



Developmentally Appropriate Guidance with Infants and Toddlers

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The purpose of guidance

The purpose of behavior guidance is to establish secure relationships and provide gentle, consistent support for developing skills. Guidance with infants and toddlers always requires assisted regulation. Adults must develop a deep knowledge of children and their advancing skills – and stay in communication with families to ensure cultural safety and deep understanding of family priorities and knowledge.

Purposeful teaching

Positive guidance strategies should be incorporated within the context of learning environments that are designed to meet the individual skills and strengths of each child. This means that spaces and materials are adapted to keep up with changing skill levels and learning needs. Teachers should evaluate spaces to minimize barriers to active learning, anticipate frustrations, and adjust the level of challenge to ensure children engage successfully.

Playful learning

When infants and toddlers are engaged in meaningful play with attuned and responsive adults, and when spaces and materials are designed for the specific children, behavior challenges are rare. The children’s cultures, languages, and interests are integrated through books, materials, activities, and conversations to foster pride in family identities and experiences.

The role of development

Adults must develop a deep understanding of children’s development through ongoing communication with families. They must recognize the interdependence of skills, such as the role of physical, verbal, and cognitive development in emotion regulation. All young children need individualized, assisted support (co-regulation) that includes encouragement and authentic caring for their unique ways of being.

It is critical to identify strategies that are ineffective and to avoid these. One ineffective strategy is “use your words.” Toddlers do not have words when they are upset, because the emotion loop in the brain is faster than the verbal loop. They need assistance with words. Young toddlers can learn to say, “Please stop.” “No thank you.” and “Walk away.” Another frequently used ineffective strategy is to admonish, “make a better choice.” Children make the best choices they can, given the circumstances, their skill level, their verbal development, and their level of stress or fatigue. They depend on adults to gently guide them.



Less verbal or non-verbal children may be taught to use cues, like tapping a teacher on the arm or squeezing their hand for attention. Toddlers who scream or yell for help should be thanked for using their words! This means they are not hitting or hurting others. Often, teachers want to stop children from yelling – when this behavior can be gently modified. Teachers can say, “Instead of yell, just say “Help me!” I will come help you.” Even very young toddlers learn quickly to get help in this very simple way. However, the teacher must stay aware and come immediately when the child needs help. And to minimize frustrations, teachers should anticipate what will be frustrating and step in proactively to support children by adapting spaces, materials, activities, and supporting interactions with other children.

Strategies for Success

With developmentally appropriate guidance, children develop confidence and security. Infants and toddlers require consistent routines and schedules to minimize stress. Teachers should work with families to develop cultural and practical coherence between the homes and the program. In this way, guidance builds on family priorities and values. The following strategies are designed especially for infants and toddlers.

1. Model the behaviors you want children to learn. Show children by example how to speak gently, accomplish tasks, get help, and find what they need. For example, ask before you touch a child’s toys, change a diaper, or go into the child’s cubby. For example, take an infant with you to their cubby and ask first, “May I please put your sweater in your cubby?” “May I please get a diaper from your cubby?”

Many adults simply do things without showing children consistently that to touch someone else’s things, one asks first. Asking shows respect – but most importantly it demonstrates that people just don’t swoop in and do what they want without asking others. Modeling how to ask teaches respect for the boundaries of self and others.

2. Prepare children for what comes next. Only say what you plan to do. “First, we will wash hands. Then we will eat lunch.” Be consistent every time. Wait to announce what will happen next when you are certain it will be next. Don’t expect children to know what is happening next. They are focused in the moment.

3. Narrate successful strategies. Describe a child’s effective thinking or caring actions. “How kind. You patted Skye on the back when she was sad.” “You noticed Bryon’s puzzle and stepped over it.”

Frequently, teachers narrate what did *not* go well. “Oops, you dropped your blanket.” “Look out, you are bumping into Jasmine.” Instead, notice and narrate your own and children’s prosocial behaviors. “I’m going to get Natasha another napkin. She dropped hers.” Narrate effective strategies – not ineffective ones!



4. Use effective redirection. Effective redirection is an incompatible alternative. It replaces rather than stops a behavior. Rather than talk about what not to do or tell a child to stop, describe a safe, positive solution. To a toddler playing too close to another child, say, “Let’s move over a little bit,” or “Steer around Joshua.” (Rather than, “Don’t hit Joshua with the stroller.”) To a child who is frustrated say, “Let’s find another doll.” To a toddler who needs to be engaged, say, “Let’s pick a book and read together.” The goal is to help children notice what needs to be done and – over time – develop self-responsibility.

5. Offer choices that match children’s understanding. “Naptime. Do you want to snuggle with your lovely blanket or your bear?” You can observe infants’ body language and vocalizations to understand their intentions and interests to guide the choices you offer.

6. Keep it simple. Young children have short attention spans. Give brief, one-step instructions. “Feet on floor.” “Book on your lap. Let’s read together.” It is important to avoid conversations that lecture toddlers to share. Instead, show them in simple ways how to resolve issues, such as by getting another toy.

7. Use alternatives to “no.” Redirect or distract. Shift children’s attention forward to a positive activity. “I have a box of squishy balls. You can roll them down the slide.” Children live in the moment, so move their attention forward to successful experiences.

8. Validate feelings and promote empathy. Describe what you see. “I know you are disappointed. Let’s choose another toy.” “I know you miss momma. Let’s read until she comes.” Also draw children’s attention to the needs and experiences of others. Often, teachers comfort one child, without giving an explanation to other children. “Joshua feels sad. Let’s bring him a puzzle and sit with him.” “Abby is hungry. Let’s make sure she gets a snack.”

9. Use assisted soothing. Use soft materials and cozy spaces for stress relief. Children need to have breaks from being in a group. Infants, as well – need one-one one time with adults and enjoy gentle swaying, and soft singing. They are soothed through a teacher’s quiet breathing and calming words. Toddlers love to copy yoga stretches, lay on the floor like puppies, or curl up with soft pillows. They also need stories, songs, and gentle soothing for their sensory needs.

10. Encourage and empower success. Effective guidance celebrates children’s progress. “Awesome! We had fun cleaning up together.” “I am happy to read with you. You are a good book reader.” Teachers must affirm and honor children’s unique ways of being. “You are creative, like your momma.” “You and your daddy had fun on the swings. You love playing outside.” These affirmations instill pride and confidence.



Reflection Questions

- What are typical responses to misbehavior, especially for toddlers? How do basic, effective strategies help?
- Why is children's behavior often seen as something within a child's control? What can adults do to adjust the setting, timing of experiences, routines, materials, and support to minimize behavior issues?
- How do cultural differences influence perceptions of behavior and ways of communicating during behavior guidance?

See: www.mariemasterson.com for additional resources:

- *101 Principles for Positive Guidance: Creating Responsive Teachers* (Pearson, 2013)
- *Enjoying the Parenting Roller Coaster: Nurturing and Empowering Children through the Ups and Downs* (Gryphon House, 2016)
- *Let's Talk Toddlers: A Practical Guide to High-Quality Teaching* (Redleaf Press, 2018)
- *The Essentials: Providing High-Quality Family Child Care* (NAEYC, 2018)
- *Serious Fun: How Guided Play Extends Children's Learning* (NAEYC, 2019)
- *Developmentally Appropriate Practice in Early Childhood Programs Serving Children from Birth through Age 8, Fourth Edition* (NAEYC, 2022).