

Building the Strengths of Curious, Fabulous, Rambunctious Toddlers With Primetime Teaching, Powerhouse Positive Guidance, and Purposeful Play

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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.

Where do you start? Meet essential needs.

- **Be attuned; authentically present.** Children show you what they feel, think, and need through body language, actions, and words. Be a detailed observer and documenter.
- **Love and nurture:** Use gentle patience and encouragement. “You are learning!”
- **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:** Exercise, nutrition, sleep, media protection.

Primetime Teaching

Primetime teaching is child-centered, responsive, and evaluative. It requires continual adaptation of the setting, interactions, and level of support to meet the needs of each child.

1. **Build on child development.** Recognize how much toddlers know and can do. Understand capabilities, strengths, interests, and asynchronous patterns. See CDC Milestones.
2. **Learn from children.** Become a skilled observer and recorder. Authentic assessment to observes, documents change over time, and identifies emerging skills.
3. **Respond to children.** Anticipate needs. Minimize frustration. Monitor stimulation. Adequately challenging experiences meet individual needs. Meet need for stimulation and rest.
4. **Use co-regulation.** Children require consistent support, with discerning evaluation of all factors that touch a child’s experience.
5. **Nurture through self-care.** Meals, diapering, toileting, napping, and dressing teach worth and honor for bodies and feelings that set lifetime patterns for self-care and care towards others.
6. **Respect boundaries.** Bodies, things, feelings, space, words, wants, needs. Ask permission.
7. **Ensure consistency:** Simple routines. Simple rules. Simple instructions. Competence and security grow through reasonable and predictable schedules, activities, ways of being, and expectations.
8. **Model with mini-lessons.** Show rather than “do for.” “To fit the cow inside the barn, you have to turn it like this. Here, you do it.” To open the latch, you pick this tiny hinge and pull it up. You try it.” This builds confidence, competence, and responsibility.
9. **Preparing spaces for children’s needs.** Spaces large enough for individual play. One truck on a shelf – spells disaster. Too many children in enclosed spaces – stress!
10. **Know and facilitate content area concepts.** Imbedding these in materials, activities, and conversations. *Know the early learning guidelines for your state.*

Prime-Time Conversations: Talking with children! This is the foundation of primetime teaching and facilitating play-based, child-centered play.

- **Respond to a child's cues.** Notice what a child does or wants. The toddler reaches for a ball. You respond, "Oh you want the red ball. Here is the red 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 a blanket?"
- **Initiate serve and return, back-and-forth conversation.** Describe what you see. Narrate events, effective strategies, and children's actions. "You are working hard to pull the chair over. You used your strong muscles to pick up the chair. Is your doll going to sit on the chair?" Invite interaction with questions.
- **Engage in joint attention.** Share focused positive emotions and conversation. "The red geranium's leaves are turning brown. Can you help me pick them off? When we are finished, we can fill the watering can and give the geranium a drink."
- **Add on information.** A child says, "My block." "Yes, that is your red block. Can you balance it on top of the skyscraper?" A child says, "It's in the house." You say, "Yes, the caterpillar is inside the cocoon. It feels warm and soft inside the cocoon." A child says, "Tiara is crying." You respond, "Yes, Tiara is crying. She feels sad her momma left. Let's invite her to read a book. Can you find a book for Tiara?"
- **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 red cap, it's called a cardinal." Avoid pronouns and non-descriptive words, like, "Put it over there." Instead, say, "You can put the big horse book on top of the cart."
- **Ask open ended questions.** "Tell me about your shopping trip." "What do you think the boy is doing?" "What do you see in the picture?" "How did the dog get 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 a muffin, ask, "Is it a pancake?" (They will laugh and say no!) "Is it a popsicle?" They will say no. "Is it a muffin?" They will say "yes!" Then you add, "What kind of muffin are you eating? Yes. It is a yummy blueberry muffin."
- **Use "fancy" vocabulary.** Instead of, "Oh that was so kind." Say, "You showed lovely manners!" It is amazing how proud children are of the words they use. Instead of, "It's a fire truck," Say, "This 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 kittens stuck in a tree." "This is an aerial ladder. Workers use it to climb into windows." Children will be wide-eyed as they imagine these adventures and ideas.

Co-teachers, leaders, and coaches can work together to focus on high-quality language interactions, essential for positive development.

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 to ensure children 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?”

6. Keep it simple. Young children 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 my 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 webpage www.mariemasterson.com for resources including book lists for toddlers, the checklist for facilitating play, and a four-page handout with detailed information about effective positive guidance and strengthening competence in toddlers.

Playful Learning: Read more in *Let's Talk Toddlers*, published by Redleaf Press. **Set a purpose and know the goal** and skills for each activity and interaction. Materials are just the first step. 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 include jungle, explorer, community helper, zoo keepers, veterinarian, rescue workers, restaurant play, shopping, beach, camping, and travel.
- **Loose parts:** Tools of all kinds, natural objects, material bits, paper and fabric, sensory tools and materials (rollers, brushes, sand paper, kitchen utensils), and container play.
- **Cardboard boxes:** Consider spaceships, tunnels, trains, canoes, houses, castles, tree houses, garages, farms, igloos, and boats.
- **Construction activities:** Complex block play with wooden unit and hollow blocks.
- **Fine-motor play:** Magnetic sets, interlocking blocks, brick and peg sets, rod and tube sets.
- **Logic play:** Stacking toys, shape sorting, graduated puzzles, geoboards, tangrams, puzzles, mixed-material design (funnels, tubes, paper, and three-dimensional materials).
- **Water play:** Tables and tubs for car and baby washing, themed play, measuring, tubes and funnels, waterwheels, paddles, boats, sponges, sink and float toys.
- **Sand play:** Indoor and outdoor with 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, cooking and homemaking, special wreaths, decorations, festivals, songs, and celebrations.
- **Sensory play:** Molding materials with pattern tools, texture play, scents, foam, and container play with sifters, shakers, tongs, spoons and pans.
- **Helping activities:** Cleaning, mopping, sweeping, dusting, sorting, folding, stacking,
- **Science and nature play:** Natural objects (seed pods, pinecones, bark, branch cookies, shells), growing plants and flowers, classroom pets, tools (magnifying glasses, containers, tweezers, magnets), bugs and bug houses, bird feeders, ramps and gears.
- **Pre-writing play:** Multiple pads for list-making, writing letters and cards with envelopes and stamps, clipboards with attached pens, notebooks, loose paper, a variety of writing tools.
- **Prop boxes:** Store items together - A plastic sled, balled sock snowballs, hats and mittens for snow tub play, books like Jan Brett's *The Mitten* and Jack Ezra Keats' *The Snowy Day*.
- **Art play:** Include open-ended two- and three-dimensional art materials/tools for collage, mobile, construction, painting, and design. Include free-standing easels with spaces to paint.
- **Music play:** Include child-safe wall mirrors, hand mirrors, dance costumes, streamers, drums, rhythm instruments, string and wind instruments, recordings, piano, autoharp.