

Teacher Practices with Toddlers During Social Problem Solving Opportunities

Lissy Gloeckler · Jennifer Cassell

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Abstract This article explores how teachers can foster an environment that facilitates social problem solving when toddlers experience conflict, emotional dysregulation, and aggression. This article examines differences in child development and self-regulation outcomes when teachers engage in problem solving *for* toddlers and problem solving *with* toddlers. It also reviews teacher practices aimed at preventing problems. The article suggests a paradigm shift from perceiving social challenges as toddler problems to viewing such situations as problem solving opportunities. The article concludes by applying these principles to an actual classroom dispute among toddlers.

Keywords Toddlers · Problem solving · Self-regulation · Challenging behavior · Teacher practices

Introduction

During the toddler years (15–36 months) children learn the rudimentary skills of self-care as they interact with others (Copple et al. 2009). Children are eager to explore the environment, eat on their own, use words to communicate, and participate in activities they see adults perform. They are also learning how to cooperate, ask for what they want and need, take turns, and listen to others. As toddlers develop these early skills, teachers begin to support different kinds of problem solving. For example, teachers

allow toddlers extra time for trial and error while eating with utensils or putting on a sweater for outside play.

Teachers of toddlers also provide emotional support when they observe toddlers struggling with social challenges. They may supply words, simple scripts, choices, or physical assistance as strategies for resolution during conflicts. During the brief but frequent episodes of toddler conflict, adults' reminders of toddlers' and others' perspectives and prosocial suggestions for dealing with frustrating situations provide opportunities for toddlers to develop a healthy self-esteem and understand positive human relationships. Just as toddlers develop different levels of independence in response to the care they receive for their physical needs, the *frequency* and *method* by which teachers provide social emotional scaffolding also suggests varied developmental outcomes for children.

Toddlers as Social Problem Solvers

As toddlers' freedom to move and play in the classroom increases, conflict among them is inevitable (Chen 2003). Because typical toddlers have limited awareness of another's point of view and often lack the language skills needed to explain what is wrong and what they want, they have been described as happily playing one moment and then crying and clinging to the caregiver the next (Lieberman 1993; Mahler et al. 2000). Toddler conflicts are usually short in duration and commonly involve toy ownership or turn taking (Chen 2003). Learning "what belongs to me" versus "what belongs to you" can be a source of many toddler challenges, yet understanding another's viewpoint is primary in being able to engage in simple problem solving (Chen et al. 2001; Elliott and Gonzalez-Mena 2011).

L. Gloeckler (✉) · J. Cassell
Department of Human Development and Learning,
East Tennessee State University, Box 70548,
Johnson City, TN 37614, USA
e-mail: Gloeckle@etsu.edu

Typical toddler can be seen pushing or pulling on a toy another child is holding that they believe is theirs, no matter how it got in the other child's hands. Toddlers may hit and bite to gain access to materials they want, appearing to have little regard for another's view (Kovach and Da Ros 1998). Likewise, because their brains are not fully developed, they have immature regulatory skills and need adult assistance to manage emotions and behaviors (Bronson 2000; Bruno 2011). When upset, the typical toddler may respond with his or her entire body—pushing and pulling, biting, hitting, and kicking. These moments can be frustrating for both toddlers and their teachers.

One of the teacher's goals is to support toddlers in moving from using their whole bodies when responding to an upset, to more mature ways of responding that include an increased use of emotion regulation strategies and language to express feelings (Hyson 2004). As adults act as external regulators of toddlers' emotions and behaviors, children develop the emotional control needed to self-regulate (Shonkoff et al. 2000; Thompson 2009). Then, as emotion regulation increases, the teacher may focus the child's attention on interactions with others via simple problem solving. Through teachers addressing social challenges with their full attention, offering comfort as needed, and asking questions, it is reasonable to expect that toddlers will learn appropriate language to express emotions and state their needs.

Teachers may assist toddlers in understanding another's perspective by describing emotions, discussing the consequences of actions on others, and providing alternatives. Toddlers' vocabulary is increased as children are provided with a language rich environment (Dickinson and Tabors 2002; Hart and Risley 1999). Responsive caregivers who engage in conversations with toddlers during social challenges help them learn to use words to ask for what they need to negotiate and solve problems.

Problem Prevention

Prevention of problems and watching for safety concerns is a natural part of a teacher's day; these are standard practices of highly effective and caregivers.

The Physical Environment

The very act of setting up the physical classroom environment in a developmentally appropriate way shows that teachers are acting to reduce the number of problems likely to occur. Designing the classroom environment to match the interest level of the children and creating predictable routines and transitions that keep the toddlers engaged in authentic and natural ways, helps maximize learning

opportunities and reduce problems. Child sized furniture allows greater access to materials and equipment; it increases learning opportunities while decreasing accidents and problems. Likewise, schedules driven by the children's needs rather than the adult's needs result in toddlers who are more likely to remain engaged, focused, and self-regulated (Coppole et al. 2009; Isbell and Exelby 2001).

The Social Emotional Environment

Teachers can support the development of a positive social emotional climate by engaging with children in reciprocal interactions. Those teachers who are truly present with children, use an appropriate tone of voice for the context, and model respect to toddlers in verbal and nonverbal ways demonstrate that they care for them and about them (Dombro et al. 2011; National Scientific Council on the Developing Child 2004). Additionally, teachers who offer warm, responsive, predictable care enable toddlers to focus on exploring the environment to engage in learning opportunities like social problem solving, while knowing that they can return to the teacher for comfort and support as challenges arise (Gloeckler and Niemeier 2010). Over time, these sensitive interactions build a secure relationship between the teacher and child, where the teacher routinely scaffolds the child's learning and offers supports for his or her self-regulatory efforts.

Social Emotional Curriculum

Embedding social emotional activities throughout daily routines strengthens the emotional tone and classroom climate. When teachers spend time pointing out emotions in stories, singing transition songs about emotions, and using mirror play to engage children in forming and labeling different facial expressions, the activities show toddlers that their feelings are as important as their thoughts, and their emotional development is as important as their cognitive abilities (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child 2007).

Teachers should be both physically and emotionally available to toddlers during daily routines like diaper changing; their availability provides individual *me* time for the toddler. Magda Gerber called the time when a child receives the undivided attention of his or her teacher *magic moments*. That is when a child is emotionally *fed* with the adult's words, gestures, and laughter (Van der Zande and Santa Cruz Toddler Care Center 1995). Predictable daily routines and activities that focus on social emotional skills build relationships and provide security to children, resulting in fewer problems (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child 2004).

Proactive Practices

In addition to structuring the environment to promote child engagement and providing activities to support development of social emotional skills, proactive teachers prevent problems by anticipating and acting when they see a potential accident. When a child splashes water out of the water table, the teacher may ask the child to help find a towel to clean it up so no one is hurt. The teacher who knows a toddler struggles during a certain activity may offer extra support to scaffold the child and prevent an accident. And a teacher who remains near a young child climbing the big slide for the first time is likely to offer help to enable a successful accomplishment.

Proactive practices are not only about physical health and safety but are also used to offer support when children may be overstimulated, tired, or are challenged to self-regulate. Findings of a descriptive study on teacher practices with toddlers during problem solving opportunities indicated that the greatest number of conflicts and emotional dysregulation occurred during transition times (Gloeckler 2009). Being proactive means teachers prevent problems by providing activities during transitions and offer help for children to maintain emotional balance and self-control. For example, during hand washing and transition to lunchtime, a proactive teacher remembers to engage hungry children in a favorite song that will help them regulate their emotions and behaviors as they move from one activity to another. Furthermore, the teacher who understands the needs of his or her children may take action to alleviate the stress of morning arrival by offering comfort to a child who cries while separating from his or her family. Having an awareness and sensitivity to what is occurring in the moment with individual children and the group, along with wise decision making, maintains the emotional tone and balance of the classroom and prevents many problems.

Promoting Self-Regulation

Prevention is only the beginning of establishing an environment for positive social emotional growth, problem solving, and self-regulation. Findings of a pilot study by the authors (Gloeckler and Cassell in press) revealed that when social conflict and physical aggression occur, toddler teachers typically engage in one of two forms of problem solving: problem solving *for* toddlers or problem solving *with* toddlers. Kovach and Da Ros (1998) noted that a primary concern for teachers of toddlers is keeping the peace. As a result, teachers may engage primarily in problem solving *for* toddlers. While both have value, there is a difference in child social development and self-

regulation outcomes when teachers engage in the process of problem solving *for* toddlers rather than problem solving *with* toddlers.

Problem Solving for Toddlers

Problem solving *for* toddlers involves teachers who actively intervene when social challenges arise and address the problem or conflict *for* the children with little or no input from them. When teachers solve problems *for* toddlers, the goal appears to be to end the problem behavior quickly. Teacher language may be brief or not used at all. Teacher strategies may include distraction, redirection, and commands or reminders of class rules and procedures. Teachers frequently solve problems *for* toddlers in situations when safety is a concern. For example, teachers are quick to remove a toddler who stands on a table or chair and intervene when a child throws sand at a peer. Teachers may remind children of class rules (keep your hands to yourself, one person at a time, use your walking feet, or our teeth are not for biting one another) and have children complete or demonstrate the expected behavior. Removing a toddler to a quiet or calm down area may be another strategy that teachers use when solving problems *for* a child.

Social problem solving *for* toddlers may occur during conflicts over toys and materials. For example, Micah may attempt to take a toy camera away from Emily. When solving a problem *for* the toddlers, the teacher may remind Micah of the class rule, take the toy away from him, and return it to Emily, saying, “Emily had the toy first and she can keep it until she is done”. The teacher could take the solution a step further and *redirect* Micah’s attention to another toy camera, a book, or a new activity of the teacher’s choosing. Whatever action the teacher takes, the goal seems to be to end the problem behavior and restore classroom peace.

A Paradigm Shift to Problem Solving Opportunities

Although solving problems *for* toddlers alleviates problem behaviors in the classroom, these teacher practices do not transition children to more independent methods of self-expression or social self-care (Kovach and Da Ros 1998). When a teacher solves problems *for* toddlers, he or she may be speaking *at* the toddlers rather than *with* them and the toddlers may experience little or no opportunity to respond or explain their needs.

As toddlers develop, teachers trust them to state their physical needs, feed themselves, wash their hands, and use the bathroom with increasing skill. It is critical that

toddlers, therefore, be given the same opportunities to develop a framework for solving social problems with support for their self-regulation and language development. Effective toddler teachers will therefore, balance prevention of problems in the classroom with allowing a certain number of problems to occur that will provide opportunities for engagement in the problem solving process. These problems provide specific and authentic *in the moment* opportunities for learning language, cooperation, perspective taking, and empathy.

What is needed is a paradigm shift that views challenging social situations as problem solving opportunities rather than toddler problems. A problem solving opportunity occurs when “a child fails to manage his or her level of arousal and expresses strong (positive or negative) emotion or behaves in a manner disruptive or harmful to self or others” (Gloeckler and La Paro 2009, p. 1). Rather than perceiving the toddlers as the problem or their behaviors as transitory for their age, the effective teacher understands that children lack emotion regulation and simple problem solving skills. Therefore, the teacher recognizes the great potential and benefit of teaching these developmental tasks. Within problem solving opportunities, the teacher engages children in the problem solving process during daily routines in an attempt to establish patterns of behavior that will serve as the framework for conflict resolution life skills (Butterfield 2002). In other words, teachers systematically target social problems as teaching opportunities and increase toddlers’ involvement in choosing solutions to common classroom problems.

Problem Solving with Toddlers

Problem solving with toddlers is a process that engages the teacher and children in thinking about what has occurred (the problem) and how it may be resolved (conflict

resolution). Problem solving *with* toddlers takes into consideration several teacher practices such as labeling children’s emotions, assisting them in managing their level of excitement or upset, offering choices, and listening to children’s opinions and needs. When looking at the conflict as a teaching opportunity, rather than charging one child with blame, teachers who may not have witnessed the entire problem often ask questions about the situation. Teachers intentionally ask open ended questions not only to understand the problem from the children’s perspective but also to acknowledge the goals of all children involved.

When children experience the opportunity to communicate, teachers help them learn specific strategies to deal with problems. Teachers can provide scripts, “Maya, instead of hitting, say *I’m mad!*” “Can you say, *I don’t like that!?*” Teachers may suggest alternative behaviors, “When you feel mad, you can go over to the calm down area and take a break”. “When you feel mad, you can give yourself a hug and breathe deep, like this [model the action]”. Moving to resolution means teachers and children together choose an option and try it out. Table 1 provides a comparison of teacher practices used when problem solving *for* and *with* toddlers.

What are Toddlers Learning?

Toddler teachers who reflect on their use of their practices when problem solving *for* and problem solving *with* toddlers will realize that both methods have value. Solving problems *for* children can limit the duration and intensity of problems. Problem solving *for* toddlers may be needed when multiple problems occur simultaneously. However, when teacher practices prevent all problems from occurring or solve all problems *for* toddlers, children receive little real or meaningful practice with successful social conflict resolution.

Table 1 Problem solving for and with toddlers

Teacher practices when problem solving for toddlers	Teacher practices when problem solving with toddlers
The teacher may use distraction, redirection, or physically remove a child from the location of the problem	The teacher may offer comfort and touch as appropriate and identify emotions in order to initiate problem solving or so problem solving can occur
The teacher identifies the problem and ends it quickly	The teacher invites discussion of the situation, describes, and asks open ended questions.
The teacher gives directions, warnings, and reminders; the teacher makes the decision about how the problem should be resolved	The teacher invites children’s participation and offers choices, alternatives, and asks the children open ended questions about their ideas
The teacher is brief and uses little teacher language or allows little child language	The teacher gives the child or children simple scripts for self-expression
The teacher holds the responsibility to manage and solve problems. Children learn that it is the teacher’s job to solve problems	The teacher and children together hold the responsibility to manage and solve problems. Children learn to self-regulate, how to problem solve, and learn strategies to take care of themselves during challenging situations

With the help of their teacher, toddlers who experience social conflict learn to manage disagreement and negotiation while learning language, decision making, empathy, and other vital social skills leading to the development of social competence (Chen 2003). Problem solving with toddlers provides a framework for learning how to effectively interact and relate to one another—a key component of social competence (Denham 2005). If teachers rely solely on problem solving *for* toddlers, they must ask, “What are toddlers learning?” Toddlers may hear little language about emotions, may perceive that they have few (if any) choices, and may learn that it is the teacher’s responsibility to resolve problems.

When toddler teachers only provide children with a “teacher will solve this” framework for social conflict, toddlers experience little motivation to use emotion regulation strategies or language because, essentially, their voices are not heard. The socially aware toddler teacher strives to increase his or her problem solving *with* strategies, especially as children develop increasing language skills and an interest in peers.

When solving problems *with* toddlers, teachers must consider how they can incorporate more teacher language and opportunity for child response into their problem solving routines. Teachers can increase their own language by offering matter-of-fact details about toddler behavior, labeling emotions, proposing intentions, and offering simple scripts. When teachers provide opportunities to discuss emotions, children begin to recognize facial expressions and emotional cues—a concept called emotion knowledge (Denham et al. 2003; Izard et al. 2001). Children who have learned language that can be used when they are upset are also less likely to strike out at others (Eaton 1997). Toddlers’ language use may be increased by suggesting words when they cannot find the language for self-expression and by asking simple open ended questions, “What happened?” “What do you want?” “How do you feel?” Toddler teachers can also increase children’s communication and language by offering toddlers choices.

When a toddler encounters a choice during an activity or problem, the child learns that he or she has some power and control in daily situations (Van der Zande and Santa Cruz Toddler Care Center 1995). The toddler learns to use language more effectively to express thoughts and ask for what he or she wants or needs (Watson 2003). Children learn that problem solving means talking about what happened, considering what to do differently next time, and having choices about how to resolve challenges. Children also realize that when challenges arise, they can count on the teacher to help in developing a peaceful solution that includes their opinions and desires. This framework for resolving problems supports the overall sense of classroom community where each child is treated with respect and their view is heard.

Teachers who engage toddlers in the problem solving process move them along the continuum of social skill development. Toddlers transition from using their whole bodies when responding to challenges to a disposition of independence in which they are able to make choices that involve increased use of language and culturally acceptable social behaviors. They move from “mine, mine, mine” to considering another’s perspective—a critical skill in the development of social competence (Chen et al. 2001; Denham 2005).

Two Problem Solving Scenarios

The problem solving scenarios shown here provide an opportunity to examine how a teacher’s response might look when he or she problem solves *for* the children or *with* the children.

Scenario 1

Mickey gives Joseph a hug, but Mickey squeezes too long or too tightly and Joseph starts to cry.

Problem Solving for Mickey and Joseph

The teacher says, “Mickey move away. Joseph does not want a hug”. Mickey releases Joseph and the crying stops.

Problem Solving with Mickey and Joseph

The teacher stoops down to the children’s level, offers comfort, and calms Joseph. The teacher asks, “Joseph, are you OK?” “Mickey, I like that you wanted to give Joseph a hug, but do you see that Joseph is crying?” “Why do you think he has tears?” “Joseph, do you want to tell Mickey that he hugged you too tightly?” “Mickey can you give Joseph a gentle hug?” Once the children are calm and have discussed the problem, they are more able to understand each others’ perspective and agree on a solution to the problem.

Scenario 2

Seth and Mark are playing next to each other on the carpet. Mark picks up a toy truck that is next to Seth. Seth shouts “NO!” Mark continues to roll the truck on the carpet. Seth bites Mark and grabs the truck. Mark cries.

Problem Solving for Mark and Seth

The teacher may say, “No biting!” “Mark, give Seth back his truck. He had it first and was playing with it”. Mark

gives the truck back to Seth, and the teacher returns to her former activity.

Problem Solving with Mark and Seth

The teacher stoops down to the children's level and offers comfort first. As emotions are calmed, the teacher asks, "Are you okay, Mark?" "What happened, Mark?" "What happened, Seth?" As the teacher listens, Mark and Seth may each have simple words or gestures (nodding, pointing) to express their views. The teacher may say, "Biting hurts, Seth". "Do you see that Mark is crying?" "Biting hurts". The teacher may describe the problem, "You both want the same truck", and offer a variety of suggestions (mindful to offer a limited number of age appropriate choices), "Is there another truck on the shelf, so you can each have one?" "Do you want to take turns playing with the truck?" "Maybe one of you could drive the truck and the other could be the gas station for when the truck needs gas". "What should we do?"

With discussion, the teacher and children resolve the problem together in a way that makes peace and allows each child the opportunity to engage in the problem solving process. Children learn not only that biting and hitting prevents them from accomplishing their goals but also that when a problem occurs they can do something other than bite or hit. They can trust that the teacher will help them make good choices.

Conclusion

Toddlerhood is an exciting time for developing independence and self-care. Teachers assist toddlers as they transition from diapers to independently using the bathroom. Toddler teachers arrange the room so that toddlers can trade their cribs for "big kid" cots and mats. Teachers aid toddlers during lunch as they swap their bottles for cups, plates, and spoons. Teachers encourage toddlers to use words to describe what they want or need. Teachers also have the opportunity to support children as they move from external emotional regulation to increased internal emotional regulation and the beginning use of social skill strategies (Thompson 2009).

Using a combination of prevention, problem solving for toddlers, and problem solving with toddlers, teachers establish a firm foundation for healthy emotional regulation and positive social strategies. As toddlers grow and encounter higher expectations from adults for socially appropriate behaviors, they grow into preschoolers and primary age children who are equipped with words and strategies to assist them during social challenges in a variety of settings.

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