

Positive  
Guidance in  
the Early Years:  
Using  
Developmentally  
Appropriate  
Strategies

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Toddlers



## Maximize Your Influence to Make Toddler Mornings Meaningful

“Doggy!” says Anna, as she presses a cookie cutter into the playdough. “Yes,” responds Ms. Garrett, who is sitting at the low table with the children. “You made a purple dog! Is he hungry? Let’s make some food for his dish.” She notices Jacob rolling a ball between his hands. “Are you making a snake? Can you make him wiggle into his cave?” She sees that Sam has just arrived. “Come and join us. I have a bowl of red playdough for you.”

Across the room, Ms. Landeros welcomes the children. Hugging Sofia, she says, “I’ve been waiting for you! Here is a basket of books about kittens.” Tucking a stuffed kitten into Sofia’s arms, she says, “You can read to Kitty with your mom.” Sofia’s mom reads to her for a few minutes before giving Sofia a hug good-bye and an “I love you!” sign.

**C**OMING TO SCHOOL IN THE morning is an important event for toddlers. Whether in family or center-based care, the way children feel about their transition influences their experiences throughout the day. Feeling safe and secure saying good-bye to a parent and joining the teacher and children in the classroom are two of the most important lessons of the day. When this transition goes well, there are significant benefits to the child, to the family, and to teachers. Making the most of this important time leads to a successful day for everyone.

Morning drop-off is the time to strengthen the framework of caring with families. A positive transition builds trust between families and teachers, and helps children feel secure (Brazelton & Sparrow 2006). Teachers can help parents develop a special drop-off routine that works for them. Some might want to join their child for a

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few minutes to support positive engagement. Playing with a puzzle together before blowing a kiss, giving a secret sign, or whispering in the child's ear makes the leaving time easier for parent and child. When families see their child happy and involved in activities, they leave with a sense of confidence.

## As you focus on each child's positive characteristics, you will encourage families to share your strengths-based view of the child's potential.

As toddlers arrive, they leave the attachment of the parent and make the emotional shift to the teacher as their home base (Ahnert, Pinquart, & Lamb 2006). This safe transition helps children relax and feel welcomed into the classroom community (Honig, Miller, & Church 2007). They adjust more easily to upcoming routines and activities (Howes & Shivers 2006; Bergin & Bergin 2009). Sensitive, responsive interactions with teachers activate good feelings, and consistent routines help children in calming themselves and self-regulation (Breslin 2005; Thomason & La Paro 2009). They take their cues from the reassurance of their families and teacher as they join the rhythm of the classroom.

### Using morning transition strategies

Teachers maximize their influence at this important inflection point—the point at which their focused attention will have positive results that last all day. The following seven strategies help teachers welcome and engage toddlers and meet their unique developmental needs.

**The child comes first.** Find multiple ways to connect with children. Get to know them well, and show them that you care. Help them discover their unique strengths and special qualities. As you focus on each child's positive characteristics, you will encourage families to share your strengths-based view of the child's potential (Seda 2007; Zarate 2007).

- When families arrive, make individualized, meaningful connections. Welcome each child with encouraging words: “Good morning, Alexander. I loved reading with you yesterday. I have a special book waiting for you.” Also support the child's connection with the family member: “I notice the way Jolanda laughs like you. I can see how you enjoy each other.”

- Share caring words that soothe and calm: “I've missed you. I love seeing your smile.” Communicate nurturing words in the children's home language.
- Connect through items the child brings: “Is teddy bear coming to school with you?” This redirects the child's attention away from the separation and serves as a bridge to a waiting activity: “You and your teddy bear can toss the beanbags together.”
- Ask families to wait until later to ask extended questions, so you can focus on children as they enter. Later you can text or email the parent to answer the question or to set up a time to meet. Keeping communication open helps you stay responsive to issues and concerns, and find out what works best for each child.

**Nurturing 15 minutes.** The first 15 minutes of the day provide key opportunities to nurture children. Focus on involving children in meaningful play, bonding, and learning activities (Early et al. 2010). Children respond positively when they sense love and respect on the part of an adult who matters to them (Fuller, Gasko, & Anguiano 2010; NAEYC 2010).

- Spend a few private moments with every child. Connect with them at their eye level to create a caring bridge of focused attention. Talk to—rather than about—them.
- Smile! Children scan for facial reassurance. Your emotional connection releases positive body chemicals that increase children's relaxation (Wexler 2006; McCrory, De Brito, & Viding 2010).
- Pay attention to children's verbal and physical cues: “You seem extra quiet this morning. Did something make you feel sad?” Stay responsive and available.
- Prepare activities that promote sensory awareness. Let toddlers sniff lemons, oranges, peppermint, or cinnamon. Use your imagination to support children's individual interests.
- Offer a variety of tactile experiences through art and play materials. Be aware of the textures of art materials, toys, food, soap, stuffed animals, the carpet, and other materials. Describe physical feelings and sensations to promote children's awareness: “The water feels warm and slippery,” “The shells are smooth and shiny.”
- Use dolls or stuffed animals to model nurturing behaviors, such as comforting, feeding, and rocking: “Our babies [dolls] are cold. Can you wrap them in warm

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blankets?” Children feel soothed themselves when they rock babies or cuddle stuffed animals. Provide dolls that reflect a variety of ethnicities along with infant care items, such as simple clothing, strollers, beds, and bottles.

- Encourage children’s interactions with others as well as with you. Guide them by supporting positive peer interaction through small group activities.

**100 percent present.** A watchful adult must be physically and mentally available 100 percent of the time. To create a smooth morning transition, teachers can come in early to put out materials and set up the room. As soon as children arrive, the teacher turns her full attention to them (Halle et al. 2011).

- Survey the room. Scan often to be sure you are aware of children’s actions and needs. This will help you to step in and support them before problems occur.
- Stay emotionally attuned. Your presence includes getting on the children’s eye level, mirroring their emotions, and responding with empathy. For a child who is alone, say, “I see you love the fish. Let’s feed them together.”
- Remain close by. Keep children’s hands and minds active: “I see you have a hungry puppy with an empty dish. Can you pour him some food?” Meaningful questions stimulate language and positive interaction.
- Stay ready for action. Toddlers need you to be fun, fair, firm, and fast! Young children can help sweep the floor or wipe the table (with water), carry their plates, or pass

out needed items. Keep your attention on what is happening. Step in quickly to redirect behavior and to avoid serious problems.

**Activate engagement.** Toddlers are bursting with curiosity. They make sense of the world through exploration, and experience rapid growth in their ability to regulate feelings (Morasch & Bell 2011). Mutual enjoyment results when teacher and child share attention and complete a task together (Björklund 2010). “Jaden, I see you have a big red block. You put the small yellow one on top. Which one will you choose next?”

## Positive and responsive interactions boost children’s social skills and increase their ability to get along with peers, so that they are more successful in school.

As teachers encourage meaningful conversation, toddlers communicate more in return (Hallam et al. 2009). This reciprocal engagement helps toddlers build emotional and cognitive skills (Burchinal et al. 2008; Kärtner, Keller, & Chaudhary 2010). Positive and responsive interactions boost children’s social skills and increase their ability to get along with peers, so that they are more successful in school (Thompson & Raikes 2007). Toddlers look forward to coming in the morning to see what is awaiting them.

The following morning activities help foster children’s engagement, fun, and learning:

- Set up several waiting activities, such as puzzles or sorting activities, on different areas of the carpet. Invite children to join in: “I see a spotted giraffe. Can you pick him up and put him next to the lion?” Colorful fabric squares in a basket placed in a quiet area serve multiple functions as scarves, blankets, or picnic cloths. Easily accessed containers of cars, blocks, or building materials invite children to play together.
- Provide activities on low tables, ready for curious hands. Toddlers never tire of playdough, which encourages shape cutting, rolling, and “baking.” Small utensils and cookie cutters enhance this activity.
- Set up an art table and easel. Toddlers love to draw and paint pictures and write letters to their families. This provides an opportunity for teachers to model preliteracy skills.
- Encourage water play, such as doll washing, measuring, and cooking activities.
- Provide soft beanbag chairs to draw toddlers toward reading. Use wordless picture books to talk about how children feel. Describe the scene and ask questions: “Is



the boy happy? What is he doing?” Read with character voices, and use scarves, hats, and costumes. Include puppets or use simple props. Toddlers will imitate the stories’ characters.

- Enrich centers with props for play, including dress-up clothes and accessories that promote multiple themes, such as sorting clothes by color or type, grocery shopping, and other familiar activities. Empty cartons or boxes serve as houses, cars, or trains.
- Use puppets to act out experiences children understand. Showing how puppets take a nap, eat a snack, or take a trip brings enjoyment as well as teaches new skills to children.
- Sing songs for fun and with purpose, such as silly bubble songs for washing hands. Use music, instruments, games, and finger plays to build connections and share experiences.

**Forward focus.** Think ahead about what helps toddlers be successful. Teaching toddlers requires practice, patience, and a positive approach. If a child is climbing on a table, say, “We sit in the chair so that we can be safe while we put together the puzzle.” Focusing on positive solutions



## voices of PRACTITIONERS

NAEYC is pleased to announce the fall 2013 publication of *Voices of Practitioners: Teacher Research in Early Childhood Education*. Articles in this issue include “Young Thinkers: Supporting Toddler Theory-Making Through Cooking” and “A Sense of Knowing: Teacher Research With Community College Preservice Teachers,” available at [www.naeyc.org/publications/vop](http://www.naeyc.org/publications/vop).

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helps children get what they want and need in ways that are satisfying and productive (Kersey & Masterson 2013). Rather than focus on what they do not want toddlers to do, teachers can focus on teaching the skill or strategy that will help toddlers become competent, independent, and successful.

- Provide enough materials, especially popular items. Remember that toddlers are more likely to engage in parallel play than group play, and most toddlers are still learning how to share. When two children reach for the same item, quickly provide more: “Here are trucks for each of you. Can you help build a road for them?”
- Use simple language: “Teeth are for eating,” “Gentle hands,” “Two feet on the floor,” “Walking feet.”
- Keep hands busy. Toddlers enjoy helping. Ask them to pass out cups, crayons, or beanbags. Toddlerhood is the golden age of imitation.
- Keep bodies busy. Play Follow the Leader: crawl like puppies, slither like snakes, tiptoe like turtles, hop like

bunnies, skip to music, sway like elephants, or grow like sprouting seeds. Play music and use guided imagery to engage minds and nurture creativity (Dow 2010).

- Stay proactive as well as positive. Step in quickly when you see that you can soothe a frustration or help children find a creative way to solve a challenge: “Both of you want the cars. Can you drive them into the car wash together?”

**Same way every time.** Children relax when they are confident that routines and safety are consistent (Szalavitz & Perry 2010). Tell children what to expect, as preparation for each activity and event: “We are going to play at the sand table. The cups stay in the sand table.” “We are going to read on the carpet. Please pick one book from the box.” “First, we will rinse off the soap and dry our hands. Then we can play.”

- Handle routines in the same way every time so children trust what is expected of them and feel competent. Home expectations can differ from the program, so give lots of support. Have fun. Sing directions!
- Be sure to follow through: “We need to play with our feet on the floor. Here are your fireman boots. Firemen need their feet on the ground to fight fires.” Help put boots on (real or pretend) as you guide children back into play.
- Support success. Children feel safe when expectations are consistent: “I saw you being gentle with the puzzles while you put them away,” “Thank you for holding the plate with two hands while you carry it to the trash.” Thanking children before they begin a task sets positive expectations and lets them know how much you appreciate their effort.

**Three minutes.** While toddlers’ attention can be encouraged with warmth and support, it is variable (about three to six minutes) and influenced by the social situation (Gaertner, Spinrad, & Eisenberg 2008). It is not likely that they will sustain prolonged play in group settings for longer than a few minutes without teacher support. Anticipate their needs, then provide appropriate materials, space, and timing.

- Move furniture if needed to provide enough space for movement.
- Monitor children’s activity level. Determine if they are fatigued or if they need stimulation. Plan active learning games as well as quiet and soothing ones. When children begin to lose interest, take time for music and motion. Pass out shakers for a lively song and finish with a soft melody as children sway or stretch (e.g., trees wave their branches in the wind with scarves).



- Anticipate toddlers' need for rest, food, drink, comfort, and exercise or movement. Toddlers often need help calming and relaxing, so try yoga and stretching as well as quiet reading or soft whispering of poems and stories.
- Be ready for hugs and quiet conversation. Take your cues by observing and responding to children's needs.

## Conclusion

As you revitalize your connection with toddlers, you will see the impact these strategies have on children and their families. Your influence—multiplied during a focused and supportive morning transition—will become a stable blueprint for children's feelings about themselves and about learning. This well-planned, nurturing time fills toddlers' emotional fuel tanks and deepens your connection with them. Boosting responsive interactions during the morning transition will result in many positive benefits for you and the children. A sense of confidence and joyful collaboration will continue to fill your time together as you maximize your influence and make toddler mornings more meaningful.

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