

# Shifting Gears for Infants and Toddlers

by Marjory Keenan

*It took me two months to figure out that I had to comfort a crying baby within the group. If I got up to walk the one crying, they would all cry."*

*"I expected my toddlers to divide themselves among activities as my preschoolers did. They resist being divided. They like moving as a group and being with me."*

*"Just that much body contact in one day is exhausting."*

These are statements that infant/toddler teachers made in discussing the changes they experienced from teaching preschoolers. Each day, more and more preschool teachers are working with infants and toddlers. The change in age group is significant, and it isn't always an easy transition. Directors need to know how best to support teachers in making this change to ensure quality care for infants and toddlers.

Teachers making this transition are struck by:

- the fact that babies do not speak;
- the amount of crying, especially the first four to six weeks before attachment occurs;
- the experience of just being with an infant or toddler in their pain or grief when your comfort does not seem to make a difference;
- the need to be more watchful;
- the more intimate contact such as in diapering;
- the emotional intensity of relationships with children, parents, and co-workers; and

- the physical strain — dealing with how much more physically tiring it is to work with infants and toddlers than preschoolers.

Discussion among themselves and/or with the director is an important support that helps teachers make the transition from preschoolers to infants and toddlers. Because teachers often work intuitively, discussion is extremely valuable in articulating and clarifying with each other their experiences in the classroom.

Teachers who have already made the transition can share what changes were difficult for them and how they adapted. In sharing, they guide and support teachers new to the transition.



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As facilitator, the director can point out the developmental appropriateness of the changes discussed. It is also important for the director to facilitate a dialogue on the value of quality group care for infants and toddlers and to provide articles and research which describe quality care and how it benefits this age group.

It is important that teachers share their own feelings about the appropriateness of infant/toddler care. How do their feelings affect their relationships to parents and their teaching style in the classroom?

## 1. Relating to Children

- Attachment is a necessity in infant/toddler care. Though teachers bond with preschoolers, their relationship is not the primary focus. Forming friendships and mastering skills are the significant issues for preschoolers. For infants and toddlers, relationship to the teacher is of primary importance. A trusting relationship between child and caregiver is necessary for exploration and learning to occur.
- Interpreting and responding to non-verbal communication is essential in working with infants and toddlers. A teacher needs not only to interpret the communication out loud to the baby to whom she is talking but also to respond in a way which creates a genuine dialogue between them. Because body language differs among babies and is often subtle, teachers need to be observant throughout the day. As one teacher stated, "Working with this age group helped sharpen my observation skills."
- Child/caregiver assignments are necessary. To ensure a trusting relationship for every infant and toddler, each child must have an assigned primary caregiver. This also makes it possible to observe

more closely in a group setting.

Small group size and high teacher-child ratios also make observation of children more likely. Having primary caregivers helps to promote attachment as well as to help teachers interpret and meet the needs of infants and toddlers. If the group size is large and teacher-child ratios low, the chaos of too many needs to meet and not meeting them in a reasonable amount of time undermines the effects of primary caregiving.

As director, it is essential to ensure the ratios, group size, and consistency of staff necessary for creating trusting relationships between infants, toddlers, and their caregivers. This is not an easy task because of budget constraints and staff turnover. Yet directors need to continually advocate and problem solve for conditions which will ensure quality care.

## 2. Relating to Parents

- Relationships are much more intense with parents of infants and toddlers than with those of preschoolers. Parents of infants and toddlers tend to want to know more about the teacher as a person than parents of preschoolers do. A deeper level of trust is involved in leaving an infant than a preschooler, and teachers have a more intimate relationship with their baby than they do with their older child.
- Daily communication is essential because it is the foundation for a trusting relationship with parents. Teachers need to bond with parents to be able to bond with their infants and toddlers. This means the ability to communicate cross-culturally is essential.
- Teachers find it important to communicate in a collaborative manner with parents of infants and

toddlers, rather than taking the role of the expert. As one teacher said, the parent/teacher relationship needs "more delicate handling because parents are not sure that someone can care for their infant as well as they do. If they feel that the teacher's care is comparable to their own, then their caregiving as parents is challenged or judged."

Directors can support teachers by providing information and training in communication skills. The skill that seems most helpful in creating a collaborative relationship with parents is the ability to listen and then paraphrase back to the parent what is heard.

This is true in relating to all parents, but especially true for families of cultures different from that of the teacher. You want to convey that you really listened and their concern has been heard. The caregiving of infants and toddlers is very personal and embedded in a cultural context. Therefore, differences will need to be shared and discussed.

Another support directors can provide is either to have staff create or give feedback in the design of the daily information forms which they use. The forms need to be convenient for the staff to fill out, and informative for the parents, and they must fulfill record keeping requirements.

## 3. Relating to Co-Workers

- Infant/toddler teachers feel the relationship they have with their co-worker has a more direct effect upon the atmosphere of trust and security in the classroom than when they worked with preschoolers.
- Teachers stress the importance of non-verbal communication between themselves as they work together in an infant/toddler classroom. For

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example, if one teacher has to change a child's diaper, the other teacher knows she now needs to be with the entire group, or at least with a larger group of babies. Teachers have said that "there must be stronger communication between infant teachers because there is an anticipatory element that exists."

- Some teachers find themselves conversing much more with their co-workers than they had while working with preschoolers. Though these teachers may question their conversations on the floor, they see the value of providing and modeling dialogue for pre-verbal children when appropriate. The balance between modeling conversation and caring for children's needs must be maintained.

Because trust and security are integral to infant/toddler learning, directors need to promote supportive relationships between co-workers. It is important to know your staff well and create workable staffing patterns for collaboration and problem solving. Staff need to have time to meet to discuss and solve problems which affect their classrooms or the entire center. The director may be needed to facilitate problem solving at these meetings.

#### 4. Group Dynamics

- Teachers experience changes in adjusting to the calmer, quieter pace of infants, and even young toddlers. They begin using a softer voice and try to be more physically accessible, as in sitting on the floor with the babies.

- Teachers need to be aware of adjusting their eye contact. Somewhere between three and six months, babies become uncomfortable with direct eye contact, especially if they do not know you well. Often the toy becomes the object of focus for you both.

It also is easier to comfort young children if they are against your body but facing away. In that position, they can be comforted but do not have to be reminded that they are separated from those they love.

- Teachers talk about being more conscious of being active or receptive in relating to infants and toddlers. Before they act, they consider whether it is an appropriate time and how their response will affect an individual child and/or the dynamics of the group.

- In an infant/toddler classroom, the teacher is the focal point for the group to come together. Infants, even toddlers, will leave what they are doing independently to be physically closer to the teacher. For this reason, when a baby needs comfort, it is given in the context of the group. The adult provides the security necessary for the babies to explore their environment and each other.

- Other changes teachers experience are smaller groups, less adult interference, and fewer group activities. One teacher said, "There is greater awareness of the interaction between children because you are seeing it for the first time. Also much more time is spent helping infants/toddlers interact with each other while preserving their autonomy."

- Teachers have expressed the importance of being "able to focus both on the individual child and to see the group as a whole, especially with keeping babies safe." Some teachers expressed the need of "being aware when infants are getting bored and to move them or bring toys to those who are not mobile."

- For many teachers, one of the hardest adjustments in terms of

group dynamics is that young toddlers tend to move as a group and do not divide themselves among activities as preschoolers do. For young toddlers, the group has become another source of security. This feedback from teachers is helpful in letting directors know what to look for and how to assess the group dynamics in the infant/toddler classrooms. It also provides directors with useful suggestions for teachers when they are adjusting to infants and toddlers. As one teacher said, "It took me two months to figure out I had to comfort a crying baby within the group. If I got up to walk the one crying, they would all cry." She also said, "I wish someone had told me."

#### 5. Curriculum

- Teachers find the curriculum to be less planned and structured activities and more flexibility; children set their own agenda. Teachers explore and experiment with what activities are appropriate for infants and toddlers. The curriculum is formed as a response to the teacher's observations. There definitely is a shift in focus from preparing activities to observing and responding. The specific activities of the curriculum unfold spontaneously in the immediate situation.

- The teacher, the environment, and the routine are all curriculum. Feeding, diapering, and napping are considered curriculum not only in learning self-help skills but also in providing caregivers with the opportunity to give individual attention to children during the day. This individual attention creates and promotes the trust between child and caregiver which is so necessary for learning to occur.

- Teachers feel they are calmer, more nurturing, more intuitive, and

less directive with infants and young toddlers than with preschoolers.

- Because trust is so integral to infant/toddler learning, teachers find that their presence has even more of an impact upon the development of younger children. As one teacher said, “Infant teachers need to examine their non-verbal behavior much more carefully because mood is picked up more easily by this age group.”

Directors need to support teachers in coming to understand that it is not planned activities which provide opportunities for learning and socialization for infants and toddlers. It is the presence of the teacher and the environment, as well as feeding, diapering, and napping.

Directors and teachers must be able to articulate to parents how these components of the program are indeed learning opportunities for their children. An atmosphere of observation and taking cues from the children must be encouraged and supported. Then teachers will discover activities that are developmentally appropriate for infants and toddlers. Scaling down preschool activities for young toddlers is not appropriate.

## 6. Routines and Transitions

- Teachers see routines and transitions not only as curriculum but as providing predictability for infants and toddlers, enhancing their sense of trust. Transitions are very difficult for this age group and need to be planned carefully. One teacher said, “Just moving an infant from one location to another can upset the child.”

- There need to be fewer transitions for young children than for pre-

schoolers; and these transitions need to be simpler and slower. Even though the children are pre-verbal, it is still very important to verbally prepare infants and toddlers for transitions.

- Though teachers follow a schedule of routines and transitions, the exact timing of them is determined by the needs of the children. The younger the children, the more they want to move as a group with the primary caregiver, though dividing the group makes transitions easier.

Directors also need to see routines and transitions as an integral part of the curriculum. Teachers and directors need to ask what the child is learning during this routine or transition. What are we teaching? Many teachers see transitions as difficult for all ages: “With infants and toddlers, you may hear more crying; and with the older children, there may be a surge of misguided energy.” For all age groups, it is important for teachers to discuss and coordinate transitions as much as possible.

## 7. Director Support and Supervision

- Some teachers find the supervisor to be helpful and necessary in being a neutral third party between the teacher and the parents because of the intensity of that relationship and the possibility for misunderstanding.

If directors know which parents teachers find difficult, they can do problem solving with teachers, especially in ways of communicating with parents before conflicts arise. This often empowers the teacher to solve the problem and avoid a conflict. When conflicts do occur, directors need to not only be a neutral party but a mediator, understanding the intensity may be greater because of the age of the

child involved.

- Other teachers feel the most valuable support is having someone with whom the infants are comfortable available to help out when an individual baby needs full attention or just to help move the infants from the classroom to the yard.

It can be extremely helpful to have the director, whom the children know and trust, assisting in the classroom. This kind of support lessens the amount of crying and enhances the sense of security within the classroom. Though it may involve only five or ten minutes of your time, teachers feel tremendously supported.

- Because of separation and stranger anxiety, it is very difficult to have substitutes in an infant/toddler room. Many teachers feel the pressure to be absent as little as possible, and plan absences so that there can be a familiar substitute. Of course, this is not always possible.

- Because of the importance of attachment, an issue that needs to be addressed is how to provide consistency of caregiving for young children. In some centers, the teacher follows the group of children until they complete preschool. Other centers have the child visit the next age classroom over a period of time before she/he is transferred.

At another center, a teacher stays in the infant room for two years, becoming the toddler teacher for the last group of infants she teaches. In that way, consistency of caregiving is provided for the infants' first two years at the center, and the teacher is given a break from the intensity and the physical demands of working with babies.

It is essential that directors look at

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how consistency of caregivers can be provided for infants and toddlers, and how transitions are made to the next age classrooms. Are children moved as a group, individually, or in dyads? The director and teachers need to discuss what is best for the children and the needs of their center.

## 8. Most Important Differences

The most important differences teachers want to share with someone who is beginning to work with infants and toddlers are:

- the importance of non-verbal communication with both children and co-workers;
- the importance of communicating daily with parents;
- the intensity of relationships with parents, children, and staff;
- the emphasis on the individual child rather than the curriculum;
- the necessity of observation in creating a curriculum; and
- the utilization of routines as nurturing times.

“Remember to go slow and develop a one-on-one relationship with each child at that child’s own pace.” For

someone beginning to work with infants and toddlers, teachers feel “one needs to know that they have feelings, they are curious, and that they understand a lot of things.”

“Knowledge about the age group and their development” is also important, as well as “careful observation.” Get to know infants and their families and realize that some babies are difficult.

Adjusting to being an infant/toddler teacher definitely takes time and involves making mistakes. As one head teacher said, “Allow time for adjustment — it will take years (at least three). Allow yourself to make mistakes — you will. Ask for help! Also learn from your mistakes.”

### Support for Transitions

Through discussion, infant/toddler teachers are able to clarify and articulate the developmental growth they are observing. The amount of facilitation needed from the director will vary with the needs and skills of their staff.

If your center also includes a preschool, it is beneficial for all to have a dialogue between infant/toddler and preschool teachers. Discussion supports teachers in effecting changes for all children.

An infant teacher who works with preschoolers in the summer stated that “because the focus of preschool seems to be more on activities, the integration of the group, the emotional adjustment of the children, and the routine of the day all seem to be secondary —rather than primary.” She suggested some simple changes would be to “establish subgroups for circle time, eating, and small group activities.”

As more and more teachers work with different age groups and mixed age groups, their discussions and practices can improve the quality of care for all children.

Administering care for infants and toddlers is as significant a transition as the one teachers have made. Different knowledge and skills will be asked of you. You, too, need support, especially from other directors who have experienced this transition.

Allow time for adjustment, learn from your mistakes, and continue to find ways to support teachers in providing quality care for all children.