



Best Practices

Young toddlers are active learners. Walking, jumping, climbing, balancing, and manipulating objects are not only skills to master, they are also tools for finding things out. Curious toddlers may touch and taste, pull, throw, and climb—just to see what might happen or what they can discover. But they are still learning what is safe and acceptable. Tuned-in educators can show toddlers that they value their curiosity, while also helping them to explore and interact in safe ways. Educators can provide interesting learning opportunities while also helping toddlers to understand the potential consequences of their actions and to accept necessary limits.

As they pursue their curiosity, young toddlers will want to do things by themselves and in their own way. They are developing a sense of *autonomy*, a sense that they can make choices and direct their own behavior. At the same time, they also need a lot of emotional support and guidance. Educators can give young toddlers the structure they need to feel secure and behave appropriately. Familiar items in familiar places, simple daily routines and activity patterns, and trusted adults who help them manage their feelings help toddlers to be confident, active learners who are proud of what they know and can do.

Help Toddlers Express Themselves in Positive Ways

Young toddlers are active, inquisitive learners who often want to choose their own activities and to do things for themselves. They are full of curiosity, energy, and strong feelings. They are just beginning to learn to control their outbursts of frustration or excitement and may need help to express themselves in positive ways. Toddlers like to feel in charge and in control—they want to make choices for themselves.

Sharing a coveted item or taking turns is particularly difficult for young toddlers. *Mine* is a new and important word. From a toddler's point of view: "If I have it, it's mine. If I had it and put it down, it's mine. If I want it, it's mine." But young toddlers are also capable of sensitivity, kindness, and generosity. A skilled educator can tap into these qualities as she helps toddlers learn to resolve inevitable conflicts with other children.

- **Model empathy.** Give toddlers words for their strong feelings and comfort them when they are upset. Acknowledge a child's own feelings as you help him recognize what another child may be feeling. When children disagree, help them to calm down, recognize each other's feelings and desires, and find a solution that makes them both happy.
- **Offer simple choices.** Give toddlers time to say or show what they want. For example, an educator might ask, "Would you like to carry the bucket?" or "Would you like the red shovel or the green shovel?" Adults tend to use more specific language when they offer

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a child a choice instead of telling him what to do, and toddlers are more likely to use language as they respond. In addition, a toddler is often more willing to do what an adult requests when he has made the choice on his own.

- **Use positive guidance strategies.** Young toddlers are still learning safe and appropriate behavior. They need limits and they need to test them. But educators don't like to say "no" all the time, and toddlers don't like to hear it. In fact, research shows that toddlers learn less language when they hear mostly what *not* to do. When adults use *positive guidance* strategies (such as encouraging words, questions, explanations, and teaching polite, kind, and safe behavior), they use richer language and invite responses. When toddlers hear "yes" more often than "no," their language develops more fully and more quickly, and they learn to use their words to express their feelings and ask for what they want.

How can educators help toddlers who are overly excited, upset, angry, or frustrated express their feelings appropriately?

- Educators can:
 - Acknowledge the child's feelings.
 - Give the child words for what he seems to be trying to express.
 - Physically comfort, support, and contain the child gently and affectionately.
 - Offer the child a choice to do something. (For example, in the video Kristin asks, "Do you want to hold the grapes?")

What benefits do toddlers gain when educators offer them choices?

- Toddlers gain the following benefits:
 - They hear and use more language.
 - They feel respected as individuals.
 - They strengthen their relationship with the educator.

How can educators help toddlers recognize and consider each other's feelings and desires?

- Educators can:
 - Acknowledge the child's own feelings.

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- Point out or describe how another child may feel or what he seems to want. (For example, in the video Eileen says, "He's waiting for a turn.")
- Show pride and pleasure when commenting upon children's sensitivity to others ("Oh! You knew that Kai was looking for a yellow egg!"), and tell families about these special moments.
- Help children to acknowledge each other's kind acts.
- Encourage budding friendships by giving children chances to play together in their favorite ways, and tell families about their children's growing friendships.

How can educators help young toddlers to share or take turns with toys?

- Educators can:
 - Provide enough duplicate or similar items so that children do not have to share or take turns all of the time.
 - Be empathetic. Acknowledge a child's strong desire to keep, take, or hoard toys, before trying to enlist her cooperation.
 - Enlist children's cooperation by offering choices, within limits. ("When you're all done with the egg, could you give it to Kai?")
 - Remind a child of another child's feelings. ("He's waiting for a turn.")
 - Provide options for solving the problem.
 - Acknowledge kindness and sharing. ("That was really nice of you to consider Kai.")
 - Play turn-taking games, such as handing items back and forth or taking turns throwing things into a basket.
 - Encourage trading one toy for another rather than taking turns or sharing.
 - Offer toys such as large balls and rocking boats that are more fun to use with a partner.
 - Give the child who is waiting a sand glass or windup kitchen timer that will hold her interest. Over time, children can learn to work timers and to use them on their own.

How can educators support young toddlers' considerate behavior?

- Educators can:
 - Model considerate behavior in their relationships with other adults.
 - Model considerate behavior as they interact with children.
 - Teach children words that describe feelings; help them put their feelings into words.
 - Teach polite words and actions.
 - Teach children simple words (or signs) to use when another child does something they don't like.
 - Provide a comfortable, predictable, low-stress environment and a rhythm to the day, respecting each child's unique needs for stimulation, relaxation, and a balance of active and quiet activities. (Conflicts are most likely to occur when children are tired, hungry, or overexcited. It is especially hard for young toddlers to express themselves in positive ways and be considerate of others when they are feeling stressed.)

Expand Toddlers' Language as You Talk, Read, and Play Together

Language explodes during the young toddler period. At first, children may use actions, gestures, signs, and babble talk to communicate and say few, if any, words. They understand a lot more than they are able to say, however, and may show this by following simple directions. Soon, they will communicate with single words, then put words together, and then finally speak (or sign) in full sentences—often in more than one language! To support this growth, it is especially important for educators and families to provide young toddlers with many language-building opportunities.

- **Talk *with* children and give them time to respond.** A young toddler may take up to 5 seconds to put her thoughts into words. Young toddlers also need time to process what you say. Use short, simple sentences, especially when the child is expected to follow a direction, respond to a question, or learn a new word. But toddlers also need to hear more complex language that stretches their abilities. A tuned-in educator can add just enough challenge by listening intently to a child's verbal and nonverbal communications, putting the child's communications into fuller sentences, and building on the child's ideas.

- **Use interesting words and phrases that will expand toddlers' vocabularies.** Most young toddlers are eager to learn new words. In fact, a word for “What’s that?” or “Look at that?” is often among the first 50 words children say. Pairing new words with actions, signs, pictures, or real objects helps to make their meaning clear. Repeating the words themselves helps toddlers to remember them. When families and educators keep each other informed about a toddler’s new words, they can better understand what he may be trying to say. They can also help the toddler to hear and use a word in different situations and to connect it with a range of experiences and ideas.
- **Use books and songs to extend language and concepts.** Books and songs introduce words, concepts, information, and language forms that children may not otherwise encounter. Books often include unusual words or phrasings, descriptive language, and names for items that children may not interact with in their everyday worlds. Popular toddler songs often highlight categories such as body parts, colors, and farm animals, and concepts such as counting, directions, and opposites. Educators can also make up new song verses or put new words to familiar tunes so that children can practice new words, concepts, and actions.
- **Read books one-to-one or in small groups, in ways that encourage active involvement.** The real power of reading with toddlers is in the conversations that a book sparks. When educators read with individual children or very small groups, children can point out and name pictures, act out story events, ask and answer questions, repeat words and phrases that are fun to say, and, with an educator’s help, make connections to related experiences.
- **Talk, read, and play with children in *all* of their languages.** Young toddlers can learn two or more languages if they have frequent opportunities to both hear and use them. Learning more than one language can help toddlers stay connected with family and community members and traditions. It also contributes to skills like memory, focus, and flexible thinking.

These rich language experiences build a strong foundation for the rapid language and intellectual growth that happens during the next two years.

How can educators help young toddlers who are just beginning to use words to communicate? How can they expand their language?

- Educators can:
 - Listen patiently and respond to anything that sounds like a word.
 - Ask a child to show what she means if she does not have the words to say it.
 - Respond with words to what it seems a child is trying to say.

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- Repeat what the child communicated, and add a little bit more information.
- Pair words with actions, objects, pictures, or context clues that make their meaning clear.
- Use an engaging voice and facial expressions to show interest in what a toddler has to say.
- Speak clearly, using simple sentences and checking to make sure that a toddler is following along and seems to understand.
- Use rich language in situations where it comes naturally. Include words that may be beyond typical toddler vocabulary (such as *scrub*, *penguin*, and *delivery person*).
- Give toddlers time to repeat new words.
- Find many opportunities for one-on-one conversation and language expansion.
- Extend conversations through several exchanges. Build on a toddler's ideas.
- Stay in close touch with families so both educators and families know the words or signs a toddler uses and the experiences he may want to talk about (in his home language and in the educator's, if they are different).

How can educators share books with young toddlers in ways that encourage their active involvement and expand their language?

- Educators can:
 - Read with children one-to-one or in small groups so that children can ask questions, actively participate, and engage in back-and-forth conversation.
 - Let toddlers choose books to be read aloud.
 - Read favorite books over and over so that children become familiar with them.
 - Select books that depict or describe actions toddlers might want to imitate or silly rhymes they might want to repeat.
 - Act out words or parts of the story together with children.
 - Read with expression and use different voices and sound effects.
 - Pause to let toddlers repeat or fill in words and sound effects they know.
 - Name pictures that toddlers point to, ask about, or seem interested in, and ask them to point to pictures or details as they are named.
 - Give toddlers a chance to repeat new words and phrases.

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- Ask open-ended questions about the pictures, characters, or story events.
- Draw connections between pictures, words, and events in the books and children's experiences.
- Encourage and respond to toddlers' questions.
- Talk about characters' feelings.
- Ask toddlers what they think and build on their ideas.
- Remember that reading doesn't have to happen while sitting down, at circle time, or even inside. Educators and toddlers can even make up the words. With toddlers, books are springboards for conversation and play. Use them frequently and have fun together!

Help Toddlers Explore How Things Relate to Each Other

As they play with toys, tools, containers, and interesting materials, young toddlers explore and discover relationships. They might notice that a small pan can fit inside a large pan and that the larger pan can hold more plastic eggs than the smaller pan. They might discover that two paint colors combine to make a third color.

Following their own agendas, young toddlers may line up all of the toy cars or group stuffed animals into families with parents and babies. As they fit simple puzzles together or figure out how to cover a large interlocking block with smaller ones, they discover and confirm how things can be whole, in pieces, and back together again. They are learning how the world works. Educators can support these discoveries by providing appropriate materials, noticing what toddlers focus on, talking with them about what they are doing or trying to figure out, asking questions to guide their exploration and thinking, and occasionally offering guidance or a new challenge.

- **Offer opportunities for children to fit, compare, sort, combine, and count things.** Provide puzzles such as shape sorters, ring stackers, nesting cups, and pots with lids. Help toddlers notice what is bigger or smaller, what fits inside what, and what can hold more. Offer interesting combinations of materials, tools, and containers, and talk about what toddlers do with them, how they solve problems they encounter, and what they discover. Let them mix materials, such as different colored paints or sand and water, and discover what new things they can make. Help them notice relationships by talking about how things are alike or go together. (For example, "Daffodils and buttercups are yellow flowers." Or, "You found a big truck and a smaller one. Can you drive them to the garage?")
- **Celebrate children's discoveries.** Praise can feel empty when the agenda belongs to the educator and the goal is following directions or finding a right answer. But young

toddlers beam with delight when educators they love share their pride and excitement at something they have done or discovered themselves. Experiences like these build toddlers' sense of themselves as competent explorers and communicators and confident, self-directed, intentional learners.

How can educators help young toddlers to explore science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) concepts and to make discoveries about how the world works?

- Educators can:
 - Offer toys and materials that behave in interesting ways when acted upon; for example, by winding up, pushing buttons, combining, scooping, sifting, blowing, pounding, stretching, rolling, and so on.
 - Put out a few materials that enable children to explore a particular idea, such as motion and propulsion, color mixing, emptying and filling, size and shape, quantity, floating and sinking, or how materials can change states.
 - Display learning materials in an attractive, orderly way so that children can find what they want to use and get things themselves.
 - Use outdoor time for focused exploration as well as for active play. For example, toddlers might make “mud soup,” drop pebbles in puddles, send different objects down a slide, or walk across surfaces such as leaf piles, snow, and soft sand.

How can educators use language to support and extend young toddlers' discoveries, without interrupting their autonomous exploration?

- Educators can:
 - Approach children's explorations with curiosity to find out what they might be thinking.
 - Watch, wait, and wonder. Ask, “What is this child trying to do or find out?” Then find a way to join the play that builds on the child's agenda.
 - Take care not to impose an agenda when offering help or starting conversation. For example, don't quiz a child about the color of the cups that he is stacking or using to “feed” his dinosaur.
 - Put words to what children communicate with actions or signs, and expand their single and simplified sentences with a bit more language and information.
 - Use specific and interesting vocabulary to refer to objects and actions.
 - Encourage and answer children's questions.

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- Ask genuine questions, whose answers you really want to know, about what children are doing, trying to do, creating, or finding out, even if children can only answer with actions or single words.
- Offer an additional challenge or material; show children how to use tools.
- Celebrate children's discoveries with them. Show pride in their accomplishments and use specific language to describe what they did.

How can educators help young toddlers feel good about themselves?

- Educators can:
 - Show that they value children's opinions as they engage them in conversation.
 - Show that they share their delight in children's discoveries and accomplishments.
 - Give children time to master self-chosen tasks and skills as they repeat activities that they find engaging over and over again.
 - Offer challenges that are just a step above what children can do, so that they can succeed through their own efforts.
 - Give children opportunities to be helpful, such as getting an item for another child or helping to clean up a spill.
 - Be specific with praise, and focus on what children have done on their own initiative rather than at the educator's request.
 - Use positive guidance strategies to build children's self-control, language, and social skills, along with their confidence and self-esteem.

Glossary

autonomy: ability to make decisions for oneself and direct one's own behavior

empathy: ability to recognize, share, understand, and consider another person's feelings

positive guidance: helping a child learn good behaviors and self control

View the self-paced video workshop at <http://resourcesforearlylearning.org/educators>.