

Creating a Network of People Who Work with Infants and Toddlers

Caring for the Little Ones

by Karen Miller



Photograph by Ludwig Studio

The Play of Infants and Toddlers

Dumping, filling, pushing, spilling, fitting, bumping, climbing, banging, bouncing, look at them go! Infants and toddlers at play are a study in movement. Our *little scientists* are busily figuring out how the world works.

Object Play

A very descriptive term that is sometimes used to describe the play behavior of infants and toddlers is *object hunger*. The child fully examines every object she comes across, mouthing it, turning it over, banging it on the floor, throwing it, fitting it inside other things. As the child plays with objects in this seemingly random way, she gains *physical knowledge* about the object, its shape, where it fits, that it has sides that can't be seen until it is turned. The popularity of playing with pots and pans is an example. This type of play forms the baseline for cognitive development — spaces, places, shapes. The child needs to do this to make sense of the world, to see order and relationships.

When toddlers use art materials like crayons, it is on the physical knowledge level. They scribble, roll the crayon, pound it, and find out everything they can do with it. After they have had plenty of exposure to it, as preschoolers they will move toward more complex drawings and representational art work. A four or five year old who has never before been

exposed to paints will first just experiment with the materials before creating more complex paintings. That's what a toddler is doing with everything. As she fumbles around with stuff, she's asking herself, "Hmmm . . . I wonder what this is good for . . . I wonder what I can do with this."

Make sure children have lots of safe, interesting objects to investigate and the time to explore them. Be on the look-out for objects with interesting shapes and textures or that move in interesting ways.

Right along with object play is play with the concept of cause and effect — causality. Making things happen. The most successful manufactured toys for toddlers take advantage of this interest. The toy or object has an interesting effect when the child acts upon it. It moves in an interesting way — a ball, for instance — or it makes an interesting sound. Children see what effect they can produce with all the objects they come across. That's why toddlers love to do such things as honk horns, flush toilets, and push elevator buttons.

The most interesting cause and effect toy is another person. A baby learns very quickly that he can get a caregiver to respond to a cry. Toddlers get very skilled at *getting a rise* out of people close to them. Have you watched a toddler walk across the room to the VCR with a

challenging look on her face? While it may not seem very flattering that a child is using you for a toy or tool, it does show progress in thinking skills. All children need to learn how to use adults to get their needs met. It can also be great fun. You know how a baby giggles when you honk when he squeezes your nose or beep when he presses your stomach. This is about power. The child is learning that he has power in the world, one base of the development of self-esteem.

Social Play

This cause and effect shows up in the early social play of infants and toddlers. All the little lap games that most cultures have for infants and toddlers — "Pat-a-Cake," "Ride the Horse to Banbury Cross," "Peek-a-Boo," and others like them — are examples of social play. The child and the adult are interacting in pleasurable ways. Even more interesting are the invented social games of toddlers and parents when they repeat noises and gestures back and forth. What a child learns from such play is "I count, I matter. It's fun to be with other people."

I love to watch toddler-invented games. They usually involve two or more children imitating each other's actions or noises. One child starts crawling across

the room sounding like a puppy. Pretty soon everybody is in the act, no directions given. One child jumps off the wooden border of the sandbox onto all fours in the sand, and soon there is a line-up doing the same thing, with much hilarity. Join in yourself! This is both social play and motor play.

Motor Play

A great deal of the play of early childhood involves repeated movement, and its beginnings are in the infant year. The child takes pleasure in pure physical motion, learning how this body he's been issued works. We see it early when an infant enjoys staring at his hands — those interesting things floating above him. Soon the discovery is made that he has some control over those things and he moves his fingers and makes interesting things happen. Crawling up and down stairs becomes a compulsion. Think about that two year old who enjoys jumping off a low step 47 times. You'll see a self-imposed drill as a child repeats a newly learned action over and over again. We often marvel at a child's perseverance!

As a child learns to run, jump, hop, spin around in circles, and push himself along on small wheel toys, he is gaining mastery. And that feels good. There is a direct connection to self-esteem.

Imitation

Have you noticed a toddler imitating your gestures and tone of voice with surprising (and sometimes embarrassing) accuracy? It's actually a high compliment. Children first imitate things that have emotional meaning for them. If you were not important to them, they would not imitate you.

They imitate emotional scenes, and perhaps the most popular one is tucking in, putting the baby to bed. This involves separation, and sometimes anxiety, fear, anger, and control. When the child replays this common scene, wrapping a blanket or cloth around a doll and put-

ting it to bed, the difference is that now the *child* is in the position of power, controlling the scene. Perhaps the child utters the reassuring words she has heard someone say to her, or sings a familiar lullaby.

This is the very beginning of dramatic play. The child starts simply by imitating important people. Later, the child will begin to take on the role, as when he talks to the doll, obviously pretending to be the mommy. You can help bring the child along to this more complex play. When you see the child playing, address the child by the role you think the child may be trying to take on, and suggest directions the play might take. "Is your baby hungry, *Mommy*? Do you think you should cook her some food on the stove?"

We also see toddlers begin to use objects for pretend play. A very early one is a toy telephone. Amazing how a not-yet-talking infant will put the receiver of a toy phone to his ear and seem to be speaking Italian! Have you had an infant pretend to feed you with a small spoon? In order for an infant or toddler to use objects for pretend play, the objects have to look a lot like what they are supposed to represent. She will push a toy truck along, making truck noises, but is less likely to do so with a block. You can bring her to more abstract use of objects by involving her in developing her own props. "What could we use for a doll bed? How about this box?"

When it feels right, become a play partner with a toddler, but be sure you are welcome. Let the child take the lead with the most powerful roles. You be the baby who is sick, and let the child be the doctor who gives the shots. Generally, don't interrupt a child or impose yourself in the scene when the child seems already deeply involved. Do so when you feel you can augment the level of the child's play.

As the child acquires language, dramatic play develops in exciting ways. It can now become socio-dramatic play because she can interact with others from within a role. This does not usually happen until the child is at least three. A toddler's play

is more likely to be isolated, or *parallel* imitating the actions of another child. But an adult as a play partner can give children valuable experience interacting with someone else in pretend play. You can see the role the child is playing and give the child ways to talk to you as another character. "Tell me when to get off the bus, Mr. Driver."

We need to acknowledge that infants and toddlers need these types of play just like they need food to grow. Fooling around with a huge variety of objects forms the base of curiosity and cognitive development. The opportunity to move in their own ways at their own pace leads to coordination and confidence in themselves. Social play leads to easy interactions with others. Pretend play gives the child practice in creating her own symbols and abstract thinking, and it gives her feelings of power in emotional situations.

Karen Miller is the 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 newest book, *The Crisis Manual for Early Childhood Teachers* (Gryphon House, 1996).

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

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