



Chapter 17 — Socialization and Guidance with Infants and Toddlers

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Socialization and Guidance with Infants and Toddlers

By Janis Keyser, M.A.

“Mine!” “No-o-o-o!” “Wha-a-a-!” What do they want?

When we understand the reasons for infant and toddler behavior, we can respond to it in ways that support children’s healthy growth and development and simultaneously decrease our worry and frustration. Infants and toddlers are working hard to understand their new feelings and ideas, to figure out their worlds, and to learn *how* to interact with other children and adults.

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Most infant and toddler behavior that is difficult for adults is part of healthy development. A crying baby is using the best tool she has to communicate her needs to her caregiver. An older infant who is mad because an adult took the pen away from him is demonstrating that he now remembers what he is interested in and won't be easily distracted with another unrelated toy. A toddler who bites another child might be trying to figure out how to express her frustration or checking out her friend's feelings.

Here are some assumptions underlying effective socialization and guidance:

- ❖ Every interaction with a child is an opportunity to teach something; and every time we interact with a child, we are teaching something, whether we realize it or not — even during conflict or difficult interactions.
- ❖ The purpose of guidance is to help children learn about themselves and to teach them successful ways to interact with others. The purpose is never to punish, scare, or hurt a child.
- ❖ Behind every behavior is a healthy impulse. Even if the behavior itself is hurtful, it still makes sense from the child's perspective and demon-

strates some underlying competence. The child may be trying to express an idea or a feeling, ask a question, test a hypothesis, or connect with another person. From the child's perspective, his behavior is the best way he knows to get his needs met or communicate his message.

- ❖ If we can figure out the child's perspective or point of view, we can help her learn positive, safe, and successful behaviors to express herself and get her needs met.

Here are some actions to consider when helping children learn:

Look for the reason for the behavior you want to change. Observe when it happens, talk to coworkers and parents, and think about child development. Ask yourself, "What is it this child is trying to accomplish?"

Let the child know you want to understand what she is trying to express or figure out. "It looks like you are interested in how that pen works." "I hear you crying. I'm listening so I can understand you." "It looks like you both really want that truck."

Provide information to the child. "I can't let you play with this pen, because it

has a sharp end that could poke you.” “The water in the toilet isn’t clean to play with.” “When you hit him, it hurts.” Even if the child can’t fully understand the information you give him, he feels respected when you explain the reason to him.

Give the child a positive limit. Tell the child what you want her to do, instead of what you don’t want her to do. “Give me the pen,” rather than, “Don’t play with the pen.” Children don’t usually hear the “don’t” at the beginning of sentences.

Suggest another way for the child to express himself. Instead of distracting, “Come over here and we’ll do a puppet show,” suggest an alternative for the child to express his idea or do his research. “You look so interested in splashing. The toilet isn’t a safe place for you to play, but here’s a tub of water for you to splash in.” The child is not only more

likely to cooperate, but he also gets a chance to feel good about his idea.

Offer the child a choice. Toddlers need practice making their own decisions. We can give them that practice by setting up two good choices from which they can pick. “It’s time to change your diaper. Do you want me to carry you, or do you want to walk over?”

Ensure safety. Always tell children what you are doing when you move them or touch them. “I’m going to pick you up and take you back to the play area.” “I’m going to stop your hand from hitting Niko.” With infants and toddlers, we often need to intervene physically to help them move or stop their bodies. It is essential that we do this in a loving, clear, and informative manner.

Follow through and anticipate. Older infants and toddlers are good at remem-

Positive limits...	Rather than negative
<i>Keep your feet on the floor. Climb on the stairs.</i>	<i>Don't climb on the table.</i>
<i>Food stays on the table.</i>	<i>Don't throw your food.</i>
<i>Be gentle with your friend. "Ask her to 'Move.'"</i>	<i>Don't hit her.</i>
<i>You can ask him for a turn with the toy.</i>	<i>Don't grab toys.</i>

bering what they were doing. They will often go right back to the activity you just stopped. Observe, stay close, and help them redirect their ideas in a safe way, again (and again) if necessary.

Model the behavior you want children to learn. Your tone, body, and voice convey as much meaning as your words. Strive to be clear, firm, loving, understanding, serious, calm, optimistic, but never punitive. Your gentle touch with children lets them know you respect them and

provides a model for how they can touch their friends.

Avoid punishment, shame, fear, or belittling. These undermine the trust and self-confidence children need to learn positive self-control. When children are punished, they learn to fear the person they are supposed to trust the most. Effective socialization and guidance require the trust, comfort, and confidence that come from a supportive, nurturing relationship.