

Caring for the Little Ones

by Karen Miller



Dear Reader,

I asked Heather Wenig to write about toddlers and ritual when I heard her talk about this at the Midwest AEYC conference in April. Her (unedited!) article points out a key characteristic of toddlers. It's how they develop a sense of power in a world that is so unpredictable for them. I'd be very interested in continuing this topic. Please write to me at the address at the end of this column and share rituals you and toddlers have developed to smooth your days and any other insights you have about the topic.

Because of the publication schedule, we skip an issue before I can include your responses to a question. I am therefore asking for input for a topic for our January issue now: taking infants and toddlers outside in colder, winter weather. Let us know how you manage it . . . any hints about getting children dressed, how you communicate with parents about the value of outside play in cold climates, and especially activities — things you do with ice and snow, what you do on neighborhood walks, etc.

In the meantime, enjoy the autumn and the “new school year” getting to know the special individuals you care for and their families.

A handwritten signature in cursive that reads "Karen Miller".

Karen Miller is author of *Ages and Stages*, *Things to Do with Toddlers and Twos*, *More Things to Do with Toddlers and Twos*, *The Outside Play and Learning Book*, and her new book, *The Crisis Manual for Early Childhood Teachers* (Gryphon House, 1996).

The Same Way, Again and Again

by Heather Wenig



Photograph by Nancy P. Alexander

Nicholas always sits in the same spot at Miss Tanika's table. Today, however, the chairs have gotten mixed up. When it's time for lunch, Nicholas walks to his usual spot, checks the back of the chair for his picture, then sits down — even though it is not his picture! There is a great fuss as his teachers try to get everyone into their own chairs.

When Derek first began attending our program, he was enrolled part time. He arrived each day at the beginning of nap-time. When he woke up, he would eat snack, play outside, and then mommy would be there. Derek relied on the consistency of these events to give him an idea of when his day in child care would be

done. Several weeks later, Derek's parents enrolled him full time. This is obviously confusing to Derek. At each time of transition or clean-up, he will find one of the teachers and ask, “Sleep?” He is trying to fit the new activities into his established framework.

Jake has been part of our class for some time and is obviously comfortable with us. Each morning, however, he clings to mom and cries, saying, “Mommy be back!” His mother always answers with the words, “Yes, mommy will be back.” After this exchange, Jake is willing to let mom leave. Throughout the day, Jake will check in with his teachers by asking, “Mommy be back?” He expects the answer, “Yes,

mommy will be back.” He will ask the question over and over again until he hears *those words*. When he is satisfied, he joins the rest of the children at play.

The observations you’ve just read are examples of the ritualistic behavior of toddlers. It’s inevitable that when working daily with this age group we will experience this kind of behavior, and it’s important to have an understanding of what is really going on when it occurs. When a toddler refuses to drink from a red cup on Thursday because he wants the blue cup he’s had all week, it can be frustrating. When a parent tells us that her daughter eats sandwiches cut in quarters better than those cut in halves, we may ask, “What’s the difference?” When we realize that these are instances of ritualistic behavior, we begin to see how important it is to respect these ideas. To help put this type of behavior into perspective, I suggest three reasons for the ritualism we see in some toddlers.

First, ritualistic tendencies are part of a toddler’s drive to achieve a degree of control over her environment. Stop for a

moment and think about a toddler’s day. We may do what we can to provide choices and opportunities for decision making, but there will still be much that is beyond the child’s control. The toddler’s demand for the blue cup he usually uses is his way of controlling that aspect of his environment. The color of our cup may not seem important to us, but that should not detract from our respect for the toddler’s feelings. Achieving a sense of control is part of the development of autonomy. It should be nurtured whenever possible.

My second suggestion requires a brief description of my brother. He is quite fond of playing video games. He prefers sports games, especially football. He will play the game over and over again, often playing straight through the night, until he has mastered it. It makes him feel powerful to know that if he calls certain plays he will win. He knows that those plays will be effective because he has tried them repeatedly. Sometimes toddlers’ ritualism will show itself in their play. They will choose the same toys and use them in the same ways because they can predict the

results. The process of repetition is comfortable and makes the child feel powerful, another aspect of autonomy.

To illustrate my third and final suggestion, I will tell you a secret about myself: I cringe at the thought of being edited. I have a hard time letting go of my written “creations” and putting them in the hands of someone who may not understand what I was thinking as I wrote, or who may see a passage I felt strongly about as dispensable. Rituals like Jake’s mommy questions are a toddler’s creations. They may have very strong ownership feelings that we need to respect.

Recognizing and respecting the ritualistic tendencies of toddlers has helped me find new ways to ease morning separations, to get children’s cooperation at times of transition, and to coax them to join me for stories and songs. How will you use ritualism in your program?

Heather Wenig is a child care resource and referral counselor in West Lafayette, Indiana.

— Good Ideas —



New Use for Tennis Balls

The Child Development Lab School at the College of the Mainland in Texas City, Texas, uses sliced open tennis balls on chair legs to make them slide easily and avoid scratching flooring. It also reduces noise.

Shoe Bags Message Boxes

Tanya Jones, director and head teacher of Montgomery College Child Care in Takoma Park, Maryland, shares:

Teachers who communicate often with parents need an organized method. The following idea has worked wonderfully for me over the past six years. Purchase a couple of shoe bags, the kind that you would hang on a door or wall. Label each shoe slot with a parent’s name. Use these as little mailboxes. Put your notes, letters, and cards in your parent mailboxes. Your parents will love this organized way of receiving notes and messages from the staff.

In the July/August issue of *Caring for the Little Ones*, the last line of the “Crying” article was inadvertently omitted. We apologize for the inconvenience this has caused our readers. The final paragraph should read as follows:

Do remember that infants do not cry to bother adults. When you are appropriately responsive to the different reasons for crying, either by picking the baby up, feeding the baby, changing a diaper, moving the baby, putting the baby to bed, or otherwise comforting the child, you teach the child that she *matters*. Infants learn that they can communicate and somebody out there cares . . . a very basic emotional message!

Open Discussion

In March, Tonja Deviney asked us to talk about having one's own baby in the program where you work. Last issue, we heard about a very successful situation. Here are two more responses.

Marie-Helen Goyetche from Fabreville, Quebec, shares these comments:

Mom or Educator?

A supervisor is not just an educator but she will more likely be a wife, a friend, a sister, a co-worker, and sometimes a mother. How do we handle the different roles we're faced with every day and every minute? Somehow we manage and we don't give it much thought. But how do we handle it when two roles intertwine? One of the most strenuous dualities is when you are bringing your children to the same child care program where you work.

As an educator and mother, I have had mixed emotions about leaving Max, 5, and Alex, 3, and myself in our respective groups. Being so close to them, it's easy for the roles to switch back and forth from educator back to mom. Here are a few tips that can help you deal with the hidden pressures of having your treasures with you.

- Start them young. From past experience, I have found that babies and toddlers will integrate better and not be bothered if they're comfortable in their own environment.
- Talk to your children. Tell them which educator will take care of them and

which group you'll be working with (younger or older ones). It doesn't mean that you don't love them; you do.

- Trust your co-workers and give them "carte blanche." Do not interfere with the daily squabbles and routines. If your child approaches you, redirect him back to his educator. Show support for both sides, but don't get involved.

- When dealing with the other educators, realize they don't want to talk about your children all the time. They have other children in their group and so do you. It will take stress off your co-worker, who won't feel like she has to perform.

- Get your spouse involved. Have him bring the kids in later or pick them up before you leave. The little break you'll have from your group time to your kids at home can give you just enough time to get re-energized.

- Deal with your child rationally. Your children are in good hands; otherwise, you wouldn't be working there now, would you?

If you run into other difficulties, remind yourself that kindergarten isn't all that far away and then you'll have different things to worry about.

It Doesn't Always Work Out

One person, who prefers to remain anonymous, describes a different situation. This individual accepted a new position as the toddler supervisor in a

child care center. Her three year old was enrolled in another group. For several months she tried, but could not ignore what she felt was very inappropriate behavior on the part of the individual caring for her child. Her son's caregiver was harsh and even frightening to her child and the other children as well.

She tried talking to the director about it, but got only a patronizing response. Talking directly to the other caregiver only seemed to make things worse. So she took her child out of the program and placed him in a more supportive family child care environment.

Finally, though, the experience made her realize that she did not want to support an organization with her creative work that really didn't show the values she felt were most important in working with young children. She left her job and found a better one. Her child remains with the family child care provider he has learned to love.

New Open Discussion Question

What do you do about pacifiers? Let's talk about what purpose they serve for children and the cultural issues they bring up. How do you keep them clean and sorted out, avoiding the hygiene problems they can pose?

Send your comments to the address below.

Send comments, questions, feedback, giggles, good ideas,
as well as any photos you'd like to share with other readers to:

Karen Miller
PO Box 97
Crowdrey, CO 80434