

Social-Emotional Environments: Teacher Practices in Two Toddler Classrooms

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Abstract

This descriptive qualitative report is taken from a larger U.S. study on the influences of teacher practices on the early development of emotion regulation in toddlers. This report focuses on the classroom practices of two teachers in separate toddler classrooms. During a week of observations in each setting, the authors collected data on how the teachers spoke to the children, how they positioned themselves physically in relation to the children, and how they acted when children showed distress or challenging behaviors. Children's behaviors were also observed in relation to the teachers' practices. The authors provide a brief comparative discussion of observations made in the two classrooms. They recommend additional research to address how teachers' daily practices create the classroom social-emotional environment and how those practices may influence child outcomes, especially the early development of emotion regulation.

Introduction

Early nurturing relationships between young children and adults can create a sense of safety and security that supports children's learning to trust (Erikson, 1950), to regulate emotions (Weinfield, Sroufe, Egeland, & Carlson, 1999; Campos, Frankel, & Camras, 2004), resolve interpersonal conflicts, develop empathy, and learn how to relate to others in socially appropriate ways (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000; Weinfield et al., 1999). These abilities are generally seen as critical not only for children's social emotional well-being but also for their cognitive development and later success in school (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2004, 2007, 2008). Teachers and caregivers of young children set the daily emotional tone and climate of their classrooms, thereby influencing children's development of social skills, including the early development of emotion regulation (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2004, 2007, 2008; White & Howe, 1998; Thompson, 2001).

Little research exists on the social-emotional environment of the classroom (Mill & Romano-White, 1999) and how teacher practices can facilitate the development of emotion regulation in natural settings (Campos et al., 2004). Few studies address how children who are in child care are supported or challenged in those environments to manage and regulate their emotions.

Bio-ecological systems theory provided the conceptual framework for this study (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998). Teachers and children interacting through daily activities and routines are said to have a bi-directional effect on one another, at what Bronfenbrenner and Morris (1998) would call the "micro level" of influence, wherein the physical and social environments children regularly experience profoundly influence development.

Methods

Purpose of the Study

The two teachers described in this paper, Rochelle and Tori, were among five teachers involved in a larger qualitative descriptive study of how teacher practices influence the early development of emotion regulation in toddlers (Gloeckler & Niemeyer, 2010, submitted for publication). The larger study had two purposes—to examine the practices that teachers used to create relationships with toddlers and, more specifically, to describe how teachers responded to a child who was showed signs of distress (e.g., crying).

Selection of Participants

This study took place in two U.S. states. Participating programs were identified through one state's Division of Child Development Web site and from the other state's Department of Human Services Web site. Directors of centers ranked as "quality centers" according to their states' official "star rating system" were invited via telephone to participate; state assessors had rated programs in these states and awarded "stars" based on several criteria. Researchers used county-by-county listings from the state Web sites, calling any center that operated a full-day/full-week program for infants and toddlers and received a state quality rating of Good to Very Good. Choosing centers with similar costs was seen as a way to control for socioeconomic differences among families.

Rochelle and Her Setting

Rochelle and her center director readily agreed to participate in the study. Rochelle taught in a private, for-profit child care center serving 129 children and families. The center provided care for children 6 weeks to 6 years of age plus after-school care. Rochelle was Caucasian, and English was her primary language. She had a high school education and had been the lead teacher in the toddler room for 1 year prior to the start of the study. She had worked for the 6 previous years in the after-school care program. An assistant teacher worked with Rochelle.

Rochelle's professional development history for the previous 3 years consisted of training in cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR), first aid, Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS), communicable diseases, diapering, and hand washing. She had taken no training on child development or social-emotional development of young children.

At the time of the study, nine children ages 18-24 months were enrolled in her classroom—six boys and three girls. Eight were Caucasian and one was Hispanic. The toddler classroom was rectangular, 19 by 24 feet, and furnished with toys, materials, furniture, and equipment that seemed to be developmentally appropriate.

Tori and Her Setting

Tori worked at a child care center serving 190 children and families. Tori and the director of her center both participated in the study. The center, part of a national franchise, provided care for children 6 weeks to 6 years of age plus after-school care. Tori was Caucasian, and English was her primary language. She had a high school education and had been the lead teacher in the same toddler classroom for 7 years and 5 months prior to the study. Tori worked with a co-teacher.

Tori's professional development history for the previous 3 years included training in SIDS, CPR, playground safety, communicable diseases, child growth and development, problems with biting, practices to promote social-emotional development, and effective discipline.

Nine children ages 14-24 months were enrolled in Tori's classroom—four boys and five girls. Four were identified as Caucasian, four as African American, and one as "Other." The classroom was rectangular (12 by 36 feet). It was one-half of a larger room (24 by 36 feet) divided with shelving and gates to allow for five 10- to 14-month-old children and their teacher on one side and Tori's class on the other side. The toys, furniture, and equipment in the classroom were developmentally appropriate, although some of it appeared old or worn.

Data Collection and Analysis

The researchers conducted observations 3 hours a day (8:30-11:30 a.m.) Monday through Friday at each site, for 1 week (15 hours total), keeping a running record during observation periods. To help with record keeping, the researchers arranged for each child involved to wear a sticker with initials on the back of his or her shirt as an identifier. The researchers also reviewed Rochelle's and Tori's professional development histories.

An adapted version of the *Colorado Childhood Temperament Inventory* (Buss & Plomin, 1984; Rowe & Plomin, 1977) was completed by parents for their own child and by the teachers for each child in the classroom. Additional data were collected during individual interviews with Rochelle and Tori and with two parents from each classroom; information from those data sources is not discussed in this paper.

Classroom Observations

Observations of Rochelle's Class

Tuesday, 8:34 a.m. Children are at the table having breakfast snack. Rochelle is helping the children eat and get food onto their spoons. The child J is slipping down in his chair. As Rochelle picks him up under the arms, she remarks, "Come on, J, are you lazy this morning?" She then feeds him some grits and applesauce. A few minutes later, Rochelle says to another child at the table, "T, you're just being lazy" as she feeds him a spoonful.

Tuesday, 8:54 a.m. The class is outside. Rochelle has brought bubbles for play. She gets down on the children's level and calls the children to her, asking, "Want to blow bubbles?" For the next 10 minutes, she engages the children with the bubbles. She lets each child have an individual turn. Children laugh and squeal as she blows many bubbles for them to chase and catch. "Ready for big ones?" she asks as she continues. "You have to turn around," she says to C who is facing the opposite way. She laughs and they laugh. She smiles and they smile.

Tuesday, Transition from Outdoor Play. Rochelle and the children are returning to the classroom after outdoor play. A few children have gone immediately to the sink and turned on the water. After the teachers remove each of them from the sink area, JS returns to the sink. Rochelle says loudly, "Time out, time out!" She lifts JS under his arms and puts him on the floor. "Sit in time out; sit in time out," she scolds. He lies on the floor and will not sit up. Rochelle physically sits him up. They wrestle a bit on the floor. Rochelle pulls him up, and JS lies down. She takes his arms, and he lies back down. Rochelle lets go of him and gets up and moves away and goes to put music on. JS now goes to the book area and tries to stand on his head. Similar interactions between JS and Rochelle continue for 15 minutes.

Wednesday, 8:59 a.m. The class is on the playground. Rochelle picks up a child who seems to have a bug bite and takes him inside to be checked. They return at 9:05. A few minutes later, Rochelle leaves again. She returns 35 minutes later at 9:47 with some red paint for an art project. Within 1 minute (at 9:48), she leaves the playground again.

Wednesday, 9:29 a.m. Rochelle has left the playground without telling another adult. Another teacher comes out the door to the playground and tells the assistant teacher that it is time for her (the assistant teacher) to take a break. The assistant leaves with no explanation to the children. The children notice; several of them go to the door that the assistant teacher just went through, apparently looking for her. The remaining teacher on the playground then scolds them: "What are you looking at, what you see in there? Come away from the door."

Wednesday, 9:37 a.m. Rochelle is still absent. The assistant teacher returns from break. She

announces, "Time to go inside." When the children enter the classroom, they begin to throw toys and pull items randomly off the shelves. The observers' notes from this episode read "children run all around, throw toys, push toys around the room, climb on things, chaos breaks out." The assistant teacher says to the researchers, "They act that way when they come inside."

Wednesday, Transition to Lunch. The class has finished an art project a bit later than the teachers anticipated. Lunch is due to be delivered soon. Rochelle says loudly, "Come to sink," as she roughly pulls children under arms, up and out of chairs. "Go to sink. Come to sink." "L, you have paint on your fingers, come to sink." She washes the children's hands very quickly, then gives paper towels to each to dry their hands and says, "Go to table."

Wednesday, Lunch Time. Lunch has arrived. All are at the table. G says, "Want, water." Rochelle responds, "Okay, G, it is coming." G continues, "Water, water," watching the teachers. Rochelle says, "G, water?" and pours him some milk. One minute later, she says, "Turn around G; you know how you spill milk." She notices that C is slipping in his chair and says, "Getting lazy" to him.

Thursday, 9:36 a.m. When the class re-enters the classroom from outside play, a person from the kitchen arrives with a large cart of newly washed toys. The assistant teacher is on a break and is not in the room. Rochelle and a teacher from another room begin to sort, file, and put the clean toys on shelves, going in and out of the room for more toys as the cart is left in the hall. Children begin playing on their own. The observers witness several children biting, pulling, pushing, and scratching one another. When one child bites another and crying begins, Rochelle stops what she is doing, scolds both children, and then focuses again on the toys.

Thursday Morning. Observer notes indicate that Rochelle has left the classroom numerous times to take breaks, get paintbrushes, get a drink, and get mats from another classroom. Each time, she gives little or no notice to the children or her assistant.

Post-observation Conversation with Rochelle. After a full week of data collection, researchers held a private meeting with Rochelle to give her feedback about her practices. Returning 2 weeks later to pick up paperwork, the principal investigator asks Rochelle if she has implemented any of the suggestions given to her at the meeting. Rochelle replies, "No." Her assistant teacher quit, so she was "starting all over again."

Observations of Tori

Tuesday, 8:30 a.m. JA appears upset to be separating from her mother. JA is passed to Tori who comforts her, pats her on the back, and holds her. JA's mother leaves. Tori takes JA to wash her hands. JA cries and Tori continues to hold and comfort her. Tori says, "Let's get some milk," and brings JA to a chair and gives her some milk. ER asks to get up; Tori bends over JA and gives her a kiss on her forehead while helping ER.

Tuesday, 8:30 a.m. Three children are eating at the table. Tori sits on the floor next to the table offering help as needed. At 8:42 a.m., Tori gets down on the level of the children on carpet, sits, and is ready to read. She gets up for a moment at 8:45 a.m. When she returns, she sits on the level of the children reading them a book. She continues to read and plays peek-a-boo with children. She gets up to clean and then comes back to them. At 8:52 a.m., Tori plays a game with the children. She stays down on the rug with them until 9:03 a.m., when she gets up to change a diaper and get out paints.

Tuesday, 10:28 a.m. Tori's class sits on the rug inside the classroom. Tori has given a few children xylophones. ER points at a xylophone. Tori looks and asks, "You want one, too?" and gets it out for ER. Four children now play xylophones. Tori sings "Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star," making eye contact with the children and smiling.

Tuesday a.m., Diaper Changing. Tori calls the children to get diapers changed. Her usual practice is to call a child's name just once; the child usually runs to her. Tori says, "Okay, M." M comes to her. Tori

lifts her up to change her diaper and sings with M through the diapering. She makes eye contact with M and lifts and holds M while she wipes the mat. She dances with M a bit and then carries her to the bathroom sink for hand washing.

Tuesday, 10:37 a.m. ER is sitting in Tori's lap. They are talking about pictures on the wall behind them. JA joins them and takes part in the conversation. Tori hugs and holds ER. A person from the office, someone not especially familiar to the children, enters and asks Tori if she can come and fix the laminating machine in the office. Tori says, "Not really until 11:30 a.m." (when children are at nap). The other person listens. ER begins to look fearful. Tori picks ER up and says, "It's okay," and holds her. The person from the office tells ER, "I'm not going to get you!" Tori says, "It's okay, ER." The person from the office gets up to leave. ER watches with a serious face from her place in Tori's arms.

Wednesday, 8:34 a.m. Tori is reading *The Cat in the Hat* to a group of children. D and his mother enter the classroom. D has a messy diaper. Tori gets up to change the diaper, telling the children what she is doing and reminding them that she will return in a few minutes to read. Tori asks D, "Does that feel better?" as she lifts him into her arms and takes him to wash hands. Tori says, "Just a minute and we'll read the rest of the story" to the other children. She washes her hands and returns to them. "Okay," she says, "Are we done with *Cat in the Hat*? I think you guys were losing interest. Want to do *Monkeys*?" Some children nod. Tori settles down on the children's level on the rug. She reads the *Monkey* book. As she sits, children begin to settle around her. Some watch and some play with other toys, staying near her. Tori says, "Ooh ooh ah ah" (monkey sound). Children say "Ee-ooh-ooh." Tori reads and pats E. Children crawl around her and sit near her. E is now in Tori's lap as she reads.

Wednesday, 9:40 a.m. J vocalizes. Tori responds to her. J says, "Read book?" Tori asks, "You want to read book?" J says, "Book." Tori gets up, gets books, and takes J and N with her to read books.

Wednesday, 10:24 am. Tori goes to the cabinet to get some hand cream. JA stands by her, looks, and does hand motions too, copying Tori. Tori now pats JA's hands so she gets just a bit of the hand cream too. They both rub their hands and smile at one another.

Wednesday, 11:00 a.m. Children are at the table eating. Tori says to the children, "C [co-teacher] will be right back." ER fusses. Tori says to her, "As soon as C gets the beds out, you can go and lay down." Tori then stands up next to the table. ER fusses again. Tori responds to ER, "It's coming as soon as I get a sheet on it." The assistant teacher returns with sheets. Tori puts the sheets on and puts ER down to nap as quickly as possible.

Thursday, 8:49 a.m. Tori's class is on the playground. Tori puts children in swings and pushes them from the front so they can see one another. "Wheee!" Tori smiles to each of the four children. JA vocalizes and Tori says, "What?" JA says, "Plane!" Tori looks and says, "Yes, airplane!" Tori continues to push the swings from the front. She smiles at the children and makes funny faces.

Preliminary Summary

Both of these teachers acted in particular ways to create and build relationships with toddlers and calm those who were upset or distressed. However, we noted significant differences between their practices.

Teacher/Toddler Interactions: Rochelle

Analysis of observations of Rochelle indicates that her interactions with her class were characterized by a mix of responsive and (more often) restrictive or disrespectful language. Her reactions to children who were upset or crying varied. Sometimes, she would help them, but often she might

ignore them, scold them, or keep on with what she was doing.

During breakfast and lunch, the observers noted similar language and behaviors (e.g., referring to children as “lazy”) on Rochelle’s part throughout the observation week. In the classroom, Rochelle often spent time cleaning the room with her back to most of the children, talking to her assistant teacher, getting herself a snack, or changing diapers while continuing to talk with her assistant teacher. At times, the observer recorded “no one is watching the children,” as teachers were physically present but had their backs to the children. At times, the adults appeared to be consciously ignoring the children. Rochelle often left the classroom, coming and going throughout each observation period without mentioning to the children or her assistant that she was leaving. It appeared that the toddlers in Rochelle’s class were often left to solve problems by themselves.

During the observation period, Rochelle occasionally engaged with the children in a more positive manner. Such situations were more likely to occur on the playground (for example, when she played with bubbles with the children).

Children’s overall responses to Rochelle’s practices were varied. Many of them appeared to be confused and unsettled. Some children listened to her and complied at times. Others appeared to “tune out”—some wandering the room, some seeming to distract themselves by looking at books or toys. Still others hit or bit classmates, cried, or dumped toys off shelves. Some of the children, such as C, appeared to have a variety of reactions. One day after the class returned to the room from outside play, C sat at the table with his shoe in hand, studying the flashing lights on the bottom of his shoe while other children were throwing toys behind him. Another day, he sat looking through a book, and on another, he threw toys along with others. JS, on the other hand, tended to climb the bookcases and diaper changing table, scatter toys around the room, clear the shelves, and engage in other more disruptive behaviors.

Rochelle’s practice sometimes involved inconsistent use of time out, scolding, and physically moving children. For example, JS might be sent to or physically put into “time out,” while other children displaying the same behaviors were scolded or ignored. She used time out with him repeatedly during the observation week. (Rochelle and JS may have had what Thomas and Chess (1977) would have called a lack of “goodness of fit.”) In contrast, G and some other children showed many of the same behaviors as JS, but Rochelle responded to G by scolding or ignoring his behaviors.

Many of Rochelle’s actions suggest lack of understanding of and responsiveness to toddlers’ needs. It is possible that Rochelle did not recognize the influence that she might have on the children. Neither did she seem to see any need to change her practices, as shown by her response when asked if she had implemented any suggestions given to her by the researcher.

Teacher/Toddler Interactions: Tori

Analysis of Tori’s practices as a toddler teacher shows that she engaged in a variety of activities that built emotional connections and relationships with the children in her care. The observers noted that Tori frequently made herself available both physically and emotionally to the children in her care. She spent a significant amount of time down on the level of the children each day, getting up and down routinely to accommodate the interests and needs of the children. She “lived” on the rug with the children during the observation week, which created the context for shared experiences, reciprocal interactions, and a growing attachment to one another. Children spent a lot of time playing with Tori in activities such as songs, finger plays, and simple games that she made enjoyable.

Children often seemed to want to be close to Tori. They would seek contact, comfort, and assistance, and they would drop into and out of her lap, using her as a “secure base” before returning to play. Tori engaged with the children in ongoing verbal and nonverbal communication, touch, eye contact, and face play that were reciprocal. She seemed to recognize individual children’s needs and would anticipate and intervene to provide the scaffolding needed to manage their emotions and behaviors. For example, during lunch time when some children were more tired than others and needed to go take a nap, Tori talked to them and helped them to be patient until the mats were ready.

When children were upset, distressed, or crying, Tori would talk with them, ask if they needed help, offer comfort, or engage them in activities. She supported children with her voice, touch, and eye contact, which seemed to help them manage their level of arousal.

Preliminary Discussion

This study revealed a wide continuum of teacher/toddler relationships. Although Rochelle and Tori both worked at quality-rated child care centers and had significant demographic features in common, their practices with toddlers differed considerably. Some practices (primarily those observed in Tori's classroom) appeared to be developmentally appropriate, promoting growth and offering support for toddlers' emotion regulation, while others (primarily, those often observed in Rochelle's class) seemed harsh and potentially "growth inhibiting" (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998). Likewise, children responded to the teachers in a variety of ways that may have been based partly on the specific practices used, their individual temperaments, and the overall relationship between the teacher and child.

Data from this study also demonstrate that what teachers say and do each day sets the emotional tone of their classrooms. A hallmark of developmentally appropriate practice is continuous and close supervision of children (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009). Teacher warmth and sensitivity to children's needs are also critical to their feeling safe and secure (Richter, 2004). Responsive teacher language is known to be associated with other high-quality practices of the teachers who use it. The same is true for restrictive and disrespectful language, which is linked with other developmentally inappropriate teacher practices (Stone, 1993).

Several questions arose based on our observations of Rochelle and Tori that could lead to further research.

We noted that while Tori's professional development included both safety-related and child development training, Rochelle had met all professional development contact hours with training on regulations related to health and safety. This finding suggests that studies of links between professional development training and teacher practices might be fruitful. Do teacher-child relationships benefit when professional development balances contact hours related to health and safety with contact hours on child development and adult-child relationships? Are nurturing teacher-child relationships enhanced by professional development about promoting young children's emotional and behavioral self-regulation? Does professional development on helping toddlers solve problems and resolve conflict reduce the incidence of challenging behaviors in classrooms and help lay the foundation for learning in all domains?

Our observations also raise questions about the role of center directors in providing supervision and clear direction to those teachers who do use inappropriate practices. Directors can and, in fact, are supposed to ensure that children are cared for in their setting in ways that first "do no harm" and that create "growth-promoting" caregiver-child relationships (NAEYC, 2005, p. 3). Might Rochelle's responsiveness to the toddlers in her care improve if the director of their center intervened? To what extent does director support promote the kinds of practices observed in Tori's classroom?

Finally, what support in addition to training might be needed for the infant/toddler workforce? What might be some optimal new approaches to professional preparation for working with infants and toddlers? Are there benefits to increasing the commitment of time, curriculum, and credit hours to training infant/toddler teachers at institutions of higher education? Such changes are likely to result in personnel who are well prepared and who can expect to be paid accordingly. The observations we have reported here suggest that, while some toddlers do receive responsive care, a need exists for action to change the face of infant/toddler care in the United States.

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