

Following a Child's Lead
Emergent Curriculum for Infants and Toddlers

Compiled by Susan Friedman and Michelle Soltero

Responsive teachers of infants and toddlers carefully observe each child in their care to learn about that individual's motivations, interests, needs, and feelings. As J. Ronald Lally and Peter Mangione point out in their article in the July 2006 issue of *Young Children* ("The Uniqueness of Infancy Demands a Responsive Approach to Care," pp. 14–20), responsive teachers allow each child's interests and motivations to emerge as a focus of the curriculum. This responsiveness is particularly important with children under the age of two because they are developing their sense of self as they learn about the world, holistically, and at their own pace.

What does such an emergent curriculum look like in infant and toddler classrooms? In the stories that follow, infant/toddler teachers describe how they have planned or adjusted the curriculum to follow a child's particular interest or need. The examples demonstrate how dedicated teachers use their knowledge and creativity to meet the emotional and learning needs of every child in their care.

Susan Friedman, MEd, is assistant editor of *Young Children* and coordinator of Beyond the Journal.

Miichelle Soltero, MA, is Region XII trainer coordinator, WestEd PITC (Program for Infant/Toddler Caregivers) Partners for Quality, serving three counties in California. She is an NAEYC Governing Board Member.

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Moving beyond kicking and pushing

—Arlae Gomez, Master Teacher

Cabrillo College Children's Center, Aptos, California

When a child exhibits a particular behavior that is difficult for teachers to handle, it's important to explore what's causing the behavior. I once had a child in my care who continually pushed his friends down. He would also take his arms and knock all the materials on a shelf onto the floor. He sometimes cleared the entire room that way.

I decided to meet with his parents to get their ideas about his behavior. They said that he just really liked to see things fall. We talked about creating a situation in which he could cause objects to fall again and again in a less disruptive way.

In our outside play area, we have a climbing structure with a lot of steps. We gathered balls, soft blocks, dolls, plastic dishes, and other similar materials that the boy could drop and watch fall. When he first saw the materials on the play structure, he went right over and started to drop them. He picked them back up and dropped them again and again and again. After two days, he was over it; he didn't do it anymore. And that was the end of him knocking all the materials off classroom shelves and pushing down his friends.



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Toddlers studying snails
—*Arlae Gomez,* Master Teacher

One day, when my group of two-year-olds was outdoors, a child found a snail. Some children said they didn't want to touch the snail, but one girl, who said she had a lot of snails in her backyard, showed the other children how to touch it. We started to talk about and learn more about snails, bugs, worms, and other small creatures the children could find outdoors. This began a semester-long study.

Since the children were so interested in the creatures, I offered them small clear boxes in which they could put the bugs, snails, and worms they found. They carried these boxes with their creatures inside them. At circle time we discussed what snails eat. We read books about snails and other animals, including Ruth Brown's *Snail Trail* and *Ten Seeds.*

One parent brought in a salamander. The children thought it was slimy, so we started talking about how different creatures feel. We created an aquarium habitat with dirt and plants for the salamander to live in. Some children suggested putting in a few snails as well. We discussed how the salamander and the snails would get along. The children were concerned that the salamander might eat the snails. We observed and saw that the salamander did not. We then placed in the aquarium a few rolypoly bugs the children had found. Again, the children wondered if the salamander would eat the rolypolys, but it didn't. Then, when the children put in some ants, they quickly discovered that salamanders *do* eat ants.

Our study of snails, bugs, and other small creatures took on a life of its own. Children continued to find bugs outdoors, so their interest continued. They learned about the world of nature, but their science study also presented the opportunity for them to learn about each other. We discussed how we need to be gentle with one another as well as with animals and insects.

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What is her pinching telling us?
—*Bonnie Aldridge,* Master Teacher

An 18-month-old girl in our group repeatedly pinched other children so fiercely that they were afraid to stand near her. We watched her carefully to determine what she was trying to say with her pinches. We thought she was asking two basic questions. First, socially, she was asking, "Who are you? How can I be your friend? How do I get to know you?" Second, she was exploring her small motor abilities: "How do I use my thumb and index finger? When and where can I pinch?"

To address her interest in getting to know the other children, we decided to help her develop other ways to say hello and to learn more appropriate ways of touching. When she got close to another child, we'd move quickly to intervene. We introduced new ways for her to get to know and interact with the other child. For example, we'd say, "You're next to Josh now. Let's say hi to him." And she would say, "Hi, hi, hi."

To help her learn appropriate touching, I suggested ways of touching other children that wouldn't hurt. I'd say, for example, "Should we ask Josh if you can touch his arm?" If Josh said yes, she would touch his arm gently. Then I would perhaps suggest, "Let's ask him if you can touch his hair."

We also worked with the child on being able to predict how another child might react to a pinch rather than a gentle touch. I'd say something like, "I remember yesterday you pinched Josh, and he screamed. Remember how he screamed? I also remember when you touched his arm gently, and he smiled. Let's try touching him gently again." I even tied a discussion of pinching into circle time. Using two dolls as props, I told a story about how one of the dolls had pinched the other. We then discussed ways the dolls could learn to interact with each other.

We wanted all the children to know that there could be a positive aspect to whatever they might bring to the classroom.

To address the child's second set of questions—about what she can do with her thumb and her index finger—we not only offered traditional pinching materials like playdough but also introduced something we called "pinching socks." We strung a piece of twine along a wall at child's-eye level and tied on a number of socks filled with various materials (sand, crinkly paper, cotton balls, pebbles, and marbles). We called them pinching socks because we wanted to lessen the child's feeling bad about her need to pinch. We wanted all the children to know that there could be a positive aspect to whatever they might bring to the classroom. The children really loved the pinching socks and would repeatedly pinch them, feeling the different textures and hearing the different sounds they made.

I hope the children learned that together we can figure out behaviors. Hopefully this child feels that we honored her needs. We saw her interest in getting to know the other children, and we helped her learn some skills she could use to develop friendships. We also gave her opportunities to pinch in ways that wouldn't hurt others.



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Exploring holes safely

—Bonnie Aldridge, Master Teacher

We had planted pumpkins in our schoolyard, and one morning we discovered a gopher hole in the pumpkin patch. We talked about who lived in the hole, and one boy stuck his hand in the hole. I told him I wasn't comfortable with that because a gopher might bite him. He addressed the danger on his own by finding a wooden spoon and sticking the handle of the spoon down the hole. I started to wonder if the gopher might be irritated by the intrusion, so I asked the child if he would be interested in walking around the yard with me to see how many other holes we could find. We had a marvelous time looking for holes.

The boy found many other kinds of holes that interested him. In the sandbox, he put his spoon handle into plastic cups, jiggling it around and hitting the bottom and sides of the cup. Some other children had popped the faucet off a plastic sink in the sandbox, and he discovered that hole. He stuck his spoon handle inside and tapped against the sides, but this time no matter how far he lowered the spoon, he could not feel the bottom. He discovered a vent into another room and found that if he played with the angle of the spoon, he could push it into the vent further. He wandered over to a door and tried to see if the handle of the spoon would fit inside the lock. He pushed, changed angles, and

tried turning the spoon, but it just wouldn't fit. He then noticed a knothole in our wooden deck, squatted down, and stuck in the spoon handle.

The boy had a lovely time going around the yard and seeing where his spoon would fit and where it wouldn't. While exploring his interest in holes, this child was discovering concepts of math and physics—how do the size of an object and the size and shape of a hole relate to each other? What fits into what? He not only explored holes, but he also learned that when you're following your interests, safety is important and teachers are there to help.

Helping a child with attachment and separation

***—Marisela Cerna,* Master Teacher**

Grossmont College Child Development Center, El Cajon, California

A child who had been in my care since infancy recently turned two. When she first came to us, she had a lot of emotional needs. She had been born prematurely and needed constant physical contact from the teachers. She panicked if I moved away from her. We worked on meeting her emotional needs by giving her lots of support and reassurance.

Although she remained physically very small, she was competent, and we tried to work with her strengths to help her grow and develop her interests. We noticed that she began to become very interested in books. When she came to school in the morning, she would pick up a book and carry it with her the whole day. She continued to look at and carry the book over a period of days.

Books have helped her get away from being so emotionally worried; she has begun to separate from us a little and become more interested in the world around her.

We encouraged her book interest. We saw that the books helped her focus less on a need for physical contact with the teachers and more on other developing interests.

Her language is growing slowly, but we can tell that it's coming along. We use books in many ways to help her develop her language skills. We read and reread the stories she carries with her. We use sign language books with her to help her communicate, and we ask her lots of questions about the books.



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Books have helped her get away from being so emotionally worried; she has begun to separate from us a little and become more interested in the world around her. The books allow her to move away from just wanting to be held and allow her to get involved in other activities.

I also use books to involve her in play. We extend her interest through repetitive reading and singing songs. She particularly likes *Brown Bear, Brown Bear,* so I have added a Brown Bear flannel board story that expands opportunities for play and language.

Most of the children in my group have been with me since they were about six months of age, and they are now 23 to 30 months old. Even though I have focused on one child's individual needs, the other children in the group have benefited from her emerging interests.



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Socks off, socks on

—Nathan Johnston-Chiszar, Partners for Quality Coordinator for WestEd's Program for Infant/Toddler Care

At the Walter Thompson Child Development Center, several children between the ages of 14 and 20 months were climbing on the low stairs in the loft, hanging from the frame, and squatting down and peering through the peephole. Claudia Hernandez, their teacher, stood by until one child made eye contact and held out her hand to be guided to the floor.

Walter Thompson Child Development Center, Ceres, California

Once down, the child sat and held out her foot to the teacher. Claudia responded by asking quietly, "You want to take your sock off?" The girl nodded, and Claudia helped her get started, sitting back when the sock was halfway off the child's foot.

Finding out that their teacher valued their choices about how to spend their time may have been the most important discovery the children made in the activity.

By this time, the other children had taken an interest in the activity. One after another, they sat down near Claudia so she would take off their socks too. Taking turns, she described what she was doing with each child: "OK, I started it. You do the rest." As one child removed a sock, another one would approach Claudia for help in putting his sock back on. Some children were more persistent in their efforts to do it themselves, first trying one way and then another. Claudia extended the activity, giving each individual in turn her focused attention and encouraging the others to try putting their socks back on themselves. This went on for nearly five minutes.

After several unsuccessful attempts to put her own sock back on, the child who had initiated the activity approached Claudia again. Claudia was busy with another child, and stray socks lay all around her. Sitting down, the child picked up one of the socks and started trying to put it on, only to discover that no matter how she turned it, this sock wouldn't go on her foot either.

Of course, this activity provided an opportunity for the children to discover more than just the properties of socks. Claudia allowed them time for exploration. She made herself available to interact and relate with the children and their interests. Finding out that the teacher valued their choices about how to spend their time may have been the most important discovery the children made in the activity.

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