

Strategy Toolbox for Teachers: Creating Moments of Joyful Learning

MARIE L. MASTERSON, PH.D.

Tips for positive play and behavior

Behavior guidance nurtures and supports emerging skills across all domains of development through co-regulation, strengths-based encouragement, and consistency over time. Infants and toddlers do not have the skills to regulate behavior independently and depend on a caring teacher for co-regulation (assistance and support). The following tips are part of a strategy toolbox that is highly effective:

- ❑ **Be affirming.** Get to know and affirm each child's individual patterns, ways of responding, preferences, likes and dislikes, sense of humor, sensory responses, and unique or special traits.
- ❑ **Create emotionally safe spaces.** Give reassurance through phrases like, "You can do it." "You're figuring it out." "You are making progress."
- ❑ **Treat children with respect, gentleness, kindness, and patience.** During caring routines, children may be sensitive and anxious to be comforted in the same way their families do.
- ❑ **Provide physical comfort.** Provide soft sensory experiences in cozy areas of the classroom with materials that are comforting. Invite time for snuggling and relaxation.
- ❑ **Prepare children for what is coming next.** "First, we will wash hands. Then we will eat lunch." Be consistent every time. Only say what you plan to do.
- ❑ **Notice and narrate what works.** For example, when a toddler asks for help, say, "Thanks for grabbing my hand and saying, "Help me." Also narrate your own thinking. "I'm pushing my drink back so it won't spill."
- ❑ **Teach and model self-talk.** Words are powerful and empowering. "Tell your hands to be gentle." Say, "No thank you" or "Stop." Tell your brain, "I can stop myself." Tell your feet to steer around Nathan."
- ❑ **Keep instructions simple.** For a child kneeling, say, "We sit on chairs." For a child waving a book around, say, "Book on your lap. Let's read together."
- ❑ **Validate feelings.** "I know you miss momma. Let's read until she comes." I know you are disappointed. It's okay to feel sad."
- ❑ **Nurture awareness to promote empathy.** "Sara needs help with her straw." "Lela looks tired." "Jasmine is alone. Let's ask her to play."
- ❑ **Ensure adequate stimulation.** Offer a range of challenges, like puzzles, peg and knob toys, and construction-type activities that meet a range of fine and gross-motor skills.
- ❑ **Make learning multi-dimensional.** Show a child how you will change a diaper or use the toilet by demonstrating first with a plush animal or doll. Talk about how the diaper wipe feels on the bottom by "trying it out" first on the arm.
- ❑ **Stay in proximity.** Children are fast, get frustrated quickly, and need you to anticipate and support successful play experiences. Adjust spaces and materials to minimize frustration.

Copyright Teachers College Press: *Culturally Responsive and Inclusive Care for Infants and Toddlers: Strategies for High Quality Teaching*

For more resources and to contact Marie Masterson, connect at: www.mariemasterson.com

- ❑ **Make connections from children to their families.** “You have beautiful curls, just like your momma.” “You like to dance, just like your daddy.” “You have a happy sense of humor like your grandmother.” Ask questions to connect picture book topics to the children. “Do you go for walks with your momma?” “Did you go to the Zoo with your brother?”
- ❑ **Greet children in their home language and use familiar names for family members.** “Buenos días, Ana y Tía Sofia. Bienvenidas a un día feliz en nuestro salón de clases.” (Good morning, Anna and Aunt Sofia. Welcome to a happy day in our classroom.)
- ❑ **Sing and play.** Sing familiar lullabies, finger plays, and songs families enjoy at home.
- ❑ **Introduce meaningful stories.** Select books with pictures and stories that reflect realistic pictures of daily activities children enjoy with their families.
- ❑ **Celebrate families.** Laminate photos of children’s families to hold at naptime. Display family photos at children’s eye level. Create individual family books with photos and pictures that reflect the children’s lives. Use the child’s special names for family members to point and talk about the people, pictures, events, and stories.
- ❑ **Encourage language.** Use frequently used words in home languages for self-care materials, like diaper, blanket, milk, ointment, and bottle to provide comfort and familiarity during routines.
- ❑ **Engage in personal conversations with children.** Talk or ask about family members, pets, and home life. With pre-verbal infants, narrate your own actions and talk about what a family member does with the infant at home.
- ❑ **Listen to children.** Ask toddlers where they go with their families, how they help families at home, how their family puts them to sleep, and what they enjoy playing with their families. Give children time to respond.
- ❑ **Introduce beautiful materials.** Provide books, displays, games, dolls, toys, and meals that represent the lives and experiences of all families in your program.
- ❑ **Invite families to be active members of your classroom, daily activities, and events.** Ask families to sing and record songs in home languages. Ask for activity suggestions.
- ❑ **Use multi-modal strategies to communicate.** Use gestures, physical objects, and vocal and facial expression to provide a rich context for language learning.
- ❑ **Enjoy daily shared book reading.** Connect words to pictures and photos of familiar objects, people, and places. Include books and stories in home languages.

Reflections

1. What are the greatest challenges of teaching infants or toddlers? What contributes to these issues that can be removed or added to create positive outcomes?
2. What action steps can teachers take to enrich language and learning experiences for infants and toddlers?
3. What are some ways families can be more directly involved in creating culturally affirming play experiences for infants and toddlers?