Toddler Playtime Notes

@ Montclair Community Play Center

The Art of Redirecting Toddlers

Toddler brains are still developing, so reasoning with them to change behavior is not an effective tool. Instead, redirecting their attention can be a very effective tool. Redirecting methods can aid children in resetting and navigating their emotions.

Redirection serves as a simple yet adaptable method to gently steer your child away from challenging behaviors towards more positive ones. It entails calmly halting an inappropriate behavior, acknowledging and validating your child's emotions, and guiding them towards a more constructive way of expressing themselves.

Some examples:

- Your toddler is petting the dog roughly. You can model a gentle pet with your hand on theirs, saying “gentle.”
- After asking your toddler to “keep the sand low” they still keep throwing the sand up. Say “It looks like you’d like to throw something. Let’s go find a ball.”
- When children quarrel over a toy – You might say, "You both want this toy, but there's only one. Let's try to find a toy or activity that we can enjoy together."
- Your child is not able to go outside due to unfavorable weather conditions, you might suggest, "I understand it's disappointing that we can't go outside. Instead, let's go on an indoor adventure and build a pillow fort!"

Why opt for redirection over simply saying no, resorting to timeouts, or implementing other forms of negative consequences? One key reason is to recognize that young

children don't engage in "bad" behaviors simply to cause trouble. Instead, actions such as fighting, yelling, and crying often stem from experiencing intense emotions or unmet needs without possessing the necessary coping mechanisms.

Your child may not directly communicate, "I'm feeling lonely, so I started being noisy to seek attention." As a result, punishing problem behaviors seldom addresses the underlying issues and does little to teach your child how to modify their behavior. By employing redirection, you not only communicate that certain behaviors are inappropriate but also offer them a positive alternative.

Tips for Effective Implementation

One drawback to redirection is that it can be a band-aid rather than a solution. After a while, you might end up feeling like a magician endlessly pulling new tricks out of your hat to keep the distractions coming.

To avoid this, here are some tips for using redirection as a healthy tool, not a quick fix.

- **Consistency and Boundaries**

No matter what kinds of discipline techniques you use or what your household rules are, it's key to be consistent. Setting clear boundaries and being consistent about them is also part of helping your child feel secure and safe.

When you use redirection, try to:

- ☐ Set boundaries clearly and make them consistent for all children
- ☐ Pair the redirection with an explanation of why the problem behavior is unacceptable
- ☐ Keep boundaries simple, clear, and specific (no running in the house, no hitting, etc.)

It can be tempting to enforce rules with punishment for breaking them. Punishment can (sometimes) result in quick obedience. But it doesn't work so well for learning. Redirection helps your child build a deeper understanding of how and why to follow rules and expectations.

- **Encouraging Reflective Communication**

After redirecting from a problem behavior like tantrums, hitting, or yelling, give your child time to recover so they're ready to communicate. Then, follow up with a conversation about the experience.

You might talk about:

- ☐ What happened to cause their big feelings
- ☐ How they could handle them differently next time
- ☐ Why it wasn't okay to express their feelings the way they did ("You could hurt someone when you throw things," "It hurts your brother's feelings when you call him dumb," etc.)

Be sure to make this a two-way conversation. Ask questions, and listen actively to their answers. Modeling open communication helps teach mindfulness for kids as they learn the dialogue that helps process their big feelings. The goal is to help your child notice their feelings and learn from patterns in how they act and feel so that redirection becomes a healthy habit they can use in the future.

- **Recognizing Efforts and Achievements**

Take time to show your child that you notice when they choose positive behaviors. If you only respond when they act out, you can inadvertently teach them that negative behavior gets your time and attention.

It can be helpful to set aside a special time to mention their accomplishments each day. For example, at dinner or bedtime, mention good moments from the day:
"It was nice to see you sharing that toy with your sister." or "Thank you for helping pick groceries at the store!"

- **Learning from Challenges**

A growth mindset—the belief that mistakes are chances to learn and grow—is an important skill for building resilience and self-confidence in children. You can help foster a growth mindset in your child by treating challenges as opportunities.

Those "bad" behaviors? They're the perfect chance to connect and grow. When you help your child redirect from a negative behavior without blaming or shaming them, you demonstrate that mistakes are okay. After the situation is diffused, you can talk about what went wrong and what they could do differently next time. Over time, it helps kids learn better self-control and how to choose appropriate expressions for their feelings.