



# The Wonder and Complexity of Infant and Toddler Peer Relationships

Donna Wittmer

Katiri, a toddler, cries loudly when she closes the door of the toy oven on her fingers at her early childhood program. Mattie, also a toddler, runs to Katiri's side and sticks her thumb in Katiri's mouth. Katiri stops crying immediately.

**W**ise teachers of infants and toddlers know how concerned, helpful, empathic, cooperative, and friendly—that is, how prosocial—very young children can be. Teachers see older infants crawl or toddle over to “friends” arriving later in the morning and greet them as if they had not seen them in weeks. They see a toddler give a prized toy to a child who is crying. They know that sometimes a toddler comes to a teacher and pulls on her pants leg to come help another child. Observant teachers see toddlers play turn-taking games that are mutually satisfying. Teachers and families know that these young children care and think about others and form strong, loving relationships with both adults and peers. Recent research, including brain research, informs us that young children are capable of being prosocial, caring, and loving, but need adult support to maximize these competencies (Ensor & Hughes 2005; Warneken & Tomasello 2006; Tankersley, Stowe, & Huettel 2007; Warneken & Tomasello 2008; Wittmer 2008).

In this article, I share information about how important the first three years of life are for infants' and toddlers' development of social competence. These years

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form the foundation for successful relationships throughout life. My goals are to increase readers' appreciation for infants' and toddlers' remarkable relational capacities and to recommend developmentally appropriate practices that can improve the quality of peer experiences for young children in early care and education settings. Throughout the article, I highlight the importance of quality, caring adult-child relationships for young children as they negotiate the joys and challenges of peer relationships.

### **Focusing on peer relationships and social competence**

Infants and toddlers need excellent programs that center on quality adult-child and child-child relationships. Such programs help young children develop caring and enjoyable relationships each moment and day of their lives. There are three primary reasons for teachers to focus on young children's peer relationships and social competence during the first three years of life. The first reason is that infants and toddlers have more opportunities to interact with their peers in early care and education groups than in previous years (US Census Bureau 2012), and we need to care about the quality of the experiences that promote social skills each day in programs (Williams, Ontai, & Mastergeorge 2007). Teacher and parent strategies, especially those that help children think about how others feel and what they are experiencing, influence children's social skills (Warneken & Tomasello 2009).

The second reason is that infants and toddlers are uniquely capable of interacting with one another and building each other's competence. Young children learn about their own and others' cultures as they relate to peers. Peers can use humor and experience laughter, joy, and glee as they interact. They gain social knowledge even when they have conflicts or use aggressive behaviors with peers (Singer & Hännikäinen 2002). When wise teachers understand the pos-

**When children have warm, caring, and positive relationships with their caregivers, they show a higher level of social competence.**

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sibilities for children's delight in peers, they can promote and support pleasurable peer experiences.

The third reason for a focus on social behavior is that for healthy social and emotional development, infants and toddlers need the strong foundation that protection, affection, and emotional connections with adults provide (Honig 2002, 2003). With this foundation and the continued support of thoughtful, gentle, and emotionally available adults, the social experience of infants and toddlers flourishes. Research results and our experience tell us that when children have warm, caring, and positive relationships with their caregivers, they show a higher level of social competence (McElwain et al. 2008). Children not only feel this protection but also mirror with their peers how adults relate to them. How adults treat young children matters for children's emotional and social development, because there is an "effect of relationships on relationships" (Emde 1988, 354).

### **Infant and toddler social interactions and relationships**

Teachers and parents may have heard that infant and toddler interactions consist of parallel play—children playing beside each other but not with each other. However, young children's peer interactions are much more complex. Infants watch and older infants sometimes delight in other infants; toddlers imitate, share meaning and themes associated with their play, and communicate with each other in interesting ways. Two-year-olds cooperate and may begin to participate in dramatic play. All young children are goal oriented with peers—they try different strategies to make a

peer smile or negotiate who will hold a toy—while developing theories about how to interact with particular children. Interactions are truly relational and reciprocal; that is, each child-to-child relationship differs in quantity and quality, based on the children's past experiences with each other. For example, if one child is more likely than other children in the group to give toys, then other children may be more likely to give toys to that child.

### Differentiation between self and others

Understanding that there is a difference between self and others (theory of mind) (Gopnik & Seiver 2009) develops over the first three years and influences how children interact with peers. During the second year, toddlers' cognitive abilities develop enough that they can recognize themselves in a mirror and understand that others are "independent psychological agents" (Moore 2007, 58), with feelings and thoughts of their own. Knowing that other persons may have a different perspective is important for the development of young children's social competence.

As young children develop a theory of mind during the first three years, their interest in peers and prosocial behaviors flourishes. Adults can continually encourage young children to recognize other children by participating in mirror play, using children's names, watching and interpreting the facial expressions of other children, and talking about what other children might be feeling and thinking. These developmentally appropriate practices are described in the book *Caring for Infants and Toddlers in Groups: Developmentally Appropriate Practice for Infants and Toddlers* (ZERO TO THREE 2008).

### Interest in peers

A young child's interest in peers begins in the first year, as the infant begins to understand that another baby is "like me" (Meltzoff 2010). Young children seem fascinated with others who are just their size and who do the things they do—crawl, roll on the floor, toddle, and run. There are several possible reasons infants watch other infants. Perhaps other babies do more interesting things than adults do, or possibly other children's "baby faces" attract babies, as they do adults. Or perhaps an infant recognizes that another child his or her age is "more like me."

Research studies point to the latter. According to Sanefuji, Ohgami, and Hashiya (2006), infants develop the perceptual capabilities to recognize that another person is like them during their first year. They found that infants 6 and 9 months of age preferred to look at photographs of infants

their own age rather than children older or younger. In another study, crawling infants preferred to look at crawling infants rather than walking infants, and walking infants preferred to watch other walking infants rather than crawling infants (Sanefuji, Ohgami, & Hashiya 2008). Indeed, infants do show a preference for other infants who are like them.

**What does this mean for teachers and families?** Place infants where they can see each other on pads or blankets on the floor. Encourage an infant in your lap to watch other infants by pointing out and talking about what they are doing. Provide large, safe mirrors in which infants and toddlers can see themselves and other children crawl, sit, and walk. Imitation of peers provides another opportunity for young children to learn about each other and about their own capabilities.



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### Imitation

Watching toddlers imitate each other jumping up and down reminds us of how important the ability to imitate is to children's learning and their enjoyment of peers (Trevarthen 2003). There are many skills involved in imitation. Children must have not only the desire to imitate but also the ability to observe and match their motor skills to another child's. This requires perception, focus, self-regulation, and motivation. There is often a sense of affinity, similarity, and connectedness between two children when one or both imitate each other using a crayon, drinking water, or pounding on a table. These events of mutuality can cement friendships because of shared interests and coordinated, turn-taking action. Imitation facilitates social communication with

others (Meltzoff & Williamson 2010) and is a strategy young children use to initiate interactions with peers.

We used to think that infants and young toddlers could not watch another child perform an act like using a toy in a unique way, remember the act, and then imitate the behavior later in the day or week. We now know that toddlers can imitate the novel behaviors of peers, both immediately and after a delay, and use that information in other contexts (Ryalls, Gul, & Ryalls 2000; Meltzoff & Williamson 2010). For instance, if a toddler sees another toddler kiss a peer, the first toddler can imitate that behavior at home hours or days later.

Observant parents and teachers recognize the power of imitation for children's learning about how the world works, how to interact socially, and how they differ or are like their peers. While it may seem as if a mini-revolution is occurring when toddlers imitate each other pounding on a table, we can celebrate imitation as a key component in peers learning from each other and developing relationships.

**What does this mean for teachers and families?** Watch for imitation. Whom does each child imitate? What behaviors are infants, toddlers, and 2-year-olds likely to imitate? How does imitation support two children's blossoming relationship? As teachers learn more about the intricacies of imitation, they can support, encourage, and appreciate it. Provide time for young children to play, so that

**Toddlers can imitate the novel behaviors of peers, both immediately and after a delay, and use that information in other contexts.**

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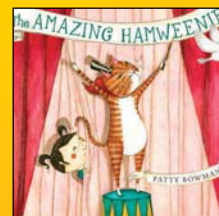
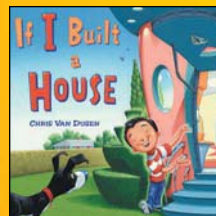
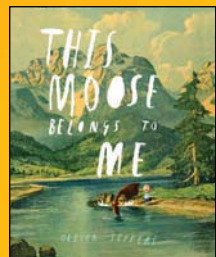
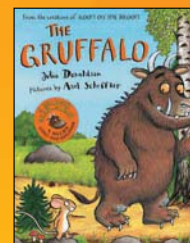
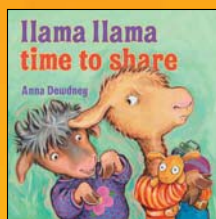
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they have the time and space to imitate each other. Recognize that infants, toddlers, and 2s watch their family members and teachers as well as their peers. Demonstrate kindness, show young children how to touch peers gently, and help children read the emotions of others and imitate facial expressions. Model for toddlers and 2-year-olds how to ask another child for a toy, and read simple books that demonstrate caring for an animal or another person. We want children birth to 3 to imitate socially effective ways of being with and caring for others.

**Curtain running.** The children each (a) run in turn through a curtain and (b) acknowledge the other's runs by stopping and watching and/or by positive affect.

**Run-chase (or run-follow).** The children run after one another. They both indicate that this is an enjoyable (and social) interaction by laughing, screaming happily, or looking back over their shoulders.

**Toddlers must move—it is their nature and right to move—and movement supports pleasurable peer interactions and relationships.**

Teachers will see other themes that involve imitation, reciprocity, and emotional expression—all social competence skills.

Most shared themes involve movement, as toddlers participate in kinesthetic conversations. Løkken (2000a, 2000b), a Norwegian researcher, calls this a “toddling style.” She states that toddlers have a social style that includes “running, jumping, trampling, twisting, bouncing, romping, shouting, falling, and laughing” (2000b, 173). Løkken observed games that young children created that were as simple as mutual shaking of heads, exchanging toys, or moving to music together. Toddlers must move—it is their nature and right to move—and movement supports pleasurable peer interactions and relationships.



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## Play

When teachers and parents observe infants and toddlers at play, they see more than parallel play. They see infants and toddlers trying to engage each other. They see two toddlers sharing themes in their play that both children seem to understand. In classic research completed in 1982, Brenner and Mueller observed pairs of toddler boys ages 12 to 18 months, in playgroups, over more than 1,200 minutes. In their play, the pairs shared themes that both children understood. The themes include the following six:

**Vocal prosocial.** The children talk with each other, even though their messages do not use words.

**Positive affect as a meaning sharer.** The children use laughter to indicate understanding of each other's actions. They encourage each other to repeat their performances by laughing and/or smiling.

**Vocal copy.** The children copy each other's vocalizations.

**Motor copy.** The children copy each other's specific motor action(s).

## What does this mean for teachers and families?

Provide opportunities for infants and toddlers to move together. A safe curtain that defines a cozy corner may encourage older infants and many toddlers to play peek-a-boo. Large motor equipment and spaces such as balls, short lofts, play areas with ladders to slides, and opportunities to paint outside on large pieces of paper support toddler kinesthetic conversations.

## Altruistic, empathic, and prosocial behavior

Kenan is delivering a doll to LaToya, another toddler, who left a play area without her doll. To do this, what does Kenan need to know? He observed that his playmate was holding the doll and then left it. He senses that she might want it back, and he acts by taking it down a long hallway and into her classroom. Kenan hands LaToya the doll.

(cont'd on p. 22)

Altruism involves acting for another's good, not your own, and empathy requires the understanding of another's feelings. Prosocial behaviors are caring toward others. When researchers, parents, and teachers observe toddler and 2-year-old behavior, they report that toddlers and 2s engage in the following prosocial behaviors:

- Comforting other children
- Attempting to remove the cause of another's distress
- Helping a child out of physical distress
- Warning another child, "You might fall"
- Suggesting solutions: Tell an adult to keep a child out of danger
- Showing empathy (Quann & Wien 2006)

How do infants, toddlers, and 2-year-olds learn to be altruistic, empathic, and prosocial? Warneken and Tomasello (2006, 2007) think human beings have an innate tendency toward altruism that has developed over generations. Researchers Aknin, Hamlin, and Dunn (2012) found that toddlers demonstrate happiness when they give objects to other children. People thrive when they work together and help take care of each other. Infants even prefer to interact with others who are prosocial rather than antisocial. Before they can say words, infants are evaluating whether an adult is prosocial or antisocial and choosing to go to the kind and loving adult (Hamlin & Wynn 2011) rather than the one who is unfriendly or grouchy.

Parents and teachers use of words that describe emotions and strategies that promote children's perspective taking of other's feelings also contribute to children's prosocial behaviors (Ensor & Hughes 2005).

**Continuity of group promotes children's friendships, a valuable asset as young children learn important social skills and beneficial attitudes about continuous, trusting relationships.**

**What can teachers and families do to help children be prosocial?** Most important, let infants, toddlers, and 2-year-olds know that you empathize with their feelings and struggles. Young children must feel that someone cares deeply about their well-being before they can become compassionate and empathetic with others. When infants, toddlers, and 2-year-olds tell you with their eyes that they are in emotional pain, reach out to console them. Let them

know they are not alone or without help. Infants and toddlers need adults who look into their eyes and mirror back to them their goodness. Young children's very essence requires responsive care for their development of a healthy self and a desire to be with others.

Model empathy and prosocial behavior at all times. Show infants, toddlers, and 2s how to be gentle, kind, and loving to each other. Talk about what you are doing as you are acting. You can say, "I see Jerel is sad; he is crying. I'm going to get his bunny and give it to him. I think that might make him feel better."

## The joy of relationships—Familiarity, friendship, and glee

### Familiarity

As adults, we are more likely to interact with people we know well than with people we are less familiar with. Young children are also more likely to initiate play, direct positive affect to, and engage in complex interactions with familiar playmates than with those who are unfamiliar. This information provides a strong argument for *continuity of group*—that is, keeping a group of children together as they develop and move from one room to another in a program. Continuity of group promotes children's friendships, a valuable asset as young children learn important social skills and beneficial attitudes about continuous, trusting relationships. The same information also makes a case for *continuity of care*—keeping the same teacher with them when the children move. Then infants, toddlers, and 2s have the advantage of moving not only with a peer group that includes familiar faces, personalities, and play characteristics, but also with a trusted, caring teacher.

### Early friendships

We have seen older infants, 2-year-olds, and other toddlers who clearly enjoy each other's company. When a child affectionately hugs a peer, squeals excitedly when that peer comes in the door, and plays special games only with that peer, we call that friendship. Friends often like to be close to each other, play with each other, and help each other. Teachers see this behavior when infants are about 1 year of age or possibly even younger. Providing time to play together, both indoors and outdoors, also encourages friendships.

### Humor and glee

Toddlers and 2s use humor to connect with other toddlers. Loizou (2007) observed two toddlers, 18 and 21 months of age, as they played together over four months. They used *incongruous actions* (that is, actions not ordinarily seen, such as a child peeking through his legs at a peer), *violation of expectations* (for example, sticking a sticker on one's head rather than on paper), and *incongruous use of materials* (such as putting shoes on their hands rather than

their feet). Adults can observe such behavior carefully to see if a child is attempting to engage a peer, and then appreciate the toddlers' social understanding and their sense of humor. Laughing with toddlers helps them know that you have a sense of humor too.

Adults smile and laugh when they see two children twirling around, laughing hysterically, giggling, and delighting in each other (Løkken 2000a, 2000b). This hilarity usually occurs between friends, because they feel totally comfortable with each other and know how to surprise each other with new behaviors, such as licking a piece of paper and patting it on their heads. More peer glee is a worthwhile goal for teachers in their classrooms and on the playground.

**What does this mean for teachers and families?** Provide continuity of care and group children to promote their familiarity, friendship, and use of humor with each other. Recognize that when infants and toddlers are silly with each other, they may be learning about each other, developing turn-taking skills, and enjoying a friend. Honor and build young children's friendship by noticing and then encouraging children's greetings to each other, hugs, and engagement in games that they create. Appreciate peer laughter, humor, and glee with your smiles and sometimes your participation.

### **The role of conflict—A social competence perspective**

When toddlers are together, there will be both prosocial behavior *and* conflict. Teachers are amazed at the speed with which a toddler takes a toy out of another child's hands and runs across the room, clutching the toy to his chest. For a second they hesitate, watching the scenario play out. In their heads, they consider many options and ask themselves how they can support these peers' relationship. What they do depends on the two children's personalities, their relationship history, what they want them to learn, and the kind of caring classroom community they strive to develop. As difficult as it is to witness

children's conflicts, young children benefit from them when they are with adults who support their learning. But what are they learning?

Children are learning that other people have feelings too. They are learning that they need to ask another child for the toy in his hands. They learn to say "mine," and eventually they learn to say "yours," as they learn the difference between possession and ownership.

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**How can adults help children learn about relationships during conflicts?** First, unless a child is physically hurting another child, watch to see what happens. An infant may turn to another toy when a second infant takes away the one she holds. A toddler might say “mine” and take a toy back from the toy taker. Two-year-olds might talk to each other or decide to play together.

If young children need support, use strategies that build children’s language and relationship skills. Both mediating and sharing strategies work much better than exerting power and control (Singer & Hannikainen 2002). Adult power strategies deny children the opportunity to take the perspectives of other children, learn about their own and others’ feelings, express feelings, and solve problems themselves. *Mediating* means to oversee agreement. To support infants, teachers help them learn what to do. When a child pulls another child’s hair, you might say “Touch gently” and model how to be kind to each other. Help toddlers learn words to say when they want another’s toy or want to keep the toy they have. Continue this with 2-year-olds, and add conflict resolution strategies. Say “You both want the toy. What can we do?” and then offer several strategies. Help young children learn to use language to express emotions and to recognize emotions in others.

If a child tends to withdraw or become aggressive, work with the child’s family to find the source of the child’s stress. Program and community support for families helps them reduce constant worry and enjoy their children. Build a caring relationship with the child by providing individual time. Rather than using *time-out* strategies, use *time with* the child to support the child’s language, emotional, and social development.

If a child consistently communicates in ways that threaten, are aggressive, demonstrate fear, and produce isolation, then that child needs adults who interact with her in calming and loving ways, demonstrate behaviors that engage peers, and meet the child’s emotional needs. Work closely with parents to learn their thoughts on the meaning of their child’s behavior, including cultural importance. Patiently support the child and family as you work together to help the child

**Both mediating and sharing strategies work much better than exerting power and control.**



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learn socially and culturally acceptable behavior. Do not chastise children for communication strategies that they use, but rather find ways to help them learn better ones.

## Summary

As infants and toddlers develop the ability to understand the difference between themselves and others, feel empathy, and learn prosocial behaviors during their first three years, their social competence grows—with the help of supportive adults. To build infants’ and toddlers’ social competence, teachers can do the following:

- Meet children’s emotional needs for affection and emotional connections.
- Work and plan for prosocial environments and caring communities with families.
- Observe children carefully to learn about their development and what works well.
- Demonstrate empathy and kindness at all times.
- Support infants’ and toddlers’ development of skills in taking others’ perspectives.
- Provide extended periods of time for play.
- Provide continuity of care and group.
- Teach alternatives to aggression.
- Encourage empathy and prosocial development.

And remember to delight in young children’s glee.



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