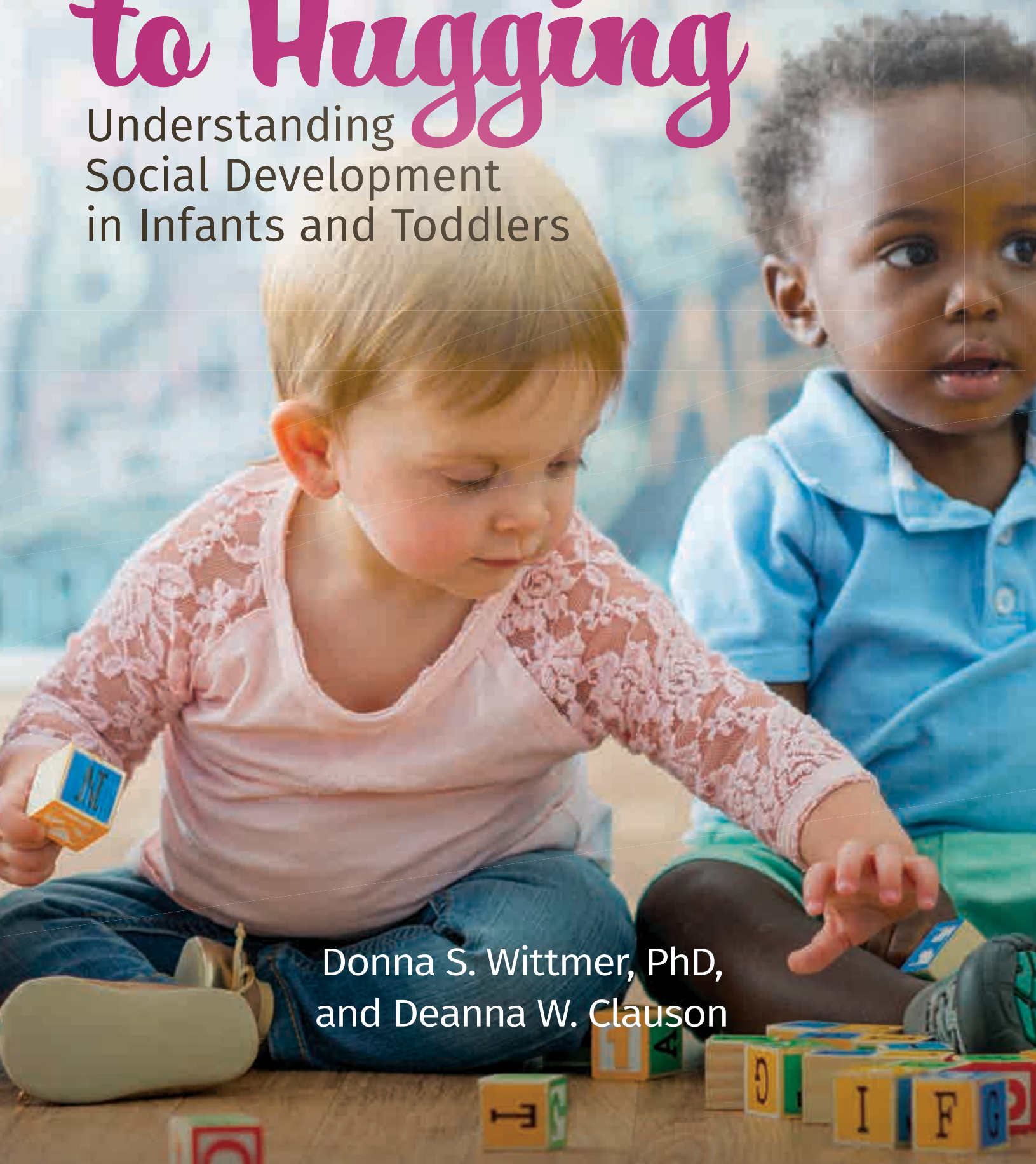


# FROM BITING *to Hugging*

Understanding  
Social Development  
in Infants and Toddlers



Donna S. Wittmer, PhD,  
and Deanna W. Clauson

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Published by Gryphon House, Inc.  
P. O. Box 10, Lewisville, NC 27023  
800.638.0928; 877.638.7576 (fax)  
[www.gryphonhouse.com](http://www.gryphonhouse.com)

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Cover photograph courtesy of iStockPhoto.com.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

The cataloging-in-publication data is registered with the Library of Congress for ISBN 978-0-87659-740-8.

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# Dedication

We dedicate this book to infant and toddler teachers who continuously strive to support young children's optimal social and emotional development. Your focus on children's growth, development, self-worth, prosocial skills, and attitudes about learning makes a pivotal difference in whether children thrive. Your devotion to creating experiences and environments that promote positive relationships between teachers and children and among peers will have lifelong impacts. We hope this book gives you support for your important work helping children learn how to engage in loving relationships.

# Acknowledgements

We especially want to thank our family members for their continuous support and encouragement as we wrote this book. They believe in the importance of the early years and thus inspired us to devote time to this important work.

Special thanks to Stephanie Roselli, our editor at Gryphon House, who constantly supported us with her expertise. Her sensitivity to the needs of the professionals in early childhood education thoughtfully guided the organization and content of the book. We could not have completed this book without her positive encouragement and constructive support.

Donna would like to thank Deanna Clauson for her contributions to this book. Her excellent writing skills contributed greatly to the articulation of the importance of parents' and teachers' emphasis on social development of infants and toddlers with peers for their present happiness and their future social competence. Deanna is in tune with the essential knowledge that infant and toddler teachers have and aspire to learn. She also was a joy to work with on the book.

Donna would also like to acknowledge Dr. Alice Honig, who continuously motivates me to continue learning and writing about infants and toddlers. It was with her as my professor at Syracuse University that I first began to understand the critical importance of the early years. Her mentorship and friendship are invaluable to me.

Deanna would like to thank Donna Wittmer for teaching her over a lifetime the value and richness of each interaction with young children. Donna's unwavering passion for and dedication to young children is deeply inspiring. Deanna would also like to thank Nathan and Rakaia for teaching her every day how to love, learn, and grow in her own social and emotional experiences.



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# Chapter ONE

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The Many Reasons to Focus on Social  
Development with Peers in the Early Years



***Interaction among children is a fundamental experience during the first years of life.***

—LORIS MALAGUZZI, FOUNDER OF THE REGGIO EMILIA APPROACH

Aren't infants too little to notice other infants?

What do infants learn by being together?

The toddlers in my room are always grabbing things from each other. What should I do?

I saw a toddler give a crying child a toy. How can I help toddlers do that more often?

The two-year-olds in my room are always saying, "Mine," when they are playing with a toy and another child approaches. Is this normal?

What can I do to help two-year-olds be kinder to each other?

I have a two-year-old in my room who screams when other children come close. How can I help her?



These types of questions are common among educators of infants and toddlers. Teachers and parents of young children are witnesses every day to an incredible period of development, when children are learning at every moment about how the world around them works—and how they fit into it. Teachers know how important relationships are, and they work tirelessly to ensure that children will be good at relationships.

We know that the relationships young children have with both adults and peers are the foundation of how they see themselves and relate to others for the rest of their lives. A child's social competence—the attitude and skill to enjoy being with others and to interact successfully with others to each person's satisfaction—is central to healthy development.

## What Is Social Competence?

The child:

- demonstrates a social, friendly attitude.
- jointly attends to something interesting with adults and peers.
- uses language or a communication system effectively.
- identifies emotions in herself and others.
- manages strong emotions and behavior (self-regulation).
- uses prosocial behavior, including demonstrating empathy.
- takes the perspective of others' thoughts and feelings.
- uses conflict-resolution strategies, such as problem-solving skills, effectively.



This book shares important information and meaningful strategies that parents, teachers, and other educators of children ages birth to three can use to support infants' and toddlers' healthy social development and competence with peers. We divide the ages into three periods because children differ greatly in their peer development at these times. Infants (zero to twelve months) are aware and interested in each other. We see the beginnings of their enjoyment of and challenges with peers. Young toddlers (twelve to twenty-four months) are capable of kind, helpful, comforting behaviors toward peers and often enjoy them immensely and become friends; yet, they also engage in conflicts with their peers.

Older toddlers (twenty-four to thirty-six months) grow in their ability to relate, cooperate, negotiate, and play with their peers. These developments occur

when families, teachers, and programs provide the kind of care and learning opportunities that children need to develop social competence.

We know that infants and toddlers are competent learners. They thrive when they experience learning within caring relationships with adults and peers. They are social beings who need compassionate social interactions and relationships to flourish. Healthy relationships with adults are the foundation from which they venture forth to learn about themselves and others. Within secure adult-child relationships, children learn that they are worthy of love and care, affection, and respect for their capabilities. They also learn how to live and love successfully with peers from their first relationships with adults. They learn empathy and how to take the perspectives of others. They become attuned to others' needs and thoughts

within parent-child and teacher-child relationships. These are challenging lessons to learn, and infants and toddlers learn them with you. They learn how to be care *givers*, not just care *receivers* (Kawakami and Takai-Kawakami, 2015).

The need for social relationships is universal. However, many factors influence how well children (and adults) learn to be socially competent. Children's characteristics and temperaments influence how others relate to them. Cultural values constantly shape their thinking and actions. Public policy and

community values influence the quality of care that children receive, as well as what families and teachers think is important for them to learn.

The development of social competence is one of the most important outcomes for children's satisfaction with relationships, sense of well-being, and learning success. Infants and toddlers need us to care about their social development and learning. Let's immerse ourselves in the essential reasons why we should care deeply about infant and toddler social development with peers.

## Why Focus on Infant and Toddler Peer Relationships?

So much learning happens when young children are together. Consider the following:

- Social competence creates a strong foundation for social and academic success in life.
- Infants and toddlers spend time together, and we want it to be quality time.
- Infants and toddlers are social beings. They learn from and enjoy each other.
- Peers build each other's competence, curiosity, and understanding of culture.
- Peers experience the joy of relationships—the prosocial and gleeful experiences.
- Infants and toddlers need the support of caring parents and teachers for optimal social-emotional learning.

Let's explore these reasons to focus on young children's peer development and relationships.



# The Foundation for Future Social Relationships and Academic Success Is Built in the Early Years

Emotional well-being and social competence provide a strong foundation for emerging cognitive abilities, and together they are the bricks and mortar of brain architecture. The emotional and physical health, social skills, and cognitive-linguistic capacities that emerge in the early years are all important for success in school, in the workplace, and in the larger community (Center on the Developing Child, 2017c, 2017d).

We have learned an incredible amount in recent years about the importance of the first three years of children's lives. Educators and parents know that these early years are very important for brain development; infants and toddlers are learning every moment—often even when they sleep. They are developing more than a million new neural connections per second (Center on the Developing Child, 2017c, 2017d). The quality of children's social and emotional experiences greatly influences brain size and structure (Teicher and Samson, 2016). Healthy social and emotional experiences during the first three years of life enable brain growth, while stressful experiences such as persistent fear, stress, anxiety, and neglect prevent optimal brain development (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child (NSCDC), 2010, 2014). The social and emotional experiences of infants and toddlers create the foundation for their behavior, health, ability to learn, and social attitudes and skills throughout their lives (Center on the Developing Child, 2017c, 2017d).

As the NSCDC asserts in their working paper *Young Children Develop in an Environment of Relationships* (2004), “. . . the concept of school readiness is not exclusively a matter of fostering literacy and number skills but must also include the

capacity to form and sustain positive relationships with educators, children, and other adults, and develop the social and emotional skills for cooperating with others.”

We must pay attention now to the quality of very young children's relationships with their favorite adults and to children's social competence with peers to ensure present and later social success. We've learned that young children who have secure attachments to their special caregivers in the first three years of life have fewer behavior problems and better social competence later in life (Kochanska and Kim, 2013). We know that young children with language skills learned in early childhood are better able to control their anger and behavior as preschoolers (Roben et al., 2013). Research tells us that toddlers who feel

The social and emotional experiences of infants and toddlers create the foundation for their behavior, health, ability to learn, and social attitudes and skills throughout their lives (Center on the Developing Child, 2017a).

inhibited are more likely than their peers who aren't inhibited to demonstrate anxiety as adolescents, but

We've learned that infants and toddlers need patient, caring, sensitive, responsive, knowledgeable, affectionate, sympathetic, language-loving adults in their lives to thrive when they are young and to eventually become adults capable of successful relationships.

only if they are insecurely attached (Lewis-Morrarty et al., 2014).

We've learned that children's acceptance and rejection by peers begins in toddlerhood and continues into the elementary years unless adults intervene (Rubin, 2002; Rubin and Coplan, 2004; Rubin, Coplan, and Bowker, 2009).

Our facilitation of social development for infants and toddlers is also a key to their present and future academic success (Hymel and Ford, 2014). There is a strong link between social skills—especially self-regulation—and academic performance. Children need social competence to function well at school. Children who are aggressive, do not have empathy,

and cannot control their emotions with peers are not as likely to be successful in school. Others may not want to work or play with them, and their enjoyment of school suffers.

Social competence creates opportunities for successful employment and mental health as well. We've learned that higher levels of social competence in kindergarten (“cooperates with peers without prompting,” “is helpful to others,” “very good at understanding feelings,” and “resolves problems on own”) are directly related to higher levels of education and employment and to lower levels of public assistance, crime, mental health problems, and substance abuse at age twenty-five (Jones et al., 2015).

We know more now, too, about what creates these quality experiences and what infants and toddlers need to develop well emotionally and socially. We've learned that infants and toddlers need patient, caring, sensitive, responsive, knowledgeable, affectionate, sympathetic, language-loving adults in their lives to thrive when they are young, and to eventually become adults capable of successful relationships. We know that young children need communities of caring within infant and toddler programs. We know that it is imperative that we focus on the quality of infants' and toddlers' peer experiences for their happiness and sense of well-being, both now and in the future.





# Quality Time Spent Together Is Important for Very Young Children

Luciana began her group experience at three months of age in a family child-care home. She has spent most weekdays from 8:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. with her family child-care provider and three peers of various ages. At two years of age, Luciana, who really likes her playmates, is very sad when the oldest child moves on to kindergarten.

Infants and toddlers are experiencing their peers more often in child-care and learning groups. Children like Luciana are spending more time with their peers in programs while their parents work outside the home. In family child-care homes, center programs, Early Head Start, and kinship care (with relatives), peers share time with each other. These daily experiences support the social and emotional development of infants and toddlers—or not. Time

spent together can deeply enhance—or be detrimental to—how a child learns to interact with others. We can ask thoughtfully, “What kind of peer day have the children had? What are they learning about themselves and others as they interact and relate to their special adults and peers?” We want peer time to be quality time.

## Infants and Toddlers Are Social Beings

Young children learn from and enjoy each other. Social interest begins early in children’s lives. Infants who are three months old will stare at another infant’s face who is gazing back at them in wonder. Two older infants sitting side by side in their high chairs will gleefully laugh at each other while gently touching each other’s hands and heads. A toddler will run excitedly across a room because she sees another person just her size. She will take the other child’s hand in hers, and off they’ll go to explore their world together. Young children often want to be with each other, especially in the presence and security of their favorite adults.

Infants and toddlers are social beings making shared discoveries. To figure out, to experiment, to enjoy, and to know—these activities are what infants and toddlers do with each other. Infants will crawl over another baby and will be surprised when their mat

Very young children are discoverers on a voyage of peer learning in how to communicate, to make their needs known with peers, and to learn the rules of physical contact and socialization.

Aren't infants too little to notice and learn from other infants?

I saw a toddler give a crying child a toy.

How can I help toddlers do that more often?

The two-year-olds in my room are always saying, "Mine," when they are playing with a toy and another child approaches. Is this normal?

I have a two-year-old in my room who screams when other children come close. How can I help her?

The infant-toddler years can be challenging. Teachers, parents, and caregivers need strategies to help infants and toddlers feel safe, secure, loved, lovable, and happy. Little ones need adult help to learn how to be in healthy, enjoyable relationships.

*From Biting to Hugging* offers strategies to help caregivers teach the littlest children prosocial behaviors and provides techniques to deal in developmentally appropriate ways with challenging behaviors such as biting and hitting. Learn how infants and toddlers develop socially and emotionally, and discover ideas for nurturing:

- Self-regulation
- Skills for joining in play
- Expressing needs and emotions
- Conflict-resolution skills
- And so much more!



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