



BELIEVE, WATCH, ACT!

Promoting Prosocial Behavior in Infants and Toddlers

Linda Groves Gillespie and Amy Hunter

Janice, a toddler teacher, purchases plastic bangle bracelets at the dollar store to share with her group of six toddlers. She buys enough bracelets so each child can have five to keep in a container.

The toddlers start exploring their bracelets, playing alongside each other. Janice watches closely to see how each child uses the materials. Josh puts the bracelets on his arm and pushes them all the way up. When he has all the bracelets on his arm, he looks around for more. He sees that Sasha has some bracelets; then he reaches over, takes her bracelets, and starts putting them on his arm. Sasha looks at Josh and protests, "Mine!"

FACED WITH THIS SITUATION, the first reaction for many of us might be to stop Josh from taking Sasha's bracelets. That inclination could be based on a belief that people should not

take things from others without asking. Most of us have a strong need to promote fairness and equity in our classrooms. Our training may have taught us that we should manage children's conflicts and work to control their behavior.

Based on the belief that Josh is doing something wrong that needs to be corrected, his teacher might say something like this:

"Stop, Josh, you can't take things from others. Those are Sasha's bracelets. You have your own bracelets. See?" And she points to the bracelets on his arm.

But what if Janice has a different set of beliefs that drive her actions? Instead of seeing Josh's actions as negative, what if she sees an opportunity to support Josh's goal of putting all the bracelets on his arm and at the same time to encourage the other toddlers to also support him in accomplishing that goal?

If Janice believes that children are naturally curious about each other and want to connect with and support each other, she might act on her belief by intervening in this way:

"Sasha, let's watch Josh and see what he is going to do." Sasha stops fussing and looks at Josh as he puts another bracelet on his arm. "Josh is trying to fill up his whole arm with bracelets," Janice says.

Sasha looks at Josh and then at her bracelets and gives Josh one of her bracelets. The other toddlers begin watching and sharing their bracelets with Josh, until his whole arm is full.

"Wow!" says Janice, "Look what you all did. Josh's whole arm is filled with the bracelets!" All the toddlers look pleased. Janice takes a photo to document how they worked together.

In the preceding examples, Josh could come away with two very different feelings about himself. In the first, he may feel shame in doing something wrong and frustration in not being

able to try out his idea. In the second scenario, he may feel competent as his interests and ideas are acknowledged and supported.

Additionally, Sasha and the other children would likely come away with different understandings about Josh and themselves in these two instances. In the first, they may see Josh as a bully and someone to be avoided. They may also see themselves as needing and wanting protection. In the replay of the situation, they might see Josh as creative and interesting—someone to join with in playing—and see their own role in helping him reach his goal.

The positive outcome achieved in the second scenario is the result of this teacher's understanding of how young children develop and the meaning of their behaviors. She makes it her goal to observe children closely. As their teacher, she is curious about what they are doing and why, and she takes advantage of opportunities to encourage the children to be interested in and positively interact with one another and support each other's ideas.

When Janice sees what Josh is trying to do, she acts in a caring way by alerting the other toddlers about his intention and interest. She capitalizes on the toddlers' inherent curiosity and interest in one another to engage them in Josh's idea. Her skilled interaction

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Illustration by Melanie Hope Greenberg.



Center on the Social and Emotional Foundations for Early Learning

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not only helps Josh complete his task and feel competent but also provides the other toddlers with an opportunity to contribute prosocially to Josh's task by giving him their bracelets.

When we see children as capable of caring and supporting relationships with each other and we support their capacity for those relationships, they carry that self-image with them into the world.

By encouraging prosocial babies, Mary Benson McMullen and colleagues (2009, 22) suggest that "caregivers and teachers who care for the youngest children play a powerful role, alongside families, in contributing to the emotional well-being and social development of babies; their impact may lead to positive or negative long-term outcomes for children." What we adults believe about children and how we act on those beliefs matters and can influence how children see themselves now and in the future.

A final note

Seeing children as capable of caring for and supporting each other does not mean teachers and families should never correct or redirect their behavior. Quite the contrary, children need sensitive, caring adults who can set reasonable limits with compassion and understanding.

It is important to carefully consider our responses to toddlers' behavior. It takes reflection, skill, and practice to foster behavior that promotes positive interactions within the toddler group while still maintaining the physical

and psychological safety of all the children. By learning how to promote these positive interactions, teachers can help young children develop social skills that last a lifetime.

THINK ABOUT IT

What beliefs do you have about babies' and toddlers' abilities to support and connect with each other, and how do those beliefs guide your actions? In the above scenario, which teaching approach do you identify with? Which approach do you want to use?

TRY IT

In her article "Seeing Children's Eagerness for Relationships," teacher educator Deb Curtis offers these three suggestions (2009, 10–12):

Notice and marvel at children's positive interactions with each other.

Sasha's teacher might say, "Wow, I really like how you helped Josh put all the bracelets on his arm. His arm is all covered up now!"

Coach children to offer their ideas and competence.

A teacher might ask the toddlers, "What can we do so Josh can get all the bracelets on his arm?"

Use documentation to show children their positive social interactions.

Teachers can document and tell stories about the children's kind and supportive actions. For example, Sasha's teacher could say, "Remember yesterday, when we were playing with the bracelets and you helped Josh put all the bracelets on his arm? Wasn't that fun? Look, I took a picture of everyone with Josh, showing all the bracelets on his arm!"

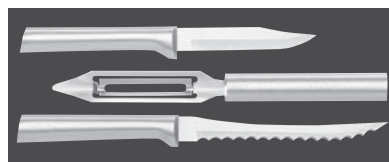
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