



Part 2

Fostering Communication with your Toddler

From 2 to 5 years



In the last issue, we talked about the importance of fostering good communication with your infant – but did we mention that this is a lifelong challenge?

We say challenge because you, as the parent, must constantly adapt to your child's developmental stage. As your child develops physically and emotionally, so many things, important things are happening. We often underestimate even the simplest of interactions. We will see in this issue how a 2-minute intervention with your toddler can help or hinder your child's development. The goal is not to freak you out, but rather to make you aware of the influence you have and to help you to recognize how valuable you are to your child's development.



As your child develops more independence from you during the toddler years (typically preschool ages of 2-6), their brains are working hard. Between these ages, the brain of your child reaches 90% of what it will be in adulthood. Lots of things are going on. However, since we are talking specifically about communication and emotional development, it is important to recognize one of the many things that your toddler is busy trying to work out. For one, they are working really hard at understanding and controlling their emotions, one of the foundations of a healthy self-esteem.



Self-esteem

Self-esteem means having pride in yourself and in your abilities. Its synonym is self-assuredness. It is the image of the self that you project in life; and it begins to take shape now.

Children use play as one way to develop their self-image. They do this by acting out what they see and feel.



Let's take the following scenario to help explain the importance of building a healthy self-esteem and show you concretely how during play you can help your child develop a strong foundation for self-esteem while at the same time, foster good communication.





Social skills development

Imagine a 4-year-old playing with her Barbie's. She is having them practice social distancing as they shop for masks. The child is practicing new social skills that she is learning in real life. Now imagine two scenarios: the first, a parent who engages with the child and asks what's going on in her play. The answer can be a clue that the child is worried or concerned about getting sick, or not. Either way, the parent reassures the child that indeed social distancing helps protect us and it is one of the things, along with handwashing and wearing masks, that we can do to stay safe. The parent is reinforcing the child's processing of what she is learning about her world, boosting her self-confidence by confirming that she is understanding things in her world correctly. The parent is also modelling coping strategies by showing that there are some things that we can control, like handwashing behaviour, wearing masks and social distancing.



Self-confidence

Now imagine the opposite, a parent who observes the child at play, walks by but does not engage, instead, flippantly remarks that wearing masks has not been proven to keep you safe. That may or may not be true, but the important lesson here is that this parent is sowing confusion, self-doubt and fear.



This kind of parent-child interaction, done repeatedly during formative years, would hamper a child's ability to trust their interpretation of what they see and hear. This child has been hearing the importance of social distancing, handwashing and sees everyone wearing a mask and now her parent, a person whose affection she is trying to maintain, sends her a completely different message. Can you imagine how confusing this would be for that child?



Validation



The parent may hold that particular opinion that masks are inefficient, everyone has a right to their opinion, but that's not the point. The point is that as a parent, engaging and understanding what your child perceives of his or her world can be an important opportunity to validate what she is hearing, seeing and feeling. Helping your child process their experiences is the foundation of your child's development of self-assuredness.





Coping strategies



Preschoolers also learn how to regulate their emotions by watching their parents. Parents who engage with their children (eye contact!!) and offer strategies to handle situations strengthen their child's capacity to regulate emotion and cope with stress. It is not too early to learn this. The parent-child interaction above demonstrates to the child that she has some mastery over the fearful situation by engaging in behavior that keeps her safe. Furthermore, the parent who engages and uses the play as an opportunity to teach and reinforce positive self mastery and self-image, is also creating a bond that will lead to parent-child closeness, because the child senses a commitment to the relationship. This opportunity is lost with the parent who walks by, sows' confusion and does not engage.



Regulating emotions

Remember that children at this stage are also very self-conscious. The ways in which parents speak to their children is so very important. Even a small criticism or a little disapproval from a parent, can hamper a child's development of self-esteem and negatively influence their motivation for learning. Moreover, harsh and critical verbalizations aimed at children has been shown to impair their ability to concentrate, focus, and by extension, learn. This can also carry over into their ability to form meaningful social relationships as well.



The message? Be curious about your child's play, use it as an opportunity to engage, and keep it kind. Remember, positive interactions form the basis of their self-esteem and can be a lifelong gift, much more valuable than any toy.

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