

# The Insightful TEACHER

Reflective  
Strategies to  
Shape Your  
Early Childhood  
Classroom



NANCY BRUSKI

# The Insightful Teacher

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Childhood Classroom**

*Nancy Bruski*

# Dedication

To my father, my biggest admirer, who always felt I was smarter and more wonderful than I am. I know you're smiling right now, somewhere in the cosmos.

To my husband, Mitchell, whose love, support, encouragement, and belief in my talents have been unwavering.

And to my children, Katy and James, who have taught me so much about what it means to be emotionally available. Thank you for giving me so many opportunities to grow. You will always be my proudest accomplishment.

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# Introduction



I read a wonderful book by Paul Tough, a former editor of *The New York Times Magazine* and noted journalist, titled *How Children Succeed: Grit, Curiosity, and the Hidden Power of Character*. I was intrigued by a review I had read of the book and by all the buzz in the educational field about how character relates to success in school and in life. In his book, Tough argues that improving children's cognitive skills is not enough to help them be successful learners. He reviews research that describes how traits such as resilience, integrity, resourcefulness, optimism, and ambition are critical components of helping children succeed long term. Tough states that these skills can be developed even in children who have not had support at a young age, and he focuses on programs around the country that work with adolescents to help them develop these traits that enable them to succeed.

My immediate reaction to reading this was that it is much better for children to have such experiences in preschool! It is difficult to overestimate the contribution that preschool teachers make to children's lives when they understand that learning numbers and letters is only part of the preparation for elementary school. Teachers also must focus on helping children learn to get along with one another, encouraging children to engage deeply in curriculum that challenges and appeals to them, showing them how to persist in problem solving, supporting them as they learn to resolve conflicts, and helping them comfortably accept differences in personality, skill level, and culture or race.

Children develop resilience through valuing themselves and having the inner strength and strategies to face challenges of all sorts. True self-esteem and confidence arise out of feeling personally validated and understood. *The Insightful Teacher* provides a holistic approach to developing classroom communities in which each child feels recognized, appreciated, and able to contribute in his own way. This book gives





teachers the tools and strategies they need to help children build critical character traits and enable them to function successfully in the classroom.

One goal of a successful educational experience is to provide support for children to learn how to cope with, survive, and overcome disappointing experiences. Everyone experiences failure at some point. How people react to challenges defines their ultimate success, and the social skills and personal validation that preschool teachers offer to young children will help them keep moving forward in their lives.

The teacher's ability to reflect on her interventions in the classroom is an essential component of helping children develop self-confidence and self-control. Examining not only children's behaviors but also her responses to them will enable the teacher to tune in to children's needs and to develop ways of communicating with them that will promote growth.

This book will be useful for individual teachers interested in improving their practice, for directors to use for staff development, as a supplement to workshops or in-service training, or for college classes focusing on guidance with the young child. Each chapter is filled with examples from real classrooms and includes effective interventions from teachers, along with commentary and analysis. The chapters include journaling activities so that teachers can reflect on what they have read and how they might integrate the information into their practice.

It is my hope that teachers will feel excited and ready to implement this approach in their classrooms as they provide children with a baseline of emotional and psychological strength. In so doing, they will equip children with the skills to succeed in school and to face and overcome life's many challenges.

# The Insightful Teacher



Supporting children's appropriate behavior at school begins with the teacher. Although this might seem counterintuitive, the teacher's perspective, approach, and values are the basis for creating a supportive, nurturing classroom and for shaping children's behavior. Understanding the child is necessary for encouraging that child to behave appropriately and function at her highest potential; however, the teacher first must reflect on and understand her own thoughts, feelings, and perspectives.

Consider the following questions:

- What are my values as a teacher?
- What are my goals?
- What are my strengths?
- What are my weaknesses?
- What should an early childhood classroom look like?
- What behaviors are acceptable to me and which ones are not?
- What situations really challenge me?
- How do I usually respond to challenging situations, and do I need to do something differently?
- How do I engage the children in the learning process?
- How do I use the physical space in the classroom to encourage engagement and independence in the children?
- How do my interactions with the children reflect my goals, values, and perspective?

The reflective teacher is willing to examine her choices to gain insight. She looks at children's behavior as a mutual interaction, one that is composed not only of what the child does but also of what she may or may not have done before and after the child acted. Teaching affords wonderful opportunities each day for improving one's professional excellence through thoughtful interactions with children, creative planning and implementation, enthusiastic sharing of a personal experience or interest with the children, and a myriad of other possibilities.



# Identifying Values and Setting Goals

Clarifying what one values in the classroom setting means answering some important questions.

- **What do I want to happen in my classroom?** For example, do I want the children to feel comfortable, safe, and free to explore? Am I comfortable with noise and activity, or am I more comfortable with the quiet hum of exploration?
- **What are my goals?** For example, do I want to communicate a welcoming atmosphere by checking in with each child every day? Do I feel that I can improve the communication I have with families?
- **How do I want the children to feel?** For example, do I want all the children to feel appreciated and supported? Do I want the children to feel free to investigate and make mistakes?

This book will help you consider and identify your values, goals, strengths, and weaknesses. Together, we will explore ways to use personal reflection to gain insight into creating the classroom you dream of having.

## Reflection Is the Key

Most teachers would agree that conveying each child's worth in the classroom is an important goal; yet, not all teachers know how to follow through in making this happen. Having a vague sense that all children are worthy of being a part of the classroom community is not enough. Reflect on what it really means to value each child and then decide how to make that a reality. What do teachers do in a classroom that helps children get the message that they are valued and appreciated? Greeting each child upon entry to the classroom is one simple example. Looking for opportunities to check in with each child individually is another.

TEACHER: Lily, that is a fascinating picture with lots of bright colors! What is happening there?

LILY: This is my backyard with lots of flowers and a swing set.

TEACHER: I love backyards with flowers. Who plants and cares for them in your yard?

LILY: My mom does, and sometimes I help! I love the daisies. We bring them in the house and put them in a jar.

TEACHER: Sounds like fun. Where do you like to put them?



Simple check-ins such as this help establish and nurture attachments between the child and teacher and are important for turning into action the value of making each child feel worthy and important. Although many fine teachers do this intuitively, it is helpful to clarify your practices to ensure that the educational values actually are being communicated on a regular basis.

Sometimes, if a child is struggling or is challenging in some way, a teacher may feel that the child gets too much attention because the teacher has to make behavior interventions frequently. The teacher might avoid the very check-ins the child so desperately needs to keep the positive attachment going. If most interactions with a child are based on setting and enforcing limits, that attachment cannot flourish.

One of the obstacles that can get in the way of being an effective and reflective teacher is focusing on how to react to children's behavior. Often, teachers believe that if they have a strong repertoire of interventions, they can put a permanent end to specific types of misbehavior. Although having a broad repertoire of effective intervention strategies and good communication skills is necessary for excellence in teaching, managing young children's behavior and building a sense of community in classrooms has more to do with developing a philosophy, thinking about prevention, considering the organization and careful setup of the environment, and making a commitment to regularly examine how one's own behavior in the classroom affects the children.

## Plan Ahead for Success

A reflective teacher must be honest with himself about his strengths and his weaknesses. Acknowledging where he has room for growth can be difficult. By recognizing and acknowledging his personal

strengths and vulnerabilities, which everyone brings along with them into the classroom, a teacher can do the best possible job of responding appropriately to children and accessing support and consultation when necessary. And the additional bonus is that, through this kind of thoughtful teaching, the teacher becomes a better, stronger person!

Most early childhood teachers, for example, want an organized, peaceful classroom in which all the children are respectful of their classmates. Communicating these values, however, can be a real challenge. Consider the following.

Mrs. Langley, a teacher of four-year-olds, is frustrated with how her morning circle time activity is going. Maria, Sam, and Madison just cannot seem to keep their bodies to themselves, pay attention, or refrain from interrupting and disrupting the process. Mrs. Langley is tired of having to interrupt group time to remind these three to manage themselves and pay attention.



Trying to respond to each individual behavior is probably not the best plan, though it is a typical one. It would be more effective to think about how the children's challenging behaviors might be prevented in the first place. Planning ahead for success rather than reacting to failure takes patience and a willingness to acknowledge that the first impulse may not be the most effective one.

The teacher can take a number of approaches. Maybe the children need to sit near the teacher or the assistant during circle time. Perhaps they would do better sitting on chairs rather than on the rug. Perhaps one of the children could be the page turner during the story, thus giving the child something physically active to do. Perhaps the teacher could offer a child a fidget to manipulate during circle time. Rather than waiting for the children to misbehave and then thinking of something to do in response, plan a preventive intervention. Explain to each child what the plan will be at circle time and how it will be helpful.

Perhaps the teacher needs to step back from thinking individually about the three children and think about what might not be working in how she is organizing or managing circle time itself. If three or four children are having difficulties, the transition into circle time may be too long, and the early birds are already bored by the time the teacher actually begins

the activity. Perhaps the stories are too long and detailed to read in a large group and hold everyone's attention, or the stories are too short or so familiar that they have begun to lose their appeal. Maybe the children need to do a music and movement experience at the beginning of circle time to get their wiggles out.

Stepping back and reflecting on one's own behavior and planning, rather than simply looking at what the children are doing, takes a willingness to admit that one's initial approach could be improved.

## Communicate Values

At first glance, young children can appear extremely impulsive and unpredictable, as well as adorable and appealing. The adults charged with teaching them want to enable children to function optimally at school—to learn to interact with peers, to pay attention to teachers, to take turns, to cooperate in play, to learn specific pre-academic skills, and to experience joy in learning. What is not always obvious to educators is that, to support such optimal functioning, a very broad, holistic approach to teaching is required. The teacher must pay attention to what she is doing, how she is doing it, and why. If her approach is not bringing about the desired results, then the approach needs some re-evaluation.

Damian loves to play with LEGOs and wants to keep them all to himself. Each day, he goes over to the small-manipulatives table, takes out the bin of blocks, and begins to play. If other children come over, he becomes upset when they take any of the LEGOs out of the bin, worrying that they might use one that he “needs.” Despite the fact that there are plenty of LEGOs available, he grabs the blocks from the other children and does not share.

Teachers want to teach children that cooperating with one another and sharing are values and expectations in the classroom. A teacher's first thoughts about Damian's behavior might be that he needs to learn how to share and that he cannot keep all of the LEGOs to himself. Therefore, a typical reaction and response may be, “Damian, in this classroom, all of the children can use the materials. You need to let the other children have some LEGOs, or you won't be able to continue to play with them.” This response appears reasonable, since grabbing from others is unacceptable. However, if the teacher considers how to meet the child's apparent need



to have lots of LEGOs, she is more likely to be successful in teaching the value of sharing.

Children are rarely pleased when they hear that they cannot do something. A different approach might look like this: “Damian, I see that it’s hard for you when other children are using the LEGOs. What bothers you about Sammy using them?” Damian might respond that he might need the ones Sammy has. The teacher then can provide a tray or plastic bowl and put a large number of LEGOs in it. She can explain to Damian that those LEGOs are just for him; no one else can use them. If anyone wants to use other LEGOs, they must get them from the bin. Those are for sharing, but the ones in the tray or bowl are just for Damian.

Although it may seem that the teacher is not really teaching Damian to share, what is happening is that she is helping Damian tolerate sharing by enabling him to feel that he will have enough and therefore does not have to worry about needing what the others are using. This approach recognizes the purpose behind Damian’s behavior, acknowledges his need, and reassures him that his need will be met.

## Know Your Strengths and Weaknesses

It is a tall order, all of these skills that preschoolers need to gain before they go off to kindergarten! The early childhood educator’s plate is quite full. It may feel like the best way to help children function well at school and gain these skills is to just jump in, develop some fun curriculum plans, and get going! However, while implementing curriculum and operating the classroom itself are essential, a significant amount of planning is required. In particular, take the time to reflect on which situations you find particularly challenging and which situations you feel that you handle pretty well.

Most teachers feel more competent dealing with some types of behaviors or personality styles and less confident in dealing with others. Knowing what these are will help teachers not only hone their skills, but also be more alert to how they respond to the behaviors they find especially challenging.

For example, some teachers are quite patient with the clingy child who has anxieties about separation. One teacher may be perfectly comfortable holding that child on her lap or keeping the child next to her as she moves about the classroom; another teacher may experience this same child very differently and may be frustrated by the clinginess. Similarly, in dealing with a defiant child, some teachers can be very inventive and creative, coming up with many ways of using humor to defuse the child's anger and obstinacy. Other teachers may view the defiance as an attack on their authority and will engage in a power struggle with the child. Consider the following example.

Samantha does not like to participate in clean-up time after free play. When the teacher tells the children that it is time to put toys away, Samantha puts her hands on her hips and loudly declares, "No way! You do it!"

A teacher who sees Samantha's defiance as a battle of wills may assert her authority. "Samantha, the rule in our classroom is that everyone helps with cleanup. If you choose not to help, you will have to sit on the porch when we go outside to play, and you won't be able to play for as many minutes if you don't help us now." Samantha is likely to react with further defiance. Both of them are now stuck, with neither wanting to give in. Frequently when a teacher threatens a particular consequence for a behavior, the child will go ahead and test to see if the teacher actually will follow through. Thus, the attempt to achieve compliance backfires, leaving both the child and the teacher frustrated and unhappy.

The teacher who is more comfortable with defiance may use humor to defuse the situation, saying, "Oh, my gosh! What a great idea! If I were an octopus and had eight arms, I could do all the cleanup myself! But look at me: I only have two arms, and that's not nearly enough. I need help! If you and I put away these toys together, we'll have four arms, and that's almost as much as an octopus. And, if we invite two more children to help, we'll have eight arms!" Humor might not work every time, but it works often. The teacher's enthusiasm when responding in this manner can go a long way toward engaging the child's cooperation.



Recognizing that a child is pushing one's buttons—and avoiding the customary response—is a skill that must be developed over time. Building insight through reflection means that, sometimes, the teacher will not handle a situation well. For example, a teacher who is feeling stressed, tired, or worried about personal concerns may respond insensitively to the children in her class. One of the wonderful advantages of being a teacher is that there are always opportunities to do a better job, to address mistakes, and to move forward more positively. Young children are developing the capacity to be reflective about their own behavior. They are fairly impulsive and often will lash out or behave inappropriately as a result of intense momentary feelings that overwhelm their self-control. The teacher can be a role model and demonstrate self-reflection through his willingness to acknowledge his mistakes.

Ms. Vargas is having a difficult day. She ran late this morning, spilled coffee on her blouse, and must juggle her schedule to take her son to the dentist in the afternoon.

For days, Ms. Vargas has been working on a papier-mâché project with the children. They are studying bodies of water to see how big the nearby ocean is in relation to the land. Phoebe, a boisterous and sometimes bossy four-year-old, comments that another child's globe looks really stupid and ugly.

Ms. Vargas yells, "Phoebe, you need to leave this table right now for using such unkind words! You should pay more attention to your own globe and not criticize others. Yours isn't so perfect, either!"

Phoebe skulks away from the table and scowls, feeling angry and hurt.

Everyone has a bad day once in a while. And when that happens, it is all too easy to say something hurtful. The good news is that when a teacher makes such a mistake, the teacher and the child both have an opportunity for growth. Later that evening, as Ms. Vargas reflects on her day, she may realize that her reaction was inappropriate, even though Phoebe's behavior also was unacceptable. The next day, she could sit down with Phoebe and talk about the situation:

Phoebe, I was thinking about what happened yesterday afternoon at the art table when I yelled at you for saying unkind words to your friend. I was having a bad day and was feeling kind of crabby, and I shouldn't have yelled at you like that or talked about your globe in that way. That wasn't nice. There I was, angry at you for being unkind to

your friend, and then I was unkind to you! You do need to work on using kind words with your friends, and I need to work on not taking out my own crabbiness out on children at school if I'm having a bad day! I am really sorry I yelled at you like that. I hope you can forgive me.

In all but the rarest of cases, the child will accept the teacher's apology, and both child and teacher will feel much better. In this way, the teacher is modeling reflection and personal responsibility. She is demonstrating the understanding that people's words can hurt, and she is making amends. By including what Phoebe needs to work on, the teacher makes it clear that the child's behavior was unacceptable as well. It is very validating for children to experience an adult demonstrating remorse in this way. Some teachers might worry that perhaps it will make them appear weak. On the contrary, the teacher looks stronger because she is unafraid to acknowledge her own imperfections. The teacher is modeling her values of peaceful cooperation, responsibility, forgiveness, and respect. Reflective teachers help create reflective children.

## Validate Children's Feelings

Working with young children exposes teachers to some of the intense developmental struggles of the first five years of life, including attachment, separation, autonomy, initiative, and beginning relationships with peers. Part of the process of learning to be a reflective teacher is to learn to accept children's feelings, even though their behavior must be limited at times. When a child experiences having her feelings validated, she is much more likely to cooperate with a limit that must be set.

Terri loves going through an obstacle course the teachers have set up outside, and she has no interest in coming inside for story time and lunch. She begins to scream that she will not go in. Instead of simply insisting that it is time to go, her teacher says, “You had such a great time on the obstacle course this morning, Terri! You were really good at it, and it was a lot of fun! It is so hard to stop when you’re having fun. Having to stop makes children really mad sometimes. How about if you go through it one more time, and I will make sure you can be the first one to have a turn this afternoon.”

Terri is not thrilled to stop, but she is pleased to have one more turn. As she approaches the end of the obstacle course, the teacher takes her hand, congratulates her for excellence in obstacle-course skills, and walks her toward the classroom before she can begin to resist.

By validating her feelings, allowing her a little extra time, and connecting with her while leading her inside, this teacher cleverly distracts Terri from becoming upset again and helps reassure her that her moments on the beloved obstacle course are not totally over.

The act of validating children’s feelings, while continuing to expect compliance with guidelines and norms, is very powerful for children. Teachers understand clearly the necessity for a schedule; this understanding is rarely so clear for children. Therefore, explicitly recognizing their difficulty in complying with scheduling expectations is very helpful.

## Gaining Powerful Insights

Another way teachers can use reflection to improve their effectiveness in the classroom is to use their own feelings diagnostically. This is a tool that child therapists learn when they engage in play therapy with young children. Frequently, a child will set up games or play situations that will evoke the same or similar feelings on the part of the therapist that the child also is struggling with. It is a way for the child to convey his worries or vulnerabilities nonverbally and mostly unconsciously.

Years ago, as a young therapist, I was working with a five-year-old boy who loved to organize structured games for us to play in our therapy sessions. But, he would constantly change the rules or change the game

in ways that would ensure that I would lose. Of course, as a therapist, it should not have been my goal to try to win the games; yet, at times I actually found myself feeling frustrated that no matter how I played the game, I always ended up not only losing but also feeling stupid because I had played it “wrong.”

When I shared these feelings, about which I was fairly embarrassed, with a consultant, he gave me an insight that has stayed with me for many years. He suggested that this child, by orchestrating the games in this way, was letting me know how he feels in his life. In some part of his life, he must feel out of control, stupid, and like a loser. And he was sharing this with me.

Because children often show us their feelings through behavior rather than verbally, it is especially helpful for teachers to find ways to understand what underlies difficult behaviors. Using oneself in this way can be very enlightening. A simple example of this dynamic might work with a child who constantly needs to be defiant so that she can feel in control. Such a child can easily make a teacher feel out of control, because the teacher’s authority is constantly being questioned. By looking underneath the angry or frustrated feelings the teacher has in relation to this child, she can recognize that feeling of being out of control.

In many cases, such children are struggling somewhere in their lives, and their attempts to control the teacher are attempts to control their own lives. If a teacher can use her own feelings diagnostically, she will understand the child better and may be able to arrive at more effective strategies for intervention. This requires a willingness to be honest with oneself, but it can be a powerful tool. A teacher’s own feelings, even negative ones, are acceptable and can be dealt with in a way that does not harm children. By being honest with herself and seeking support from colleagues, a teacher can find positive ways to support the children with whom she works.

Frequently, teachers feel it is somehow unprofessional to feel anger toward a child. As a result, too often teachers do not acknowledge their negative feelings, maybe even deny that those feelings are there, but then act out those feelings in the classroom. Therefore, it is much better for teachers to acknowledge and accept their feelings toward the children they are teaching. Then, they can get the help and support to work through their feelings in a healthy, productive way.



# Developing a Reflective Mindset

Being a reflective teacher opens up opportunities for growth, insight, and achieving excellence in one's work with children. How to get there? Take the time to look at interactions with children as a two-way street, examining both the child's behavior and your own response. Think about how the day went. What worked, and what did not? Analysis and reflection will help guide you to creating more good days in the future. Choose to look at each day in the classroom as a new opportunity to recreate the great days in new ways or to prevent some of the bad ones by changing one's approach. Getting there is not magic, but the results can be magical!

## Questions for Reflection

This chapter describes the importance of being personally reflective to be an insightful teacher. Knowing one's personal and teaching strengths, as well as one's challenges and hot-button issues, enables a teacher to respond more professionally and more supportively to children.

This exercise is designed to help teachers think about themselves as teachers, identify their strengths and vulnerabilities, and choose one or two areas to focus on for growth.

1. Describe at least three areas of teaching that represent strengths for you and of which you feel proud.
2. Identify at least two areas of teaching that are especially challenging for you.
3. Identify three typical child behaviors that you feel especially comfortable and competent in handling—for example, separation feelings or defiance.
4. Identify at least two behaviors in children that you are acutely sensitive to, especially dislike, or may occasionally overreact to because of your strong feelings about them.
5. Choose at least one area of your teaching or one type of behavior in children that is difficult for you. Commit to working on this area during the next several months.
6. Make an initial plan for steps you can take to make progress in this area.
7. Consider your goals and values for your classroom. Write them down and keep the list handy as we move through the book. Refer to them often, adding and changing them as you feel appropriate.

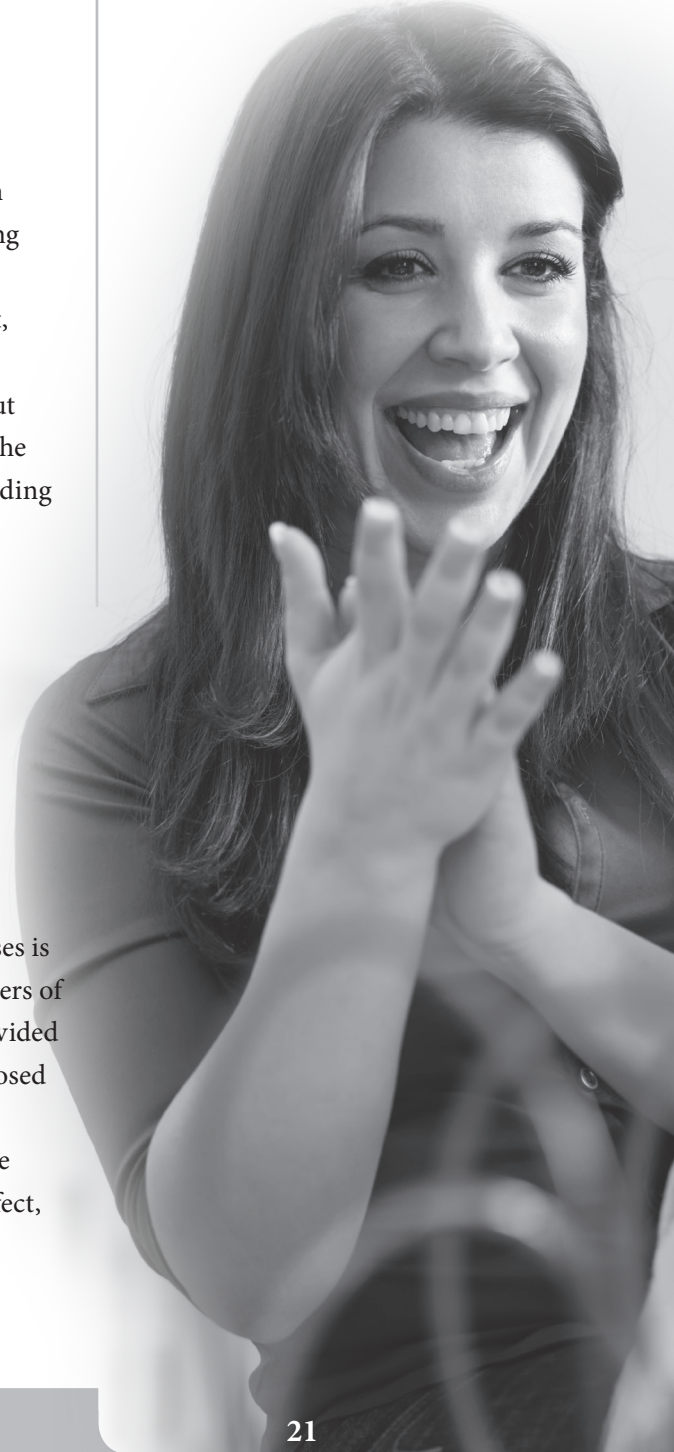
# Defining Developmentally Appropriate Expectations



Sometimes teachers' eyes glaze over when they hear the term *child development*. It may seem like an academic term with little bearing on what actually happens in classrooms every day. Actually, child development is very helpful, and here's why: Understanding which skills, abilities, interests, and emotional needs develop within certain age periods enables teachers to organize their classrooms and teaching approaches to support children. How does this work? All aspects of planning, including the physical setup of the classroom environment, curriculum development and implementation, communication with children, and behavioral guidelines and expectations, should arise out of an understanding of what is going on in the minds and bodies of the young children who will occupy that classroom. When an understanding of child development does not inform planning, the stage is set for significant amounts of misbehavior and the perceived need for lots of consequences.

## Child Development: Birth through Age Five

In this book, the framework for examining early developmental phases is the one used by Erik Erikson, one of the great psychological researchers of the mid-twentieth century. Erikson's developmental framework is divided into eight phases, each associated with an age period and each composed of a specific developmental challenge or "crisis" that a person must successfully resolve to move forward in a healthy, positive, productive way. Resolution of each developmental crisis does not need to be perfect, because all of us have incompletely resolved developmental issues as we move through life. Life provides children and adults with many opportunities to rework and resolve old conflicts.



What is needed is for a child to experience what psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott refers to as “the holding environment.” One does not have to be the perfect parent or caregiver; one merely needs to be responsive to the developing child’s needs most of the time. In doing so, the child experiences being held, in an emotional sense, and feeling secure. For an infant, the holding environment actually involves a great deal of physical holding, but Winnicott also means the term in a nonphysical sense: protecting, supporting, being emotionally attuned and close to the child, meeting physical and emotional needs. As a parent and as a professional working with young children, I have found Winnicott’s perspective comforting! What a relief to know that my mistakes would not necessarily lead to a detrimental outcome for my children or my clients. The overall commitment to and follow-through with meeting children’s needs is critical.

### Erik Erikson’s Eight Stages of Psychological Development

Age Range	Developmental Task
0–1 year	Trust vs. Mistrust
1–3 years	Autonomy vs. Shame and Doubt
3–6 years	Initiative vs. Guilt
6–12 years	Industry vs. Inferiority
12–18 years	Identity vs. Role Confusion
18–35 years	Intimacy vs. Isolation
35–60 years	Generativity vs. Stagnation
60 years–End of Life	Integrity vs. Despair

Keep in mind that children learn through exploration, interactions, trial and error, and with the help of supportive adults. The focus or goal of teachers should not be for children to learn through subtraction: deprivation, consequences, or punishment. Old notions of teaching someone a lesson by having that person suffer in some way as a result of wrongdoing are not helpful or productive. Often, when children suffer or experience consequences, they feel shame, humiliation, and resentment. This does not mean that setting boundaries and occasionally incorporating logical consequences into a response are unnecessary; however, seek other approaches and strategies first. Children express their needs through their behavior, and it is the adult’s job to learn to understand the child’s needs and to respond appropriately. When this happens, much inappropriate behavior can be avoided, prevented, or ameliorated.

# Birth to Age One: Trust vs. Mistrust

During the first year of life, the groundwork is laid for healthy emotional functioning. The parent or caregiver must be responsive to the infant's needs most of the time. As a matter of fact, a child gradually learns to become independent through having his needs met. It is through the repeated experience of being responded to when in distress—being fed when hungry, changed when wet, held when uncomfortable, responded to when in need of human contact—that infants begin to develop trust and a deep sense that the world is an inviting place. Luckily for the sleep-deprived adults who care for them, babies arrive with lots of capacity to draw us into physical closeness with them. The softness of their little heads, the tenderness of their skin, even their smell stimulate a strong desire to hold and connect with them.

As babies begin to develop some self-soothing skills, such as sucking a thumb, finding a more comfortable physical position, playing with a mobile, and exploring their own bodies, parents and caregivers can hesitate a bit before picking the baby up when she whimpers. T. Berry Brazelton, highly regarded pediatrician and author of many books about parenting infants and toddlers, addresses the need for babies to develop self-soothing techniques. Although it is detrimental to young infants to leave them screaming in their cribs all alone, older infants benefit from having a little time to figure out how to calm themselves when they experience distress. The caregiver must use judgment, a sense of timing, sensitivity, and emotional attunement to assess the infant's state of need and then must respond accordingly.

The good news is that it is practically impossible for parents or caregivers to soothe a child each time she whimpers. As a result, babies will have many opportunities to begin to develop these self-soothing skills as they move through the first year of life.





For most babies, a balance is struck between the caregivers responding to the baby's needs and the baby beginning to develop some emerging ability to wait. As long as the balance is weighted heavily toward responsiveness, the baby moves into the second year with a feeling of safety and trust that she will be cared for. This trust enables the toddler to move into the next phase with the energy and confidence to explore the environment more autonomously.

So, what does a one-year-old who has mastered this phase look like? Such a child has a happy expression on her face much of the time; is interested and engaged in finding and exploring objects in the environment; wants to move around and engage with materials on her own; and delights in interaction with parents, caregivers, and other trusted adults. A one-year-old who has not experienced a good balance of having her needs met may look less happy, may have less interest in getting around and exploring materials in the environment, and may be more anxious about where the caregiving adults are. The sense of exhilaration in exploring the world may be muted or absent, and the child may be crabby or may become upset very easily and need a great deal of soothing and reassurance. All children will occasionally be upset and will need soothing; how much time is spent experiencing this need can indicate a less successful resolution of the task of the first year.

Following the principle that young children gradually develop the ability to be independent by having their dependency needs met, if a child appears less excited and content entering into his second year, he will need a great deal of reassurance and comfort from his parent or caregiver. He will need opportunities to explore on his own, but with lots of support to help him along the way. While some children appear not to care where the adults are as they run around the room and find toys to play with, others may need to keep the adult within sight or even close by to feel safe with such exploration. The more the adult is able to provide that support and physical presence, the more likely it is that the little one will develop the confidence to explore on his own. With very young children, the "sink or swim" approach is rarely effective. Their ability to move away on their own is connected to their sense of security and safety arising out of a trusting relationship with a dependable and emotionally available adult.

**Note:** When attempting to understand what may underlie a child's apparent unhappiness or difficult temperament, rule out any physical causes first. A child with allergies or a chronic medical condition is sure to be less content than a truly healthy one. A pediatrician should assess a little one's overall health to rule out any physical issues.

# Age One to Age Three: Autonomy vs. Shame and Doubt

The word *autonomy* means “the freedom from control or external influence; independence.” Although the drive for autonomy begins during this phase, issues related to one’s freedom and control can last throughout life. Thinking about toddlers, you may be struck by what an amazing, delightful, yet challenging period of development this is! So much is going on in those little brains, bodies, and spirits during this time. It is hard to keep up with toddlers, physically and in every other way. The two most obvious changes in toddlers are in the areas of physical mobility and language development.

## Exploration

What adult has not giggled at a toddler’s headlong rush into the larger world? It is such a joy to observe the unbridled enthusiasm and wonder with which toddlers embrace exploration. On one hand, parents or caregivers may feel relieved that their little ones are now capable of moving about on their own, needing to be held and carried less. To some extent, this frees up the adults to attend to various tasks of daily life that were a challenge when they needed to be holding an infant much of the time. On the other hand, toddlers’ explorations must be closely monitored to ensure their safety. Figuring out the balance between this newfound independence and the necessary monitoring can be challenging.

When children are able to freely explore their environments, life is exciting, and new discoveries lie around every corner. Dangers lurk as well, and adults must be constantly on the lookout to provide protection. This protection sometimes must take the form of limits, and the adult begins to say no to the child. During this phase of development, sensitive parents and caregivers should reflect on the child’s development and temperament and organize the environment in ways that prevent the need for constant limits, removing dangerous or delicate objects from the reach of little hands. Especially in classrooms, the caregiver must give

careful thought to the arrangement of toys and materials, so that many interesting things will be available for the child to explore on his own without adult intervention.

Erikson's concepts of shame and doubt refer to the possibility that a young child who is constantly limited in his explorations might begin to feel that there is something wrong with him. Exploration is a natural drive at this age. It is hardwired into our brains to seek new experiences and master physical challenges. If adults frequently become angry or irritated and limit such exploration, the child might feel that something about him is not acceptable. The goal during this phase is to provide an environment rich in stimulation and materials to explore with as few dangers as possible. Understanding that toddlers must check out whatever is around them will help the adults reflect on and organize the environment in ways that minimize conflict and the need for limits.

Two-year-old Olivia has gotten into the habit of reaching up over her head to attempt to grab paper from a high shelf, instead of taking paper kept on a lower shelf for the children's use. Sometimes she becomes quite upset when she cannot reach the paper on the high shelf, and she screams in frustration. The teacher has shown her many times that paper is available for her on a lower shelf.

One day, as Olivia is once again reaching for the paper on the higher shelf, the teacher calls out, "Olivia, I just saw some pink paper waiting for you on the shelf by your knees! I bet you can grab it before I can count to three!" Olivia looks at her teacher, then quickly finds the pink paper on her own, smiling proudly.

The teacher's understanding of Olivia's wish for autonomy helped her to find a solution to Olivia's frustration. If the teacher had responded by reminding Olivia of the rule or by removing her from the area, she would have increased Olivia's frustration. In many cases, understanding the reason for a child's behavior and being creative in redirecting her is effective.

Most teachers are familiar with the term *the terrible twos* and have experienced its meaning firsthand. While not all two-year-olds have extreme autonomy struggles, it is quite common for children between the ages of two and three to become quite firmly attached to what they want and to assert themselves fiercely when crossed. "No, I won't!" or

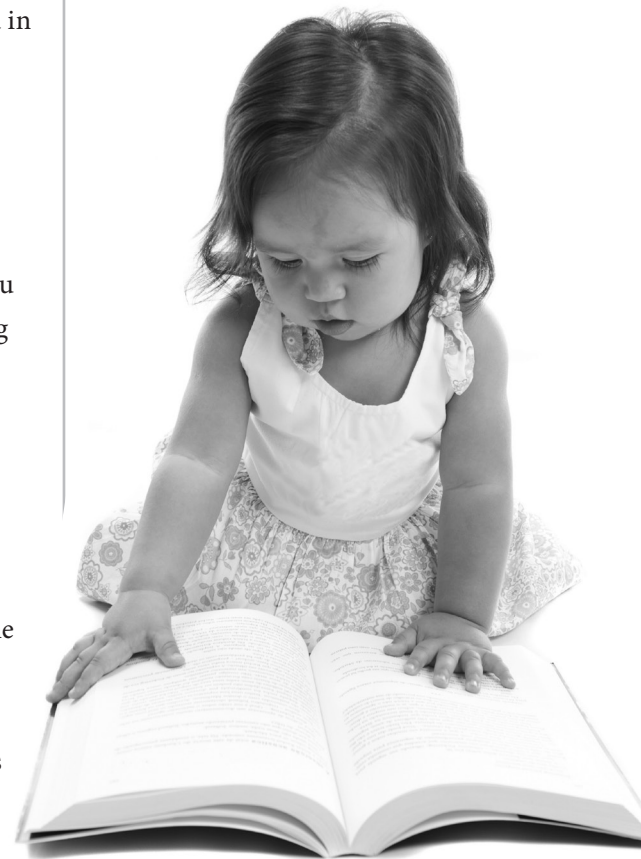
“No! Mine!” are common expressions among this crowd. Teachers of two-year-olds must plan carefully to avoid situations in which they make direct commands; they must be very creative in how they communicate expectations in the classroom.

One of the messages I frequently give to early childhood educators in workshops relates to young children’s developmental “job.” When teachers complain about controlling, challenging, or defiant young children, I attempt to reframe this behavior by explaining that, in a way, this is part of the child’s job. Young children are in the business of exploring their world. They see that they are smaller and less powerful than adults; yet, they want to have as much control over their experiences as possible. Therefore, it is their developmental job to push the limits, to see how far they can go, to find out how much control they can have. At the same time, we must remember what constitutes our job: providing young children the opportunities they need to explore safely, to begin to make choices, and to have some power over themselves within clear limits and safe boundaries. It is actually quite frightening for young children to not experience safe boundaries and limits to their explorations and demands. Although they may fight against these limits, when presented in a reasonable, caring, yet firm way, limits are deeply comforting.

Understanding the two-year-old’s need to feel in control of himself in a big, grownup world will enable teachers to find ways of engaging cooperation without confrontations. “As soon as the toys are put away, we’re going to go outside to play!” is a much wiser comment than, “If you don’t put the toys away, we can’t go out to play!” Finding ways of gaining compliance through understanding what motivates young children and capturing their interests and will go a long way toward maintaining peaceful toddler classrooms.

## Language Development

Sometimes, as toddlers develop more language skills, adults may become confused about setting limits. For young children, receptive language develops first; a young child understands many more words or phrases than he can say. Expressive language, the words and phrases the child is able to say, develops a bit later.



It is often a joy for parents and caregivers to say to a toddler, “Go get your baby doll! Let’s put on her clothes!” and see the little one go right over to the toy shelf and bring the baby doll and her dress to the caregiver. However, this recognition of the young child’s developing receptive language skills can lead adults to have unrealistic expectations. Many an adult has insisted, in expressing his frustration with the young child’s perceived disobedience, “But he knows perfectly well what *no* means!” This may be true, but there is frequently a vast distance between cognitively understanding what the word *no* means and actually having enough self-control to stop an action. This is why adults must continue to use physical intervention and distraction to set limits with toddlers, even well beyond the time when the children understand the meanings of the adults’ words.

Through the repeated experience of being gently physically stopped, the child develops the ability to stop herself. Calling out, “No!” from across the room and then getting aggravated that the toddler continues to play in the dirt surrounding the houseplant is not an appropriate response. Instead, it is better to get up and go over to the child and explain, “The plant’s dirt is not for playing. Let’s get you a bin of sand to play with!” Then the adult can take the child by the hand and lead her away from the houseplant. Recognizing that this kind of response is required for the toddler to remain safe while she learns appropriate exploration behavior will help adults feel less stressed and frustrated when toddlers seem to be ignoring them.

Mark heads over to the puzzle table only to find that Theo is working on the puzzle he planned to use. The teacher knows that Mark loves horses and that there is another horse puzzle in the puzzle rack. She kneels down and says, “Mark, Theo is doing that horse puzzle right now, but I know you love the one with the purple horse. That puzzle is in the rack waiting just for you! See if you can find it!”

The teacher’s physical proximity and redirection help to reduce the likelihood that this emerging conflict between the children will progress to pushing, grabbing, or shoving—common behaviors at this age.

## Separation

Another developmental task for toddlers is learning to manage their feelings about separation from their parents if they are cared for regularly by child care providers. Although infants also experience feelings of separation from their parents, the responsibility for supporting them lies with the adults who care for them. Infants do not yet have the necessary language or motor skills to work through such feelings on their own. Comforting and consistent goodbye routines are essential to help ease the transition. Solid communication between home and child care provider is critical for maintaining patterns of caregiving that make sense to the child and provide continuity between home and child care.

As infants move into toddlerhood and can explore their environment more independently, they often express their feelings about separation through their emerging language and their behaviors. This is the period in which many young children develop attachments to transitional objects or “lovies,” beloved toys or blankets that symbolize their attachment to their family. For many toddlers, having such objects with them helps them to feel secure. Often a toddler will need his lovie to go to sleep at nap time or to hold while he transitions into the classroom in the morning. This can present a challenge to program staff, who may be understandably concerned about how to keep these objects safe and not lose track of them.

Because of such concerns, sometimes child care programs develop rules restricting the use of such transitional objects. Some do not allow children to bring them at all; others require children to keep their lovies in their backpacks or their cubbies while they are in the classroom. Such rules represent attempts to maintain order, but, unfortunately, that order is achieved at the expense of meeting young children’s emotional needs. Because a transitional object represents the child’s sense of comfort and security, not allowing the child access to it sends the message that the child’s need for security is not important. When considered through the lens of child development, transitional objects should be welcomed at school, and staff must make an effort to ensure that these objects will not be lost or damaged. A common strategy for accomplishing this may include allowing a child to hold the lovie until he is ready to play with toys in the classroom, at which time he can place his lovie in his cubby. If a child feels needy during the day, he should feel free to go and get his lovie.

Sometimes a special soft chair or perhaps the cozy reading area with large pillows and books can be the spot where the child can hold and cuddle his transitional object, emotionally refueling himself so that he can continue his day.

At the beginning of a program, when young children are just starting to come to a child care center, it is hugely helpful if staff allow those who are especially attached to their transitional objects to carry them around for a period of time, perhaps the first week or two. This demands a great deal of attention and supervision from caregivers, but the sense of comfort and security it provides is well worth the effort. Young children adjust much more easily to the child care environment when they can keep their sense of comfort with them!

Understanding the psychological meaning of a child's wish for his transitional object can help teachers have more appropriate expectations for the child and provide the necessary supports for the child to function more successfully. Taking the extra time to think about these needs and to plan for them ends up making caregivers' lives easier, because the children feel more secure and welcome and thus are less likely to engage in negative behaviors.

Ayisha is two years old and has been in a full-day child care program for one year. She has grown attached to a particular doll in the housekeeping area. Each morning when she arrives, she goes to find "her" doll, picks it up, and carries it around with her for much of the morning. One day she arrives a bit later than usual, and another child has chosen to play with the doll. Ayisha marches right over to the child and grabs the doll, shouting, "Mine!"

The caregiver has some choices in responding to this situation. Focusing on the communality of classroom materials, she could take the position that this is an opportunity to insist on sharing. She could point out that all of the dolls are available to anyone who would like to play with them, possibly offering Ayisha a different doll. Most likely, that will not satisfy Ayisha, and she will protest loudly.

Another choice could be to explain to Susie that the doll she chose is Ayisha's favorite doll, and it helps her settle down when she arrives in the



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