Sometimes crying is unpredictable and the baby cannot tell you what is wrong. When babies cry, they need a prompt response from caregivers. There is no such thing as “spoiling” a baby by responding to crying with attention or cuddling. In fact, research shows that infants whose caregivers respond consistently and promptly to their distress end up being more emotionally secure and better regulated in their behavior than infants who receive inconsistent responses or whose crying is ignored.

Check to see whether the baby is wet, soiled, hot, or cold. Think about when the baby last ate and slept, and consider whether she might be hungry or tired. Talk warmly to the baby, and try to engage her in play if she is needing social attention. If none of these are true, it often helps to use physical soothing strategies. Different babies may be soothed by different comfort behaviors, but general strategies to try include cuddling the baby in your arms, putting him up against your shoulder and patting or rubbing his back, and rocking or gently bouncing the baby in a rhythmic manner. Some babies use a pacifier or suck their thumb or finger to soothe themselves, as sucking is a primitive behavior that often soothes babies. Talk with parents about the strategies they use at home and try those at school if possible.

Linked Strategies

• Express warmth and affection
• Comfort children in distress
Babies cry for different reasons, and caregivers may begin to hear differences in cries as they get to know a baby. How could learning to recognize an infant’s different cries help in knowing how to respond?

Stop and Reflect: Infant Distress

Although there is no such thing as spoiling an infant by being responsive to baby’s cries, not all new parents believe that is true. How would you respond to a parent who asked you to let her baby “cry it out”?

Rate Yourself!

How comfortable do you feel responding to infant distress in your classroom?

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<tr>
<th>Not at all comfortable</th>
<th>Somewhat comfortable</th>
<th>Very comfortable</th>
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Separation Anxiety

Somewhere between seven and ten months old, many infants begin to clearly show that they recognize familiar caregivers and respond differently to new people. They may start to cry or cling when a familiar caregiver leaves. Babies vary in the intensity of these responses and their developmental timing: some babies show quite a bit of distress and anxiety, while other babies’ reactions are milder. Some children show more of these behaviors during toddlerhood than during infancy.

Causes

Distress at separation from familiar caregivers happens when children have developed an emotional attachment to their caregivers. They have established feelings of safety and security in the presence of these family members and/or teachers. They are beginning to develop a sense of self as separate from other people, and they can hold in memory the concept of the caregiver even when that person is not present. Babies also are developing motor skills at this time that allow them to move away from, or closer to, caregivers on their own, for example by crawling. Although we cannot ask babies what they understand and what they are thinking, their new awareness is a sort of “safety feature,” as it motivates babies to stay close to their caregivers for protection and begin to identify which people they can trust. We must also remember that infants and toddlers do not have the same concepts of time that adults have, nor do they have the ability to understand verbal explanations—when a special caregiver leaves, the baby has no way of knowing whether the caregiver will be back in five minutes, in six hours, or not at all. Imagine how distressing that would be!

Preventing or Minimizing

Because separation anxiety is part of normal development, it should not be viewed as a problem that needs to be corrected but as a normal, healthy response that can be anticipated and responded to with support. Separation distress is most likely to occur in school when children need to say goodbye to their family members in the morning, or when a familiar teacher leaves the classroom or is out for the day and a substitute teacher takes over their care. To prevent or minimize separation anxiety, children’s attachment relationships to their teachers should be encouraged so that they feel safe and comfortable in the classroom environment. Having a comforting and predictable routine for morning drop-off can also help ease the transition between home and school when infants and toddlers arrive and need to say goodbye to parents. Goodbyes are important, so do not encourage parents to sneak out in hopes that the child will not notice. Being sneaky about separations often undermines the child’s trust, making him more fearful that important people will disappear whenever he is not looking. Instead, create rituals for saying goodbye, such as kissing and hugging, putting personal items in a cubby, cuddling with the teacher, waving goodbye or blowing a kiss to the parent, and/or helping the teacher with a task in the classroom. It can also help to have a special “transitional object” that the child can use to soothe himself, such as a special blanket, stuffed animal, or family picture. To minimize distress about separation from teachers, it is best to maintain consistent staffing schedules so that children always know who their morning and afternoon teachers will be. Letting children know when you are leaving the room, even if another teacher is there to care for them in your absence, may also be important for some children.

Responding

When responding to children’s anxiety, it is best to provide comfort and reassurance, both physically and verbally. For example, you can hug, rock, or rub a child’s back, while singing a soothing song and/or reassuring the child that the parent will come back later. You can also help a toddler put words to her feelings by saying “You feel sad this morning,” “You miss Mommy,” or “It’s hard to say goodbye today.” Do not ignore children who are crying, as this can leave them feeling emotionally abandoned. Children should never be scolded or teased about their distress. It is, however, okay to use some distraction after the goodbye ritual to entice the child into a play activity, eating breakfast, or some other task that connects them to the classroom routines.

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Linked Strategies

• Be predictable
• Express warmth and affection
• Comfort children in distress

Stop and Reflect: Separation Anxiety

Separating from a parent can be stressful for infants, especially at certain ages. As you reflect on your classroom practices, can you think of ways to improve upon your morning rituals or routines that would ease the stress of separation?

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Staffing changes during the day mean that an afternoon teacher or a substitute teacher may be a necessary part of the day. When it’s time for you to leave, what are some ways that you can minimize toddler distress when there is a new or unfamiliar teacher coming into the room?

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Rate Yourself!

How comfortable do you feel responding to separation anxiety in your classroom?

Not at all comfortable Somewhat comfortable Very comfortable

[ ] 1 [ ] 2 [ ] 3 [ ] 4 [ ] 5 [ ] 6
Stranger Anxiety

Stranger anxiety emerges at about 8 to 18 months—around the same time as separation anxiety. Stranger anxiety is a fearful response to new people getting close, and it reflects the baby’s growing attachment relationships and awareness that what is new may not be safe. While some children who are very needy or have experienced inconsistent caregiving may go to anyone, healthy infants and toddlers may react to new adults by clinging to their familiar caregiver, turning their face away from the stranger, and protesting or crying if the stranger tries to pick them up or approach them too quickly. As adults, we may forget that the baby’s definition of a “stranger” may be different from ours. You may know the teacher from the classroom down the hall and know that she is a safe person, but if the baby has only seen that teacher in passing, she is a “stranger.” Within families, aunts, uncles, or other relatives may feel disappointed or hurt that the baby does not want to be held by them. However, if these people are not part of the baby’s everyday life, they too may be perceived as “strangers.”

Causes

Stranger anxiety is typically triggered by new adults approaching or picking up the baby or toddler before the child is comfortable with the new person. Some children are quite fearful and will hide and cling as soon as a new adult makes eye contact or begins to talk to them. Other children are comfortable being greeted by a new adult as long as they do not get too close or try to pick them up. Loud voices and fast movements are more likely to frighten children than softer voices and slower movements.

Preventing or Minimizing

It is appropriate for young children to be cautious with people whom they do not know—it is not desirable from a safety standpoint for children to be too comfortable going off with strangers. Therefore, you do not need to try to prevent stranger anxiety entirely. However, you can signal children about which adults are safe and friendly, and your calm, welcoming manner toward the other adult will let children know that it is okay to engage with them.

Responding

When children show anxiety around strangers, let them warm up gradually and decide when they are ready to approach or talk with the new person. Children should not be forced to hug or sit in the lap of strangers. However, if the new person will continue to be a part of your classroom or needs to interact with the child (e.g., to complete an observation or assessment), you can reassure the child by smiling, introducing the stranger, and telling the child in simple words why the person is there (e.g., “This is Miss Monica. She came to play with us today. It’s okay, you can show her our toys.”)

Linked Strategies

- Express warmth and affection
- Comfort children in distress
- Model prosocial behaviors
- Offer opportunities for children to make choices
If someone new or unfamiliar comes into an infant or toddler classroom, children will look to their caregiver for reassurance. How can your calm, warm interaction with the stranger help to ease distress?

Infants cannot use words to describe their fears or anxieties. What kind of behavioral cues can you observe in infants that signal their anxiety with strangers?

Rate Yourself!

How comfortable do you feel responding to stranger anxiety in your classroom?

Not at all comfortable  |  Somewhat comfortable  |  Very comfortable
1  |  2  |  3  |  4  |  5  |  6
PART 5

Tantrums

A child having a tantrum may scream, cry loudly, stomp his feet, yell angry words or protests, throw himself on the floor, kick his feet, and lash out physically when approached. Tantrums may be as short as 30 seconds or may last for a few minutes or up to 30 minutes or more. Tantrums often begin to occur around 18 months and may continue through the toddler period. Tantrums often lessen between ages 3-4 years in typically developing children. However, as with other behaviors, each child is unique. Some children begin having tantrums earlier or later and have more or less intense and frequent outbursts.

Causes

Tantrums are usually triggered by frustration, when the child’s coping skills to deal with whatever is happening are overwhelmed. Typical situations that lead to tantrums include an adult saying “no” to what the child wants, having to stop a fun activity before the child feels ready, and having something taken away. Tantrums are more likely when children are tired, hungry, not feeling well, or overstimulated (too much excitement or activity).

Preventing or Minimizing

Having regular, predictable routines helps children know what to expect. This allows them to anticipate transition times and prepare themselves emotionally for each part of their day. Giving reminders and cues before and during transition times also helps children manage the hard task of stopping one activity and starting a different one. Giving children choices within limits (e.g., “Do you want pretzels or animal crackers?” “Which crayon would you like to use?”) allows them to have some feelings of control and practice making appropriate choices, rather than just being expected to obey commands all day long. While children do need structure and limits, being overly rigid and controlling tends to result in more power struggles and negativity in children. Offering acceptable choices can also help redirect children who are displaying inappropriate behaviors. For example, if a child is throwing toy cars for fun, instead of taking the cars away and provoking a tantrum, the child can be offered a choice: “It is not safe to throw the cars. You can push the cars on the rug, or you can throw a foam ball into the basket.” Teachers also need to watch for signs of escalating emotion in children. When a child starts to shout, grab, tense his body, scowl, or say “No!” to a request, the teacher should begin to use strategies to help the child calm down and resolve the problem, such as

- Getting down to the child’s level
- Talking in a quiet, clear voice
- Labeling the child’s feelings (e.g., “Josh, you look upset.” “Shaundra, I can see that you’re mad.”)
- Stating your understanding of the problem (e.g., “You want to stay outside.” “Your water spilled.” “Clinton took your bucket.”)
- Offer comfort and help with the problem

Children can usually listen and respond at this stage, before a real tantrum starts.

Responding

Many times prevention strategies will work. But sometimes they don’t. When a child is having a tantrum, the first thing to do is to make sure that the child and others around her are safe. Remove any items that are being thrown or kicked, and move other children away so that they are not harmed by flailing feet or arms. If the child is hurting herself, she may need to be moved to a spot that is safe, such as an area of the room with pillows or a mat. At this point, the child may not be able to listen to and process your words, so you may need to use gentle physical soothing strategies first, such as patting or rubbing her back. The child may not even want to be touched at this time, so watch for signals that she is, or is not, ready to receive comfort. She may need a few minutes to calm down by herself before you try to connect with her. Most children will have a peak in their distress and then begin to calm down, at which time they are often ready for comfort and/or a transition to the next activity. When
you see the child's intensity starting to decrease, you can start to talk to her again, using simple phrases. Label the child's feelings and connect her feelings to the situation (e.g., “I know you were very mad that we had to come in from the playground.”). Offer help and comfort to the child that she can accept or reject (e.g., “Would you like to rock with me in the rocker?”, “Would you like a drink of water?”, “Would you like Mr. James to read you a book in the Library Corner?”, “Would you like your naptime blanket?”). If the child is too young to understand these choices, try providing physical comfort and telling the child what you are doing (e.g., “Let’s rock for a few minutes,” or “Let’s get a drink of water.”) and see if this helps the child recover. If the child rejects help and comfort, let her express her anger and frustration as long as she is not hurting herself or others or destroying property. Let her know that you will come back and check on her in a few minutes, and do so. Continue to offer comfort and affection, and as the child calms down, suggest an enticing activity to help her transition to something new.

**Stop and Reflect: Tantrums**

A tantrum is a loss of control for the toddler. Without coping skills, they are overwhelmed by their frustration. Why is telling a child, “You need to share” not appropriate in the middle of a tantrum?

Setting up a daily schedule with consistent routines has many benefits for the children and the teacher. What are some of your classroom routines that are helpful as a tantrum prevention strategy?

**Rate Yourself!**

*How comfortable do you feel responding to tantrums in your classroom?*

Not at all comfortable  Somewhat comfortable  Very comfortable

1  2  3  4  5  6
Saying “No” or Refusing to Participate

One of the first words many toddlers learn to say is “no.” It is a powerful word because it asserts independence, self-defense, or control. However, it is not a word that teachers tend to appreciate. When children say or shout “no” and refuse to cooperate with a request or an action, the teacher may be faced with how to get the child’s cooperation or how to help several children resolve a conflict. Even small children can exert a lot of energy and power with their “no.” Some typical times when children say “no” or refuse include being asked to give up an object they are using (such as a toy that needs to be shared or an object that is not safe to play with), being asked to stop a preferred activity and do something less preferred (such as getting their diaper changed), and being asked to wait for something they want. Toddlers are more likely to say “no” and refuse when they are tired, anxious, not feeling well, feeling rushed or unprepared for a transition, or feeling the need to defend themselves.

Causes

Sometimes children’s “no!” means, “I’m not ready to do that yet.” Sometimes it means “I’m scared to do that;” or “I don’t like that activity.” Sometimes it means, “Don’t take that away from me. It’s mine!” Thinking about the meaning of a child’s “no” can help you use more effective strategies to respond.

Preventing or Minimizing

Promoting positive behavior and cooperation begins with the relationship between the teacher and the child. When young children feel loved, nurtured, and appreciated, they are more likely to be cooperative and want to please you. This does not mean that toddlers will never refuse or reject activities, but you will have a positive relationship from which to respond to their behavior. In contrast, when young children feel unloved or rejected, or when they are constantly scolded or told “no,” they will imitate this negative behavior and be more likely to say “no” themselves. Another important way to increase cooperation is to have a well-organized classroom with plenty of fun and interesting activities for children to do. When children are provided with lots of age-appropriate, hands-on activities that entice and stimulate them, they are more likely to maintain a positive attitude toward school and be eager to do what is asked of them. To a great extent, happy children are better behaved than children who are unhappy, bored, frustrated, overwhelmed, or feeling unwelcome in their classrooms. Having predictable classroom routines and schedules can also go a long way toward improving children’s cooperation. When they know what will happen next, for example through the use of a visual schedule and explanations, children can anticipate and prepare for transitions. When they know what the expectations are and that there will be future opportunities to do what they want to do, children will be better able to self-regulate and trust that they will get what they need and desire. Finally, using a heads-up reminder (such as, “Two more minutes and then it will be clean up time”) and then a transition signal to let children know when it’s time helps children learn to get ready to stop and start activities without feeling as interrupted or taken by surprise.

Responding

When responding to “no” or refusals, think about the different possible causes and choose a strategy that best addresses that cause. For example:

- If a child is saying “no” because he is afraid to try a new activity, you can offer to help, to do it together, or to watch other children do it first, and this might help the child become ready to say “yes.”
- If a child is saying “no” because she is not ready to stop a desired activity, you can remind the child of the positive aspects of what is coming next (e.g., “It’s time to do our helper jobs, and I need you to come water our plant!” or “It’s almost time to go outside and you need to use the potty before we go out.”). You can also let her know when she will have another opportunity to come back to the desired activity (e.g., “I’ll save the puzzle for you on this table, and after we get a clean diaper, you can come back and finish it.”).
- If a child is saying “no” to another child—for example, trying to hold on to a toy that another child is grabbing—you can respond by helping the children negotiate turn-taking and waiting for their turn. See the section on “Not Sharing Toys” below for more on this topic.
Sometimes making a game out of the activity can help promote cooperation and turn a “no” into a “yes!” Here are some easy and fun ways to make an activity, such as cleanup or a transition, into a game:

1. Pretend that a container is a basketball net, and cheer when children “make a basket” by placing items in it.
2. Pretend that a bag or toy box is a hungry, talking mouth that needs to be fed. For example, use a deep or funny voice to say, “I’m still hungry; feed me!” or “Delicious! More cars, please!” as children place toys inside to feed it.
3. Park toys on a shelf (or line them up in a box), and pretend that it is a parking garage.
4. Drive, fly, and skid toys off ramps and into containers.
5. Pretend a lid on a box or container is a mechanical door that is closing very slowly. Add your own motorized sound effects, and announce that all of the toys need to get inside before the door closes completely.
6. Pretend toys or objects are going to sleep, and whisper, “Goodnight, let’s tuck you in… Everybody get in bed. Shh, don’t wake them up!”
7. Animate toys so they seem alive and excited to go into containers, for example, “I’m falling in the bag. Weeee, it’s a long way down!” or “I’m jumping in the water. 1, 2, 3, jump! Splash! Come on, guys, jump in!”
8. Race to see who or which team can clean up the fastest. Can the children put all the pieces back in the bucket faster than their teacher? Ready, set, go!
9. Create a fun way for children to move their bodies from one place to another: jump to…, tiptoe to…, walk backwards to…
10. Choose an animal action to move to the next place or activity: jump like a rabbit, slither like a snake, chomp like an alligator, or swing like a monkey.
11. Challenge the child to race you to wherever he needs to go next.

If a child continues to refuse after you have tried several of these strategies, you will need to decide how important it is that she does what you have asked her to do. If it is very important (e.g., it is time to come in from the playground and the child is refusing), you may need to offer the basic choice: “You can come by yourself or I can help you,” and then hold her hand to lead her inside, or pick her up if she is still refusing to come. If it is not that important that the child comply immediately, you may decide that it is okay to wait until the child is ready. For example, if a child does not want to come sit for circle time or does not want to come to the table to eat lunch, it may be best to invite the child to come join you when she is ready. If there are fun things happening at circle time, or yummy food at the lunch table, the child is likely to come over by herself soon enough.

**Linked Strategies**

- Follow consistent daily schedules/routines
- Explain what comes next
- Express warmth and affection
- Use praise to encourage positive behavior/cooperation
- Offer opportunities for children to make choices
- Help resolve conflicts with peers
PART 5

Stop and Reflect: Saying “No” or Refusing to Participate

Why does a warm and responsive relationship with each child actually set the stage for less negative behavior?

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What are some ways to start looking for the reason behind the “no” response?

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Rate Yourself!

How comfortable do you feel responding to “no” or refusals to participate in your classroom?

Not at all comfortable  Somewhat comfortable  Very comfortable

☑ 1  ☐ 2  ☐ 3  ☐ 4  ☐ 5  ☐ 6
Hitting, Kicking, Pushing, or Pinching Others

Aggressive behaviors such as hitting, kicking, pushing, or pinching are common concerns among teachers of toddlers. As much as we would like toddlers to “use their words” when interacting with each other, they are still learning to talk and to control their impulses enough to resolve conflicts peacefully. Toddlers may use aggressive behaviors to communicate feelings and thoughts such as, “Stop!”, “I don’t like that!”, “You’re in my way!”, or “I’m mad at you because you took my toy!” It is also important to remember that young children do not yet have the ability to take another person’s perspective. This means they really don’t understand the pain they may cause when they hit or kick another child, even if they see them fall or cry. However, there are many things teachers can do to help children learn empathy and self-control, and there are ways to respond when undesired behaviors happen.

**Causes**

Aggressive behaviors often happen when children are very close to each other or sharing a small space. They also may happen when there is competition for popular toys or a desired place to sit or play. In other words, crowding and limited resources are more likely to result in physical conflicts between toddlers. Children are also influenced by the behaviors they see adults and older children modeling. They will often imitate what they see, whether in real life or on TV or videos.

**Preventing or Minimizing**

Teachers can try to minimize crowding by setting up their classrooms to allow enough space for the type of activities children are doing and the number of children in the room. This might mean that you need to move furniture to make some areas bigger. Make sure you have enough chairs at the table or spaces on the carpet for all children to sit comfortably and be able to see and reach materials. You can minimize competition for toys by having more than one of popular items (enough for everyone if possible), limiting certain toys to small group activity times, and helping to structure turn-taking. You can also make a point of encouraging gentle touches and praising children when they do express themselves in words instead of using their bodies. Share general information with parents about how easily toddlers will imitate the behaviors they see at home, and remind them that if their children see or watch examples of aggressive behaviors, including spanking or “popping” to punish, children are likely to imitate those behaviors.

**Responding**

You may notice a conflict when you hear a shriek or someone crying, or you may see a scuffle between children across the room. It is important to intervene quickly and let children know that it is not okay to hurt anyone. Go to the children quickly but calmly and protect them from any further harm. You may need to do this by physically separating them from each other, blocking a child who is hurting another, or removing an item that is being used in an unsafe way. Let children know that you are there to keep them safe and to help them with their problem. Use a calm but firm voice. For example, you might say, “Hold on, Reggie and Joseph. You may not hit each other. We need to stay safe. It looks like you both want to use that shovel. I can help you.” Comfort any children who are hurt and/or need a band-aid, ice, or other treatment. Then help them find a better way to get what they want, using prompts or strategies that are within the child’s ability level. For example, if a child is not yet able to talk, it is not helpful to say, “Use your words.” Instead, you may need to help them find another toy, or sit in a different seat, or help them share space on the climbing structure. When children do have words they can say, you can model the words or phrases you would like them to use.

**A word about time out:** Because very young children have short attention spans and are not able to reflect on their own behaviors, putting a child in time out for every offense is not necessary or effective. The child will not be able to tell you why she is there or what she will do differently next time. Unless a child is repeatedly and purposefully hurting others during a given time period, it is better to take a firm but patient approach as outlined above, rather than focusing on punishing or scolding. Many conflicts among toddlers can be resolved within a matter of seconds, and then they are ready to move on with their play. You can also use logical consequences, which are consequences that are linked to the specific behavior. For example, if a child is repeatedly pushing other children on the climbing structure, a logical consequence would be to have her find a different area of the playground to play on for the rest of the play period.
Linked Strategies

• Model prosocial behaviors
• Help children share space
• Support turn-taking
• Redirect undesired behaviors
• Provide verbal and physical cues for self-control
• Help resolve conflicts with peers

Stop and Reflect: Hitting, Kicking, Pushing, or Pinching Others

The environment has an impact on toddler behavior. Take a step back and look at your classroom. What are some ways you could improve on your classroom environment that would give toddlers more space and avoid overcrowding?

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Is there one area of your classroom where most of the aggressive behavior occurs? What do you think is causing this, and how could you address it?

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Rate Yourself!

How comfortable do you feel responding to physical aggression in your classroom?

Not at all comfortable  Somewhat comfortable  Very comfortable
1  2  3  4  5  6
Biting

Biting is a very common behavior in older babies and toddlers, but it can be distressing to teachers, parents, and other children because of the potential for children or teachers to get hurt. Most children outgrow biting behavior by age 3 to 3.5 years.

Causes

Biting can be exploratory, to find out what something tastes like or how it feels when bitten. When babies are teething, the hard pressure of biting soothes their sore gums. Older babies and toddlers may bite in a playful way as they explore objects and people (think about games adults may play with babies, pretending to bite the baby’s toes or fingers), or they may bite in a reactive way when angry and frustrated or emotionally overwhelmed. They may also bite in a strategic way if they learn that biting causes another child to give up a toy or move out of the way.

Preventing or Minimizing

Provide teething babies with safe things to chew on. Provide toddlers with enough play space to minimize crowding, and help them share space so they do not feel threatened or overwhelmed by the children close to them. Help toddlers learn words to say to express their feelings and needs instead of biting, and prompt them to use those specific words. Praise children when they communicate with words and gestures. Read books that remind children of safe ways to interact and touch others, such as Teeth are Not for Biting by Elizabeth Verdick. Do not label a specific child as a “biter,” since this may lead to isolation and rejection rather than supportive intervention. However, try to observe patterns of when, where, why, and whom a child tends to bite. With this knowledge you may be able to anticipate and prevent incidents by changing the environment and/or providing extra supervision and redirection at these times. For example, you may notice that Matilda tends to bite when another child tries to take a toy from her. Closely monitoring Matilda when she is playing with toys close to other children may allow you to intervene quickly to prevent a bite.

Responding

When a child bites, you will first need to examine the child who has been bitten and apply any first aid needed. Comfort the child who was bitten, and make sure he is safe from additional harm. If there are two teachers in the room, one can attend to the child who was bitten and the other can attend to the child who bit. If you are the only teacher, you will need to do both. Remove the child who is biting, and firmly say, “Stop. No biting. Biting hurts.” You can also explain and show the child that he has hurt the other child. For example, “Mark is crying because you bit his hand. Your teeth are sharp, and Mark is hurt.” Then remind the child of a better way to get what he needs. Try to remain calm and firm to avoid giving too much reinforcing attention to the child who bit. Follow your school’s policy with regard to documenting the incident and notifying parents if needed.

Linked Strategies

• Model prosocial behaviors
• Engage children in planned activities to promote positive peer interactions
• Help children share space
• Support turn-taking
• Redirect undesired behaviors
• Provide verbal and physical cues for self-control
• Help resolve conflicts with peers
Stop and Reflect: Biting

Toddlers bite for any number of reasons. How could it be helpful to know the motivation behind the biting?

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The issue of biting in a toddler classroom can bring out a strong emotional response from parents. How would you respond to an angry parent who is demanding to know who bit her child?

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Rate Yourself!

*How comfortable do you feel responding to biting in your classroom?*

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Sharing toys is a challenging skill that young children develop over time. Sharing often means taking turns with a particular toy or activity. It can also mean playing with a set of toys in the company of other children, for example, when three toddlers are all using puppets or toy cars in the same area. Babies do not have a concept of sharing or taking turns, although older babies may begin to offer toys and food to familiar caregivers. When they hand an item to you, they often expect that they can take it right back. Toddlers are establishing a sense of autonomy and ownership. They start to recognize items that belong to them. At school they may try to assert control over classroom toys, and they may be frustrated when someone else is using a toy that they want or when they cannot have all the crayons or trains for themselves. Children typically get better at sharing around four years old, when they have the ability to use their language skills to negotiate turn-taking and trading and have more self-control when waiting for their turns. It is important, therefore, to have realistic expectations for toddlers and to gently support them in managing conflicts about sharing.

**Causes**

Infants and toddlers do not understand that other people have wants, needs, and feelings different from their own. Therefore they do not understand that toys in the classroom belong to everyone and must be shared. Crawling infants do not yet understand the idea of personal space, so they do not see a toy being held by another baby as off limits to them. They also do not have the language skills to understand explanations and rules about turn-taking. Even toddlers who are starting to talk have a very limited sense of time, so they do not understand or believe that if they give up a toy, they will get it back in a few minutes. “Now” is all that matters to infants and toddlers.

**Preventing or Minimizing**

Infant and toddler classrooms need to have plenty of toys and interesting materials appropriate to the number of children in the class. If there are only a few fun toys, you can be sure that children will be frustrated and fight over them. In contrast, when there are many interesting things to do and objects to play with, children can share toys and space more easily. It is also helpful to establish trust and a feeling of safety within the classroom environment. When children feel safe, and when they trust their caregivers, they begin to understand that their needs will be met. This allows them to feel more relaxed and have less need to defend and cling to everything they have. Part of establishing this kind of safe environment is offering children choices when possible (e.g., “Are you finished with that crayon, Kaitlyn? Can we give George a turn with it?”) and making sure that when a child is willing to give up an item, she does get another turn with it again soon. In fact, back-and-forth games in which children practice giving and receiving encourage children to practice this early form of turn-taking. Activities such as rolling a ball back and forth, offering each other pretend food to eat, or passing items to each other during snack time lay a foundation for sharing. When children share and take turns successfully, label and praise this behavior: “Wow, Benjamin, that was so kind of you to share your crackers with Emily!” or “Shelby and William, you are doing a great job taking turns on the bike. What good friends you are!”

**Responding**

When an infant takes a toy from another infant, look for the babies’ signals to see whether your help is needed. If neither baby is showing distress, you may “let it go” and just make sure there are enough toys for both babies to explore. If one baby is frequently passive and another is frequently grabbing from others, you will want to step in and redirect the baby who is grabbing to a different toy. When babies or toddlers are grabbing from each other and showing distress, it is helpful to respond calmly, using simple words and actions to prevent harm and facilitate turn-taking. For example, you might say gently, “Hold on, Raymond. Jesse is using that car. I can help you find another one to use.” You may need to gently return the toy to the child who was playing with it as you say this. When working with children who are able to talk, prompt them to replay their interaction using words after returning the toy to the child who was using it. For example, as you return the toy to the first child, say to the second child, “Emily is using the bucket right now. If you want a turn, you can ask her: ‘Can I have a turn?’” Then prompt the other child to give an answer, such as “yes;” “no;” or “later.”
Sharing Tip 1: Think about what rules you have about sharing and why. Do you expect children to give up what they are playing with as soon as another child asks for it? Is this fair to the child using the toy? Is it okay for a child to say “no” when asked to share? Will you set a limit on how long a child can keep a popular toy? Do you use a timer or other routine to help children wait for a turn? Remember that sharing is harder for children when it always means “give up what you have.” When you allow children the choice to say “no,” at least temporarily, they are also more free to choose to say “yes” when they are ready.

Sharing Tip 2: Remember that when you offer choices and ask questions, you need to respect children’s answers. If you ask, “Can Marisol have a turn with that ball?” you are giving the other child permission to say “no,” and you will need a plan for Marisol to wait for her turn. If you do not want to offer the option of “no,” you can use a statement instead of a question, such as “Kimberly, you have had the ball for a long time. Marisol is waiting for a turn. I will count to ten and then it will be time to give Marisol the ball.”

Sharing Tip 3: When children are physically struggling over a toy as you are trying to facilitate turn-taking, you may need to hold the toy yourself while the conflict is being resolved. You can say, “I will hold the doll while we figure this out.” Stay down at the children’s eye level as you talk with them and help them take turns or find another way to share the materials.

Linked Strategies:
- Support turn-taking
- Offer prompts for peer interaction
- Help resolve conflicts with peers
- Engage children in planned activities to promote positive peer interactions
- Offer opportunities for children to make choices
- Use praise to encourage positive behavior/cooperation

Stop and Reflect: Not Sharing Toys

Understanding toddler development is necessary for a teacher to know what is within a normal range of toddler behavior. What kind of realistic expectations should a toddler teacher have about sharing?

How would you describe your role as a teacher during the many sharing struggles that occur during a normal toddler day?
Rate Yourself!

How comfortable do you feel responding to refusals to share toys in your classroom?

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Tips for Communicating with Parents about Challenging Behaviors

It is important to maintain positive, ongoing, back-and-forth communication with parents about their children throughout the year, rather than initiating contact only when there is a problem to report. When you take the time to build genuine, mutually respectful relationships with each parent or guardian, it is easier to approach them when you have a concern to discuss.

When a child is showing a pattern of challenging behavior, your first approach should be to work with your instructional team and supervisor or director to try to problem solve within the classroom. Take time to notice as much as you can about the child’s behavior: What time(s) of day does it happen? Is it every day or on certain days of the week? Does it happen in a particular area of the room, or in proximity to certain classmates? What might be changed in the environment to prevent or minimize the behavior? What might be changed in the daily routine, or at transition times, to prevent or minimize the behavior? What additional supports could you or a co-teacher provide to this child?

Make a plan based on your observations and your brainstorming, and try it out. Remember that changes and new strategies may take days or weeks to have an impact on a child’s behavior, so do not expect instant success. If things are improving, you may just want to mention to the parents the ways you are supporting their child and what seems to be working. Alternatively, you may not need to involve the parents at all.

If you have already done all of the above and the child is still showing frequent challenging behavior, it is appropriate to share this information with the parents or guardians and invite them to partner with you on finding solutions. What is NOT helpful is to simply keep sending home notes to parents reporting on their child’s problematic behavior (e.g., “Maria hit another child twice today and sat in time out,” or “Maria threw her lunch kit on the floor today,” or “Maria refused to come to circle time.”). These kinds of notes tend to distress and alienate parents, and they do not provide helpful guidance or support. Instead, invite parents to partner with you in addressing the concerning behavior, using an approach such as the following:

- Invite the parents to meet with you in person for a conference.
- Come prepared to share your observations along with the solutions and approaches you have tried thus far.
- Present your observations in a caring way:
  “We’ve noticed that Gregory is having a hard time with ____.”
  “We’ve been trying to support Lawrence with ____.”
  “Transition/nap/circle times are really hard for Brianna…”
- Invite parents to share their own observations and challenges they have been having in the home environment.
- Ask parents if there is any additional information they would like to share that would help you understand their child’s behavior.
- Make a mutually agreeable plan for new or additional strategies to try and for how (and how often) you will communicate about how things are going (e.g., daily or weekly email, brief check-in at pick-up time, note sent home in child’s backpack).
- If you and your supervisor feel that outside consultation is needed about this child, and you have such consultation available to you (such as from a mentor teacher or a child development specialist connected with your organization), it may be appropriate
to share this information with parents as well. Parents may be relieved that you are seeking out support to help their child and make her classroom experience more successful. If they have concerns about confidentiality or what information will be conveyed back to them, be prepared to answer those questions.

If, after all these steps have been taken, you and your director feel that an outside evaluation would be beneficial for this child to identify an underlying developmental or behavioral issue, be prepared to provide referral suggestions to parents and to offer whatever information or support you can to facilitate this process (such as offering to fill out any requested questionnaires or be available for a phone interview with the outside evaluator).

Conversations with parents about their children's behavior can be hard. However, when you approach them in a thoughtful way, with good preparation and anticipation of parents' possible questions and reactions, you are more likely to have a successful, collaborative dialogue. Remember, you are all on the same team, working to support the child's social, emotional, and behavioral development and learning.

Conclusion

Learning to regulate emotions and behavior takes lots of time and practice, and infants and toddlers can't do it alone. They need caring, patient, consistent adults to keep them safe, provide warmth and affection, acknowledge their strong feelings, and direct them toward positive behavior choices. Some toddler behaviors such as tantrums, biting, or saying “no” can challenge our own self-regulation skills! But take a deep breath and hang in there—the work you do now will pay off as you set children on the path to becoming caring, capable, and emotionally healthy adults.

References


