



Rich Responses Help Babies Learn and Thrive

Linda Gillespie and Rebecca Parlakian

Babies learn in the context of relationships. The way we teachers respond to infants and toddlers—as they play, babble and talk, fall asleep, eat, have tantrums, run and climb, protest and push away—shapes what they learn and how they see themselves as individuals. Babies and toddlers figure out their place in the world by watching and listening to us, by staying fully attuned to our way of being with them.

ZERO TO THREE's 2008 edition of *Caring for Infants & Toddlers in Groups: Developmentally Appropriate Practice* highlights how infant/toddler teachers can respond in supportive and nurturing ways during common caregiving situations. The following excerpt, showing two examples of positive responses, explores the role of thoughtful interactions as a means of ensuring the quality of a baby's or toddler's experience in care.

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A mobile infant, arriving in her mother's arms, clings and cries when her infant care teacher approaches.

An appropriate response

Her teacher greets the infant and her mother. Looking at the child, she says, "You love Mommy, I know. Today it's going to be hard to say bye-bye," and to the mother, "How are you doing? Do you feel sad too?" Mother and teacher talk about separation issues. As they talk, they watch for signs the infant is relaxing, and nod to each other—it's time. There are hugs, more tears, but the baby is ready to let her infant care teacher embrace her and to wave bye-bye.

Reflections

Mobile infants are able to hold an image of loved ones in their minds and they can be very unhappy when a parent leaves them, knowing that mom or dad is still out there somewhere. This baby is still too young to understand that her mother will come back every time she leaves. The infant teacher understands this normal developmental phase and is able to support both baby and mother through difficult separations.

What is this baby learning?

First and foremost, the baby in this vignette is learning to trust the people who care for her. Even though it might be easier on mom if she "snuck out," this action could make the baby feel less trustful and more anxious—that at any moment, a loved and special person might disappear. Infant-toddler teachers can help parents understand the value of saying a "good good-bye."

The baby is also learning about feelings: her own, her mother's, and her caregiver's. She is getting the message that it is okay to be sad sometimes, but that she can trust loving caregivers to help her feel better. These experiences set the foundation for later mastery of emotional regulation and self-control. Moments like these also emphasize to the baby that she is important and loved, and worthy of caring attention. This builds her



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confidence and self-esteem, and helps her establish a trusting, secure relationship with both her mother and teachers.

A toddler, joining a group playing with large blocks, pushes down a child who is in her way.

An appropriate response

Her teacher quickly picks up the fallen child to soothe her, and tells the toddler in a firm voice, "Hold my hand. Pushing hurts. See, Alisha fell down. Let's help her up and then find some blocks so you can play too."



Reflections

This teacher maintains a calm demeanor as he helps both toddlers to manage their feelings. Taking the hand of the child who pushed helps direct the child's attention to the teacher as he firmly sets a limit on the child's behavior. He then engages the "pusher" in comforting the child who was pushed down, providing a moment's lesson in empathy. The teacher also responds empathically to

the child who wanted to join the builders and models problem solving by settling her in with blocks as well.

What is this toddler learning?

The toddler in this scenario is learning some important lessons. First she is learning that there are limits to her behavior. This type of limit setting helps toddlers feel safe and also nurtures self-control and self-regulation skills. The toddler is also learning how to express emotions appropriately. Frustration and the desire to play cannot be communicated through pushing, but rather through words and pro-social actions (such as choosing

some blocks and sitting down with the group). She is also developing empathy when the teacher prompts her to check if Alisha is okay. Finally, this toddler is learning that her needs are important, as the teacher validates her desire to play and helps her to find some blocks so that she may join the group.

These short scenarios show how our everyday

interactions with infants and toddlers can teach them so much about who they are. When teachers take the time to respond respectfully and thoughtfully, babies and young children learn and thrive.

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Bilingual Research Journal—Published three times a year, this journal offers full articles from past issues online. The site also links to several bilingual and policy resources. <http://brj.asu.edu>

Center for Applied Linguistics (CAL)—This organization conducts research on topics including English language learners and offers free resources on dual language learners, literacy education, and assessment. www.cal.org/index.html

Center on the Social and Emotional Foundations for Early Learning—CSEFL works to promote the social-emotional development and school readiness of children birth through age 5. It offers resources for different age groups and for families and educators. www.vanderbilt.edu/csefel

Division for Early Childhood (DEC)—The Division for Early Childhood is one of 17 divisions of the Council for Exceptional Children. It is focused on improving education for children with disabilities, gifted children, and children with exceptionalities. The site offers resources for educators and parents, and publishes two journals focused on children with special needs. www.dec-sped.org/index.aspx

Lee y serás—An early literacy development initiative developed by Scholastic, National Council of La Raza, and the Verizon Foundation, Lee y serás engages parents and communities to help reading achievement among Latino youth. The site is available in Spanish as well as English, and the graphics engage children of all ages and learning levels. www.leeyseras.net/site/main.html

LDOonline—Touted as the world’s leading Web site for learning disabilities and ADHD, LDOonline continually updates its sources and references to give parents and educators the most recent information on learning disabilities. www.ldonline.org

Los Niños en Su Casa—The Spanish-language counterpart to A Place of Our Own (www.aplaceofourown.org), this Web site has activities, resources, guides, discussion boards, and professional development resources. www.losninosencasaca.org

National Association for Bilingual Education (NABE)—With more than 20,000 members and affiliates in 25 states, this is the largest organization focused on bilingual learners and bilingual education professionals. NABE publishes a news magazine and a research journal. www.nabe.org

National Council of La Raza—The largest national Hispanic civil rights and advocacy organization in the United States, this organization includes direct services to community-based organizations as well as advocacy for improved policy. www.nclr.org

National Dissemination Center for Children with Disabilities—With a multitude of resources for families, caregivers, communities, and educators, this center offers a Web site that stays updated with recent research and blog posts. www.nichcy.org/Pages/Home.aspx

National Early Childhood Technical Assistance Center—NECTAC works to ensure that young children with disabilities and their families receive the right assistance and information. The organization offers weekly eNotes on relevant news items and an extensive resource contact list. www.nectac.org

ZERO TO THREE—This national organization has a section for parents with information to help them make wise parenting choices for infants and toddlers, and a section for early childhood professionals, offering research-based resources. www.zerotothree.org



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