



Respecting Infants & Toddlers: Strategies for Best Practice

By Terri Jo Swim, Ph.D

Respect. What does this term mean for infant and toddler teachers? Can or should this word be used to describe teachers' behaviors when interacting with very young children? Before such questions can be answered, a definition of respect must be established. Use the following prompts to assist with thinking about your definition of respect.

Stop and Ponder: Take a moment to write down your personal definition of respect.

Reflect: 1) Circle the features that are vital to your definition (i.e., these aspects could not be removed without greatly altering your definition), and 2) Identify features that seem less important to your definition. Cross them out. What remains? Review your new definition. Does it more succinctly reflect your beliefs?

Now, compare your definition with the one found in the American Heritage® Dictionary of the English Language (2000):

- To feel or show differential regard for
- To avoid violation of or interference with
- The state of being regarded with honor or esteem
- Willingness to show consideration or appreciation

Although the dictionary definition may initially seem clear-cut, its application to teachers of infants and toddlers is not immediately apparent. Is it respectful, for example, for a teacher to pick up an infant without preparing the child for the move? Is it respectful of a toddler to encourage her to make decisions? Is it respectful of an infant teacher to secure interesting posters to the wall for the children to look at? Is it respectful of a teacher to teach toddlers how to interact with one another? Your definition, more than likely, already connects closely to your behavior. This article will present examples of how we can translate the formal definition of respect into useful examples of behaviors with young children.

Demonstrating Respect

If we declare respect an educational value (Rinaldi, 2001), then we need to consider both personal and professional basis for this decision. As an individual, your beliefs are impacted by current and past experiences, such as how you are regarded by your supervisor or coworkers and how you were treated in your family of origin or in educational settings. Both positive and negative experiences give shape and form to your belief system. The early childhood profession clearly desires to minimize negative influences and maximize positive ones. Hence, guidelines for best practice clearly articulate respect as the basis for appropriate interactions with very young children and families (Bredenkamp & Copple, 1997; Gonzalez-Mena & Eyer, 2001; Herr & Swim, 2002; Lally et al, 1995; NAEYC, 1998; Swim and Muza, 1999). Demonstrating respect is not just about feeling good; for young children, it is about adults acting intentionally to promote optimal development and learning. As Herr and Swim (2003) state, "Respect must be demonstrated in your behaviors. More importantly, respect for infants and toddlers must be something that emanates from inside of you. You have to believe that infants and toddlers are worthy of your time and attention as individuals, because a respectful relationship is vital to all aspects of child development" (p. 9).

As individuals and as a profession, our understanding of respect has been expanded by the work and writing of educators in Reggio Emilia, Italy (see, for example, Edwards, Gandini, & Foreman, 1998). They believe that children must be viewed as having rights, rather than simply needs (Ghedini, 2001; Malaguzzi, 1993; Rinaldi, 1998). If we concur that one of our basic human rights is to be respected and treated in a respectful manner, then we have to begin at birth building a strong foundation for the development of respect. What better way to teach respect than to intentionally demonstrate it during your work (e.g., when planning environments and experiences or when interacting) with young children?

Let's take two components of the definition of respect provided earlier and present specific examples with very young children. These examples will illustrate how to apply the abstract definition of respect to our work with infants and toddlers.

"To Avoid Interfering With" Allow Time

When adults allow time for children to try and/or to complete a task before providing assistance or necessary intervention, they are demonstrating respect. Infants and toddlers are reveling in their newly acquired skills. However, mastery only comes with repeated opportunities for practice. In addition to providing time for mastery, teachers must purposely monitor the type and degree of support provided. In order to know how best to respond, adults must be intimately familiar with the needs, interests, and abilities of the infants and toddlers in their care (Bredenkamp & Copple, 1997; Lally et al, 1995; Swim & Muza, 1999). For some children, it may be sufficient to provide a verbal explanation or question while other children may require physical assistance. Watch, however, that you do not rely on one approach too much. All children need a balance of responses so that they can perfect skills and view themselves as capable.

Consider this scene:

A toddler walks out of the bathroom with water dripping from his hands. The teacher asks the toddler, "Did you get your hands dried?" The toddler stops and looks at his hands. He shakes his head "no." The teacher asks, "Do you need me to get you another paper towel or can you get it yourself?" The toddler smiles at her and returns to the bathroom.

Encourage Children to Make Choices

Another way to think about “refraining from interfering with” is to allow young children to make choices or decisions. This aspect includes not only the explicit choices you provide throughout a day, but also the choices children make independently. Children, especially toddlers, need to be provided choices to help them feel in control of their environment (Marion, 2003). Additionally, when you accept an idea that a toddler has generated independently you are sending the message that she has worthy ideas.

Consider this scene:

Jacki, a family child care provider, is caring for 5 children on a warm, but drizzly, summer afternoon. One child is asleep, one is upset so Jacki is walking with her, and the other three are engaged in quiet activities. Miranda, a toddler, is looking out the window and decides she wants to go outside and “stomp in puddle.” Jacki considers the mess it might make, but then remembers the fun she had jumping in puddles. She considers the potential hazards (e.g., lightning) and sets some clear limits for Miranda’s behavior. Miranda races outside, jumps in the first puddle she comes to, and turns to look back at Jacki in the window, clearly proud that she made such a good decision to go outside!

Value Individual Styles

We can also demonstrate respect by valuing individual children’s ways of doing and being. Not all children are vivacious and outgoing, for example. Some children like to observe from a distance before joining others in play. Letting them observe and join in the play when they are ready shows that you respect their style of initiating interactions. Moreover, children, like adults, have special routines or unique ways of doing things. Close observation and documentation on your part, coupled with frequent, open communication with families, will help you to understand each child’s unique characteristics and know how to respond respectfully to these characteristics.

Consider this scene:

Hector and Miguel are two children in a mixed-age classroom (birth – 3 years) in a full-day child care program. They are both on the rug building independent structures with unit blocks. Simone crawls over to the edge of the carpet and watches them. She touches a block and babbles. “Simone,” the teacher says, “you are watching them build.” Simone looks at him, babbles again, and begins to crawl towards the mirror hanging on the wall.

“To Regard with Honor or Esteem” Create Meaningful Environments

We show children that they are worthy as individuals and deserving of high regard when we create environments and experiences that are meaningful. A key component of best practices is providing age-appropriate, individual, and culturally appropriate experiences that have intellectual integrity (Bredenkamp & Copple, 1997). In other words, the children are engaged in experiences that are relevant to their lives and lead to greater understanding of the world and their places in it. One way to deepen understanding is to engage in on-going investigations with young children (Helm & Beneke, 2003; Helm & Katz, 2001; Katz & Chard, 1989). Projects to help the children “see the extraordinary in the ordinary” (Gandini, January 27, 2001, personal communication) are particularly engaging for older toddlers. In other words, you do not have to create projects on “novel” topics. Listen to the children with your eyes and ears. What are they doing? What interests them? What do they babble or talk about? Use this information to plan experiences and investigations that support and enhance all areas of development.

Consider this scene with infants:

Tanya cares for two infants in her home. She has created special spots for them to gather and talk about families. Although they are different ages, Diego and Nerida are both experiencing separation anxiety. They are visibly distressed when their family members leave and take several minutes to calm down. Tanya laminated and displayed at the children’s eye level several pictures of both children’s family members so that she could converse with the infants throughout the day about those they miss. She also uses those photographs to talk about similarities and differences between Diego’s and Nerida’s families.

Consider this scene with toddlers:

Josy notices that Maya and Peter want to help when she sweeps the floor after lunch. She wonders if they would be interested in investigating brooms. She places a variety of brooms with different functions around the inside and outside environments. For example, she places a feather duster in the dramatic play area that is set up as a home. Beside the sensory table filled with dirt, she places a dust broom and pan. Outside, she leaves a push broom next to the building that is adjacent to the tricycle path.

Before the children arrive, she hypothesizes about how the children will use the brooms and questions she can ask. She predicts that the children will notice the differences among the brooms and so she will ask questions about how the design (e.g., shape, size) of the broom influences its function. She is also interested in provoking thinking about how two children can use one broom at the same time. Maybe later in the week or next week they can consider how to modify a broom for two people. Josy considers different ways to have the children communicate their understanding about brooms and, therefore, has available pencils, fine- and felt-tipped pens, white paper, and clay.

Teach Interaction Skills

Young children are inherently social. They interact with others long before they are verbal or can physically move to be in close proximity to others. Infants possess many strategies, such as cooing or smiling, for getting others to attend to them. Even with this high level of social interest and strategies for gaining attention, infants and toddlers lack other necessary skills (e.g., perspective-taking, problem-solving, and emotional regulation) to be successful when interacting with each other. Responsible adults perform most of an infant’s or toddler’s ego functions (e.g., reminding the child about appropriate behavior), thereby regulating the young child’s social interactions for her (Marion, 2003). Thus, these adults do not expect very young children to be able to interact successfully with others. They realistically anticipate devoting significant amounts of time each day to helping children interact with one another and employ several strategies for this purpose. To illustrate, adults can read the nonverbal communication cues for children, describe appropriate behavior, and then allow time for interaction while maintaining close supervision.

Consider this scene:

Three infants are sitting in bouncy seats in a carpeted area. While positioning the seats so that all of the infants can see one another, the adult comments that, “It’s time to talk to our friends.” Skye begins to babble and looks at the adult. The adult says, “Yes, you are excited to see Rashid. He wasn’t here yesterday.” The adult leaves, providing time and space for the infants to interact with one

another.

Listen to the Children

We communicate respect for young children when we listen to their ideas, feelings, and dreams. Listening to children who possess language is considerably easier than listening to preverbal children. Yet, as caregivers of infants and toddlers, we have to engage in the struggle to decide, "What is she trying to communicate with crying?" or "What does he want when he points towards the door?" When we listen to the children and respond accordingly, it communicates that they and their ideas are important. Utilizing their ideas when planning curriculum not only recognizes the different potential of each child, but also reflects guidelines for developmentally appropriate practices. This also supports the notion that "All children have the potential, albeit in different ways, to learn and to develop their own ideas, theories, and strategies. All children also have the right to be supported in these endeavors by adults. Teachers and parents, therefore, should observe and listen to them" (Gandini & Goldhaber, 2001, p. 125).

Consider this scene:

Evelyn is standing at the Bye, Bye Window (Herr & Swim, 2003) watching her grandfather walk away from the building. Her fists are clenched and tears are streaming down her cheeks. The adult sits quietly beside her before saying, "You are mad that Granddad left. You wanted to leave with him." Evelyn leans against the adult and continues to cry. The adult comforts her by stating, "Granddad was sad to leave you also. He had fun playing peek-a-boo with you. But Granddad has to go to work. He'll be back after afternoon snack."

Conclusion

Now that several examples of respectful interactions have been provided, it is time to take a moment to reflect on your interactions with young children.

Stop and Ponder: How do you show respect to the infants and toddlers in your care? What behaviors support your beliefs? What behaviors conflict with your beliefs? Say, for a moment, that a parent was observing your work with young children. How would she know that you respect young children?

It may, at first, seem hard to demonstrate respect to infants and toddlers because we are unaccustomed to thinking about very young children in this manner. In fact, it may seem easier to demonstrate respect to infants rather than toddlers. Toddlers are experiencing a developmental "tug of war" between the desire to do tasks independently and the necessity to depend on others to meet their needs. This milestone places significant stress on toddlers and adults. However, we cannot lose sight of the fact that respect is a key component in best practices and for meeting the developmental needs of infants and toddlers. This article, hopefully, has provided concrete examples of how to apply the abstract definition of respect when working with infants and toddlers.

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