

Why Teaching Infants and Toddlers Is Important

Allyson Dean and Linda Gillespie

Take 1

Sonya is reading a story to 18-month-old Todd. Todd points to a picture of a horse and says, “Dog.” Sonya says, “That’s a horse.” Todd says, “Horse.” “Right,” says Sonya and then turns the page.

Take 2

Sonya is reading a story to 18-month-old Todd. Todd points to a picture of a horse and says, “Dog.” Sonya says, “I can see why you think it’s a dog. It has four legs, pointy ears, and a tail. But let’s look closer. This animal is much bigger than a dog and look, this part of its face, the muzzle, is much longer than a dog’s.” She points to the nose as Todd watches intently. Sonya says, “This animal is called a horse. Let’s look for a picture of a dog.” She flips through the book and finds a picture of a dog. “See, here’s a dog. It’s much smaller than a horse. Let’s look at them together.” She folds the page so Todd can see the pictures side by side, allowing time for him to look at both pictures. As Todd points again, Sonya says, “Yes, here’s the horse and here’s the dog—they look different. The horse is much bigger, his legs are longer, and he has a longer muzzle, which is another word for nose.” Sonya pauses again while Todd points to the animals. She names them as he points. Then she says, “The horse and the dog are both animals, but they are different types of animals.”

ADULTS WORKING WITH INFANTS AND toddlers sometimes shy away from thinking of themselves as teachers because they worry the name is associated with more structured and adult-led activities than babies are ready for. The act of teaching is technically defined as “activities that impart knowledge or skill” (www.vocabulary.com/dictionary/teaching). Babies learn from their environment and the people in it, so it’s important for teachers to feel confident that the knowledge and skills they are teaching are developmentally appropriate for the age of the children in their groups. This learning often happens through everyday interactions such as the scenario above. The teacher expands Todd’s knowledge of animals by taking

advantage of both Todd’s interest in labeling and his developmental readiness to discriminate differences between a horse and a dog.

Direct teaching

Good teaching practices expand children’s understanding of concepts by offering new information, extending learning opportunities in age-appropriate ways, and observing children’s existing knowledge base and developmental age and stage. One of the teaching practices in the above scenario is called *direct* or *explicit* teaching, in which the teachers give the children specific information to build or bridge their knowledge in a particular area of development—in this case in categorizing animals. This expansion of learning occurs during everyday experiences as teachers watch for opportunities to clarify and build on babies’ and toddlers’ current knowledge and understanding. In reality, both of the above scenarios are examples of direct or explicit teaching, but the quality of that teaching practice varies considerably from the first to the second interaction.

In the first scenario, Sonya tells Todd the correct word for the animal, elicits a rote response from him, and quickly moves on. This exchange offers Todd some new information—a new vocabulary word perhaps—but doesn’t build on his knowledge of dogs or clarify that the horse is actually a different type of animal than a dog. He may offer the word *horse* the next time he looks at this book with his teacher, but most likely, Todd does not understand why one animal picture is labeled a *horse* and the other a *dog*. In short, he did not develop an expanded understanding of these two animals and what makes them different.

Building new knowledge

In the second scenario, Sonya uses Todd’s understanding of dogs to help him build new knowledge about horses. By offering explicit information about the similarities and differences in the two types of animals, Sonya helps Todd to extend his understanding of the terms *horse* and *dog*, and begin to understand that there are many types of creatures that make up the category “animals.” She also helps him begin to develop a mental picture of the two animals by pointing out visual differences between them. Finally, Sonya provides Todd with a strategy for

differentiating animals. By pointing out the differences aloud, she models the process for Todd, and he can begin to tell these animals apart by their individual attributes such as size and type of nose. She is skillfully connecting what he knows to what he doesn't quite yet know.

Sonya's interaction with Todd in the second scenario offers teaching that extends beyond the domains of cognitive development. That's the exciting part of teaching with infants and toddlers—it is all interconnected. Because infants' and toddlers' development is holistic—that is to say, growth in one developmental area boosts growth in another—effective teaching practices also take a holistic approach, calling for teachers to be tuned into the knowledge and skills happening in each developmental domain.

So what other developmental skills or knowledge does the interaction above help Todd acquire? First, Sonya responds to Todd's label of *dog*. This action is teaching Todd that he is worthy of attention and cared about, and that his thoughts and contributions are important, which builds his sense of self-confidence and his understanding of a friendship—part of the social-emotional domain. Then Sonya responds to Todd's language by describing the illustration and offering a new word to describe the animal in the picture: *horse*. This new language builds on Todd's attempt to label the animal in the picture. As Sonya offers information and then pauses for a response from Todd (verbal or nonverbal), Todd is beginning to understand the rules of conversation. He also knows that Sonya will wait for him and follow his lead in this back-and-forth interaction.

Conversations like this one, where teachers offer new or different information to children and then pause to watch and listen for a response, assist children like Todd in acquiring a rich and complex vocabulary and offer them experience with the pragmatics of conversation—the back-and-forth flow of social communication in particular situations. It is important to note that this type of interaction is no accident: Sonya has deep understanding about infant and toddler development, gained through years of experience and education, that informs her practice. She documents what she observes in Todd's behavior and play throughout the day and uses those observations to inform and shape her practice. That's what makes Sonya a good teacher.

Teaching, effective teaching practices, and instructional strategies—terms typically associated with children in primary school and above—are being used with younger and younger children. In practice, however, they look very different when applied to the field of early childhood—especially for those working with infants and toddlers. In infant and toddler settings, teaching, effective teaching practices, and instructional strategies reflect thoughtful, intentional interactions and activities teachers use to

engage young children. These interactions reflect the teacher's unique relationship with each child in her care and build upon her knowledge and observation of each child's development, allowing her to take advantage of learning opportunities that emerge through daily routines.

Extending children's learning

What can you do to make sure your interactions, environment, and learning activities provide the types of teachable moments that Sonya had with Todd? Here are some ideas to extend children's learning in the moment:

- Structure a high-quality learning environment based on babies' and toddlers' development and interests. Provide a variety of toys to allow children to explore (for example, toys that go in and out, busy boxes, blocks, nesting cups) and make sure nonmobile infants can reach and explore them. Change materials regularly to offer novel experiences.
- Slow down, wait, and watch what children are doing. Think about how, when, and why you want to interact with the child to make the most of opportunities to extend learning.
- Watch for both verbal and nonverbal responses to promote back-and-forth conversational interaction.
- Ask questions or wonder, even with babies—"Oh, what's happening? You are touching the busy box. I wonder what will happen when you push that button."
- Provide verbal support and modeling to extend children's exploration of toys and experiences.
- Offer specific information or guidance when children need help understanding concepts (for example, helping babies develop an understanding of cause and effect: "When you move your hand this way, the toy makes a rattling sound").
- Help children name and understand concepts by verbally labeling things like color, shape, sound, size, letters, numbers, and feelings. Promote a language-rich environment by narrating children's play and describing children's exploration and discoveries.
- Be available as children begin to participate in imaginary play and actively participate in it. Ask children, "What should I be? What should I do?" Follow their lead, adding context or vocabulary in the setting of their play. Respond to children's prompts or ideas, offering props to enrich the pretend scenario, such as suggesting the addition of blocks to serve as groceries in dramatic play about shopping.
- Connect descriptive words with nouns while you narrate children's actions: "Sally, you're holding a small soft ball that rolls slowly. Joey has the large rubber ball that bounces very high."

You may think of other ways to extend and build upon your interactions with infants and toddlers. The key to teachable moments is that teachers modify activities on the fly to add expanded opportunities for learning, practicing, and refining new skills. Intentional teachers use these strategies in existing routines and activities. They make it look simple, but these expansions and extensions to activities have big implications for the way infants and toddlers understand and make sense of the world around them.

Think about it

Think about a time when you learned something from a really great teacher. Maybe it was when you were in school or maybe your teacher was a friend or family member who recently taught you how to knit or cook a new recipe. What are some of the things this person did to help you learn?

Try it

Most likely, your teacher gave you new information, a chance to practice your new skills, and hands-on support while you were learning. How can you provide similar supports to infants and toddlers as they learn new skills?

- Be present and engage with children throughout the day to capitalize on teachable moments. Stop, watch, and take note of what children are interested in, what they are able to do, and what they seem interested in learning how to do.
- Promote critical thinking. Describe, describe, describe, using diverse language and full sentences to offer children the information they need to develop new understandings.
- Use simple explanations and reasoning to help children understand why things happen or to evaluate a choice: “Suzy, if you are coming down the slide you need to sit on your bottom. If you try to climb down with your feet, I think you might lose your balance and fall.”

These supports and others can turn any moment into a teachable moment. So when it comes to terms like *teacher* and *teaching*, we can embrace these labels as our own, as professionals who provide appropriate learning experiences that extend and expand on children’s learning. We do this in developmentally appropriate ways, with the right developmental timing, and in the right teachable moment. This is what it means to be an infant and toddler teacher.

Resources

Halle, T., R. Anderson, A. Blasberg, A. Chrisler, & S. Simkin. 2011. *Quality of Caregiver–Child Interaction for Infants and Toddlers (Q-CCIIT): A Review of the Literature*. OPRE 2011–25. Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation; Administration for Children and Families; US Department of Health and Human Services. www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/opre/quality_caregiver.pdf.

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