

Let's Talk Toddlers! Primetime Teaching, Powerhouse Positive Guidance, and Purposeful Play for Behavior and Learning Success

Marie L. Masterson, Ph.D. www.mariemasterson.com

Behavior and learning challenges for fast-moving, emotional, energetic toddlers are two sides of one equation. Discover a balanced formula to promote high-quality teaching that emerges from a deep understanding of child development, behavior, and motivation.

What is the foundation for balanced and integrated child-centered teaching? Meeting essential needs.

- **Be attuned; authentically present.** Children show what they feel, think, and need through body language, actions, and words. Be a detailed observer and documenter.
- **Love and nurture.** Respond with sensitivity, gentle patience, and consistent encouragement.
- **Use a co-caring approach.** Families are experts in their child's caregiving. Authentic communication reflects and honors ways-of-being, language, culture, and values.
- **Monitor and soothe stress.** Four steps - Comfort, contain, co-regulate, and reorient.
- **Ensure physical well-being.** Ensure exercise, nutrition, sleep, media protection.

Primetime Teaching

Primetime teaching is child-centered, responsive, and evaluative. Teachers continually adapt the setting, interactions, and level of support to strengthen emerging skills of each child. Teachers:

1. **Build on child development.** Understand capabilities, strengths, interests, and asynchronous patterns. Know CDC Milestones and recognize how much toddlers know and can do.
2. **Learn from children.** Become a skilled observer and recorder. Authentic assessment guides daily planning with observing, documenting change over time, and identifying emerging skills.
3. **Respond to children.** Anticipate needs. Minimize frustration. Monitor stimulation. Adapt level of challenge to meet individual needs. Assist with transition between active and quiet activities.
4. **Use co-regulation.** Toddlers require consistent scaffolding, with discerning evaluation of all internal and external factors that influence their experiences.
5. **Prioritize self-care.** Meals, diapering, toileting, napping, and dressing teach worth and honor for bodies and emotions and set a lifetime pattern for healthy self-care and care for others.
6. **Respect boundaries.** Honor bodies, belongings, feelings, space, words, wants, and needs. Ask first. Evaluate verbal and non-verbal cues. Toddlers learn to respect others through modeling.
7. **Ensure consistency.** Competence and security develop through predictable schedules, activities, ways of being, and expectations. Use simple routines, simple rules, and simple instructions.
8. **Model with mini-lessons.** Demonstrate rather than "do for" children. "To fit the cow inside the barn, you turn the animal like this. Now you do it." To open the latch, you pick this tiny hinge with your finger and pull it up. You try it." Instill confidence, competence, and responsibility.
9. **Prepare spaces that meet children's needs.** Adequate space is essential for large body and solitary play. Store ample materials for easy access to minimize frustration.
10. **Know and facilitate content area concepts.** Plan concept learning through materials, activities, and conversations. (See next page.) *Know and use the early learning guidelines for your state.*

Prime-Time Conversations

Talk with children! Meaningful interactions are the foundation of primetime teaching and play-based, child-centered learning.

- **Respond to children's cues, needs, and wants.** A toddler reaches for a ball. You respond, "You want the red ball. Here is the ball. The ball is rolling to you! Roll the ball back to me." "Here is the brown bear. His fur is soft. He looks cold. Can you wrap him in the blanket?"
- **Initiate serve and return, back-and-forth conversation.** Narrate events, effective strategies, and children's actions. "You are working hard to pull the chair to the table. You used your strong muscles. Will your doll sit on the chair?" Invite a response with questions.
- **Engage in joint attention.** Share focused positive emotions and conversation. "The geranium leaves are turning brown. Can you help me pick them off? When we are finished, we can fill the watering can to wet the soil."
- **Add on information.** A child says, "My block." The adult responds, "Yes, that is a red block. Can you balance it on top of the skyscraper?" A child says, "It's in the house." The adult responds, "Yes, the caterpillar is inside the cocoon. It is warm and soft inside the cocoon." A child says, "Tiara is crying." The adult responds, "Yes, Tiara is crying. She feels sad her momma left. Let's invite her to read a book. Can you choose a book for us?"
- **Use specific and descriptive language.** "The bird on the feeder is a cardinal. Do you see the way his head feathers make a little cap? When you see a red bird with a feather cap, it is a cardinal." Avoid pronouns and non-descriptive words, like, "Put it over there." Instead, say, "The big horse book belongs on top of the cart."
- **Ask open ended questions.** "Tell me about your shopping trip." "What do you think the boy is doing?" "What is happening in the picture?" "How did the dog sneak into the house?"
- **Increase empathy by pointing out what others feel and need.** "Sylvia looks happy. Let's see what she is working on." "George seems sad. Let's invite him to play our game."
- **Play with words.** Toddlers enjoy word sounds. "Petunia!" "Pickles!" "Pop Corn!" When they are eating muffins, the adult can ask, "Are you eating a pancake?" (They will laugh and say no!) "Is it a popsicle?" They will say no. "Is it a muffin?" They will say "yes!" The adult can add, "What kind of muffin are you eating? Yes. It looks like a yummy blueberry muffin."
- **Use "fancy" vocabulary.** Instead of, "Oh that was so kind." Say, "You showed lovely manners." It is amazing how proud toddlers are of the words they use. Instead of, "It's a fire truck," Say, "That is a hook and ladder engine." "This is a fire tanker. It holds water for the hose." "This is a ground ladder. Fire fighters use it to rescue a kitten stuck in a tree." "This is an aerial ladder. Workers use it to climb into windows." Children will be wide-eyed as they listen to and imagine these adventures and ideas.

Co-teachers, leaders, and coaches can share reflective feedback.

Powerhouse Positive Guidance

Guidance means to teach and train positive habits of behavior and strengthen self-regulation. Use these strategies individually or combine as needed. The desired goal is for children to experience success.

1. **Model the behavior you want.** Show children by example how to behave.
2. **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. Don’t expect children to know what is happening next. They are focused in the moment.
3. **Give positive feedback.** Narrate what you see. “How kind. You shared your wagon with Skye.” “You stepped over Bryon’s puzzle. Good for you to see what he was doing and tell your body where to go.”
4. **Use effective redirection.** Rather than mention what should not be done (or tell a child to stop), *describe a safe, positive choice or solution.* Effective redirection is an incompatible alternative. It replaces rather than stops a behavior. “Drive around Tommy.” (Rather than “Don’t hit Tommy.”) “Look for your feet.” (Rather than, “Look out. Don’t bump Charlie.”)
5. **Offer choices.** Make a simple statement that describes a needed behavior, then add two choices to shift responsibility to the child. “Naptime. Do you want to snuggle with your blanket or teddy bear?” “Time to pick up toys. Do you want to help pick up the cars or the bears?” Assist with next steps.
6. **Keep it simple.** Toddlers have a short attention span. Give brief, one-step instructions. For a child climbing, say, “Feet on the floor,” rather than, “Look out, Shalynn. You will fall off that chair and hurt yourself.” “Naptime. I will pat your back.” “Book on your lap. Let’s read together.”
7. **Use alternatives to “no.”** Shift children’s attention forward to a positive activity. Redirect or distract. “I have a box of squishy balls. You can roll them down the slide.” Offer a choice. “Would you like to paint at the easel or make handprints with Ms. Kelly?” Help the child get started.
8. **Validate feelings.** “It’s hard to sit still.” “I feel like running, too.” Describe feelings you see. “I know you are disappointed.” “I see you are excited.” “I know you miss momma. Let’s read until she comes.”
9. **Encourage and empower success.** “Three cheers for our kind children. You were helping each other.” “Awesome! We had fun cleaning up together.” “I am so happy to read with you. You are a good book reader.” The most motivating factor for human beings is competence. Every interaction between you and a child should result in success for the child. Support and encourage understanding and skill.

Note: See my website: www.mariemasterson.com for resources including book lists for toddlers, a checklist for facilitating play, and detailed handout on Powerhouse Positive Guidance to strengthen competence in toddlers.

Purposeful Play

Set a purpose and know the goal and skills for each activity and interaction. Materials are just the first step. Example: Music objects are important; but songs, finger-plays, clapping, dancing, and talking about music facilitates learning. Primetime teaching conversations are needed during play.

Warning: Constant supervision and choke-tube testing for objects are required for all activities.

- **Physical play:** Ball play, empty-space play, fabric play, riding and climbing play, balance play, soft-mat play, bowling, hoops, fitness, yoga, jumping, dancing.
- **Imagination play:** Themes (e.g., jungle, explorer, community helper, zoo keepers, veterinarian, rescue workers, restaurant play, shopping, beach, camping, travel).
- **Loose parts:** 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:** No limits. Create spaceships, tunnels, trains, canoes, houses, castles, tree houses, garages, farms, igloos, boats. Add a pillow to a box for solitary reading and play.
- **Construction activities:** Wooden and cardboard blocks, magnetic tile sets, commercial brick and peg sets, rod and tube sets.
- **Fine-motor and logic play:** Stacking activities, geoboards, Mr. Potato head, puzzles, mixed-material play (e.g., funnels, tubes, three-dimensional material).
- **Sand and water play:** Tables and tubs for car and baby washing, theme play, measuring, tubes and funnels, waterwheels, paddles, boats, sponges, sink and float toys, theme materials, scoops, buckets, slides, pans, sifters, “people,” and vehicles.
- **Daily life skills:** Groceries, sorting, kitchen tools, colanders, sifters, whisks, woks, coffee strainers, tea sets, tools and tool belts, work boots, work gloves, gardening play.
- **Cooking and homemaking:** Laundry, dolls and nurturing play, dress up clothing of all kinds.
- **Cultural and local tradition play:** Indoor snowman play farm stands, instruments, events with piñatas, flowers and fruit, special wreaths, decorations, festivals and celebrations.
- **Sensory play:** Molding materials with many patterns, texture play, scents, foam, and individual container play with sifters, natural objects, shakers, tongs, spoons, and pans.
- **Helping activities:** Cleaning, mopping, sweeping, dusting, sorting, folding, and stacking.
- **Science and nature play:** Natural objects (e.g., seed pods, pinecones, growing plants and flowers, classroom pet, magnifying glasses, bugs, bug houses, bird feeder).
- **Pre-writing play:** Making shopping lists, writing “letters and cards” with envelopes and stamps, clipboards with attached pens, notebooks, loose paper, varied writing tools.
- **Prop boxes:** Example - Winter fun (e.g., balled socks for snowballs, hats and mittens for children, “snow” tub play, The Mitten (Jan Brett), The Snowy Day (Jack Ezra Keats), a sled.
- **Art play:** Two- and three-dimensional open-ended materials for imagination creativity.
- **Music play.** Child-safe wall mirrors, hand mirrors, dance costumes, streamers, drums and rhythm instruments, string and wind instruments, recordings, piano, autoharp, shakers.

For more details: *Let’s Talk Toddlers: A Practical Guide to High-Quality Teaching* (Redleaf Press).