



10 Tips for Raising a Compassionate Infant-Toddler

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By Julia Luckenbill

Recent research shows that infants and toddlers are far more empathetic than we once thought. While they have short fuses, and don't cope well with sharing, they are capable of being compassionate. With this in mind, here are ten tips I use in the classroom to help infants and toddlers become pro-social that families can also try at home.

1. Be respectful, patient, and loving to your infants and toddlers and everyone else. Infants imitate what they see. Model saying “please” and “thank you”, touching gently, using your words, using a calm voice, cleaning up your messes, helping others, and sharing your things:

“Thank you for the Cheerio, would you like some of my raisins?”

2. Media is powerful! Read books about feelings with positive social interactions and discuss them. If your child watches television, watch too, and talk about the situations and emotions that happen in the shows, especially if the actions are antisocial.

“Caillou said that Philip could not use his ball – how did that make Philip feel? Do you think taking turns might make Philip feel better?”

3. When things are upsetting your toddler, you can engage your inner child. Doll or puppet play can help your child explore feelings and perspectives.

Puppet, “I don't want to take a bath!” You to puppet, “You sound mad – you don't like baths! I wonder what things could make bath-time fun?”

4. When people are upset, model compassion – talk about the problem and offer help.

“That boy fell off the climber, let’s go see if he’s ok! His daddy picked him up and the boy stopped crying. Let’s see if they need a Band-aid...”

5. Model touching gently on pets and guide toddlers who are rough to touch everyone gently, leave toys in others’ hands and to walk around people rather than pushing.

“Stop! The puppy is crying because you pulled his fur – touch him like this, that’s gentle. Let me show you how. Yes! That’s gentle! He likes that better”

6. Point out when harm has been done and suggest ways to make things better. Point out the facial cues that let you know what is happening.

“You were mad, but when you bit him, it hurt. He’s sad. See his tears? Let’s help him get some ice. Next time if he grabs your toy, say, “That’s mine.””

7. When conflict breaks out, stay calm and support your child’s feelings. Offer solutions and stay close. It helps to use the same solutions each time, for example, if the conflict involves one child grabbing another child’s toy, get close and hold the toy in question, state the problem, comment on the children’s emotions, offer solutions, find one that is mutually acceptable, and restate the solution.

8. Point out kindness to others, *“He liked it when you gave him the flower, see his smile?”* *That was kind of him to hand you the ball.”* Point out social mistakes, *“He just pushed you out of the way. I think he doesn’t have the words yet to tell you that he wants to play over by the balls. He should have walked around you.”* Point out your own mistakes, too, *“I made a mistake, I bumped her with your stroller – I’m sorry!”*

9. Involve your child in home tasks like cooking and re-gifting. Talk about the teamwork involved in helping the house run smoothly or the way others will feel when they get the gift.

“This salad will taste so good, thank you for tearing up the lettuce!” *“I bet the new baby will like that bunny – it’s so nice of you to give away the toys you are too big to use.”*

10. Stay close and guide your child as she navigates the complex world of feelings. Babies and toddlers will have strong feelings, make mistakes, feel possessive, seek autonomy, and struggle to control their impulses. Expect them to try and to make mistakes. Respect

that all people may need time to get calm and composed before they are willing to talk about upsetting things.

“You got so mad you threw the cup. Next time you can hand it to me.”

Keep in mind that not everyone learns social skills at the same pace. The Center on the Social and Emotional Foundations of Early Learning suggests that when a child can't dance, swim, etc. we teach them, but when a child can't behave, we punish. Committing to teaching social skills to children that don't "get it," creates a better community for everyone.

For more information on this topic

see: http://www.naeyc.org/yc/files/yc/file/201407/YC0714_Rocking_and_Rolling.pdf

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Audience: *Family*

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