

# Purposeful Play: Planning and Scaffolding with Toddlers in Mind

Marie L. Masterson, Ph.D. [www.mariemasterson.com](http://www.mariemasterson.com)

**Note:** The list of activities below are from the book, *Let's Talk Toddlers: A Practical Guide to High-Quality Teaching*. This book can be used as self or group study to revitalize and energize every aspect of your toddler teaching! The checklist and reflection were developed for NAEYC PLI, 2019.

**Play lights up the brain** as toddlers make sense of the world. They touch, explore, examine the way things work, ask questions, and try new ways of manipulating objects. This is scientific inquiry at its best. Toddlers internalize rules of physics and gravity, explore biology, learn what is logical, and compare and contrast what they know with new information they discover. There are endless opportunities for learning as toddlers explore and experiment. Therefore, they need **a setting** that is prepared for them. In addition, they need **interactions** that facilitate language and concept development. Teachers and families should focus on emerging skills – to facilitate competence in all areas of development.

Toddlers enjoy playing alone or next to others. They enjoy working and playing with adults using *joint attention* – shared space, focus, and positive conversation. They like many of the same themes as preschoolers do; however, they tend to imitate what they know and understand, rather than develop complex stories or make-believe scenarios. They engage quickly when materials are varied, interesting, and represent experiences they know.

As you plan for play, first, *set the purpose for play*. Start with your knowledge of children's emerging skills. What are they ready to enjoy and do? Next, set the *purpose or goal* for each activity. Finally, review activities and materials in light of the checklist that follows.

Here are just some materials and activities toddlers enjoy. Discover much more about material choice, preparation, facilitation, and storage in *Let's Talk Toddlers: A Practical Guide to High-Quality Teaching*.

- **Physical indoor and outdoor play:** Include ball play, empty-space play, fabric play, riding/climbing play, balance play, bowling, twirling, mat rolling, stretching, jumping, running, dancing.
- **Imagination play:** Theme reenactment can include (e.g., jungle explorer, community helper, zoo keeper, veterinarian, medical personnel, rescue worker, chef and restaurant play, shopping), travel play (e.g., beach, mountains, camping, train, airplane, boats, ships), and location play (e.g., barns and farming, doll house play, library play, school play, business play).
- **Loose parts:** Include tools of all kinds, natural objects, empty containers and material bits, paper and fabric, sensory tools and materials (e.g., rollers, brushes, sand paper, kitchen utensils).
- **Cardboard boxes:** There are few limits with boxes and cartons! Create spaceships, tunnels, trains, canoes, houses, castles, tree houses, garages, farms, igloos, boats, and much more.
- **Construction activities:** Materials include wooden blocks, classic toys, magnetic sets, commercial brick and peg sets, rod and tube sets.
- **Fine-motor and logic play:** Stacking activities, geoboards, Mr. Potato head, picture matching games, magnetic toys, puzzles, mixed-material play invite creativity and invention.

- **Water play:** Tables and tubs are for car, baby, and clothes washing, themed play, cooking, measuring, tubes and funnels, waterwheels, paddles, boats, sponges, and sink/ float toys.
- **Sand play:** Indoor and outdoor scoops, buckets, slides, pans, sifters, “people,” vehicles, and other themed materials are greatly enjoyed.
- **Daily life skills:** Examples of daily life play include watering plants, putting away groceries, arranging spoons in a drawer, learning how to use kitchen tools (e.g., playing with colanders, sifters, whisks, cups and spoons, garlic press, woks, coffee strainers, tea sets, mortar and pestle) playing with tools, tool belts, work boots, work gloves, and gardening play (e.g., gloves, trowels, hats, buckets, tubs, bark, dirt, and twigs).
- **Cooking and homemaking:** Toddlers reenact laundry tasks, doll care and nurturing play, and enjoy dress up clothing and accessories of all kinds.
- **Cultural and local tradition play:** Seasonal play (e.g., winter fun, farm stands, instruments, events with piñatas, flowers and fruit, wreaths, decorations, festivals, and celebrations should reflect children’s families and community.
- **Sensory play:** Molding materials can introduced with many texture tools, along with scent activities, foam drawing and painting, textured papers, calming balls, fidgets, and instruments..
- **Helping activities:** Toddlers enjoy squirt and spray bottles filled with water, mopping, sweeping, dusting, sorting, folding, stacking – and want to know they are good helpers.
- **Science and nature play:** Introduce many natural objects (e.g., seed pods, pinecones, growing plants and flowers, classroom pets, magnifying glasses, bugs, bug containers and bird feeders.
- **Pre-writing play:** Toddlers pretend to make shopping lists, write “letters and cards” with envelopes and stamps, clipboards, notebooks, loose paper, varied writing tools for scribbling.
- **Prop boxes:** Collections of themed activities can be rotated, added, switched, and created to match children’s interests. *Examples:* Pirates, beach play, pet play, winter fun (e.g., balled socks for snowballs, hats and mittens for children, “snow” material for tub play, Jan Brett The Mitten, Jack Ezra Keats The Snowy Day, a plastic sled), camping (e.g., a tent, sleeping bags, flashlights, firewood, camp cook pans, M.R. and H.A Rey, Curious George Goes Camping, Peter Eastman Fred and Ted Go Camping.)
- **Art play:** Two- and three-dimensional arts and crafts projects, are well-loved by toddlers when they can choose their own materials and mediums.
- **Music play.** Child-safe wall mirrors, hand mirrors, dance costumes, streamers, drums and rhythm instruments, string and wind instruments, recordings, piano, autoharp, and a clear dance area invite participation.
- **Block play:** Wooden, plastic, hollow and other varied block types invite children to balance, build, and pretend. Space for children to play without interruption from other children and traffic is essential.

## Facilitating Toddler Play

Below is a ten-question checklist that will help you become an effective facilitator of toddler play:

- What is the purpose or specific goal of this play material or activity?
- What emerging development skills will this activity and interaction support?
- What skills will each child need to be successful? Skills include physical, language, fine motor, reasoning, executive function and self-regulation, and the right length of time.
- What opportunities for learning are present? Consider developmental skills, vocabulary, content, concepts, and ideas children may encounter. How will children learn more about how things work or relate? For example when children play with blocks, here are just some of the concepts and ideas they learn:
  - *Self-regulation*: How to make decisions and direct their bodies to follow through to reach a goal.
  - *Scientific and creative thinking*: How to evaluate material choices to represent their ideas. How to solve problems.
  - *Executive function*: Use of focus, managing tasks, filtering distractions.
  - *Science concepts*: How to balance, center, line up, match, compare size, weight, evaluate distance.
  - Math concept words: Concepts include first, second, third..., same, different, less, more, small, large, bigger, smaller, all, and none.
  - Position words: Position words include above, below, beside, behind, front, back, inside, next to, and outside.
  - Descriptive words: Descriptive words include open, closed, balanced, center, tall, short, bridge, and many more!
  - Shape words: Shape words include square, circle, triangle, cube, cylinder, and tube.
- What kind of preparation will be needed from you so children understand expectations and limits?
- What new vocabulary will be introduced? How will you facilitate conversations and understanding of concepts? What questions will you ask?
- Is this play, routine, or expectation emotionally safe and enjoyable to children? Will it bring delight, satisfaction and fun?
- Is there adequate stimulation and alternative quiet or active play choices? Will this allow a flexible balance of active play with ongoing opportunity for children to relax? Do children have the choice and space to play alone?
- Will this activity be difficult for multiple children to do near one another? Will there be adequate adult interaction and supervision, support, and scaffolding?
- What kind of supervision and support is needed? Do specific children need additional scaffolding?

## Facilitating Toddler Play: Reflection

1. Was this activity or material interesting and motivating? Did it engage these children?
2. Did the activity respect and build on children's physical development and abilities?
3. Were children able to manage the social context, length of time, and level of support?
4. Was there adequate coordination between you and your co-teacher? If not, what will you do differently?
5. Were any adjustments needed in spaces or in timing?
6. Were additional adaptations of materials or additional materials needed for children's success?
7. What did you notice that worked well that you want to repeat?
8. What did you notice you want to do differently or change next time?
9. What materials would you like to add that can engage children's specific interests?
10. Do you think this activity or these materials were challenging enough for these children?

**Note:** Learn more about facilitating play for children in the book, *Serious Fun: How Guided Play Extends Children's Learning*, NAEYC 2019.