

Parallel Play: A Podcast for Teachers Who Love Toddlers, Episode 1

Self-regulation and Reframing the “Terrible Twos”

[Music]

Mike Brown: Toddlers are just so intensely emotional.

Becky Sucram: If adults experienced and enacted the full range of feelings available to an average toddler in a day, they would collapse from emotional exhaustion.

Mike: How can we change the image to elevate our perspective of 2-year-olds? How can we shift a perspective from negative to positive?

[Music]

Becky: Hi, and welcome to Parallel Play, a podcast for educators who love toddlers. In this podcast, we specifically focus on toddlers and how best to support their development. My name is Becky Sucram, and my pronouns are she/her.

Mike: And I'm your co-host, Mike Brown, pronouns are he/him, and I'm pretty excited to be here today. How about you, Becky?

Becky: I'm very excited, I'm really looking forward to this conversation with you.

Mike: And we are from the National Center on Early Childhood Development, Teaching, and Learning, or NCECDTL.

Becky: And I'm so excited to talk with you today, Mike, about reframing the terrible twos. And before becoming a part of NCECDTL, I was an infant/toddler coach. I worked in child care with infants and toddlers for about 12 years. And now I have a 2-year-old son, who you're going to hear more about. So toddlers are always on my mind and always in my heart.

Mike: Sounds like you can't escape them. That's a good thing though. I'm so looking forward to this conversation. I've been working in many different roles in early childhood education in group settings to as support staff, as a substitute, as a coach, in leadership, and now as an indirect role as a consultant. I think just taking this whole system approach to supporting and really loving toddlers is unique. Like my mom used to say, it takes a village to raise a child. I'm really, really excited to bring that concept to supporting the toddlers we care for.

Becky: Yeah, definitely. The phrase alone, “the terrible twos,” whether you believe it or you don't believe it, or you've recently experienced it or currently living in it, it brings up a lot of emotions.

Mike: When you think about the terrible twos, quotation marks, right, what are the images or ideas that pops into your mind? And I want our audience to just take a second to think about that. Are they anything like these sounds?

[Audio begins]

[Music]

[Baby crying]

Adult: What happened?

Adult 2: Shake, shake, shake!

[Toddler laughing]

Toddler: I got a [Inaudible]

Adult 2: Look at that, look at how ...

[Toddlers screaming]

Toddler: It's my hat. It's my hat.

[Music]

[Audio ends]

Mike: Are these images negative? Like a 2-year-old on the floor crying after you gave them the wrong color cup, or is it a toddler saying no over and over? If so, why are these the first images you see? How can we change the image to elevate our perspective of 2-year-olds? How can we shift our perspective from negative to pause? From deficit to shrink based? How can we shift our perspective to be more inclusive of all toddlers and their families?

Becky: In today's episode, we're going to be reframing the terrible twos, and we will talk about all of these questions that Mike asked us. We're going to be talking about 2-year-old development, what self-regulation is, and how we as center-based teachers, family child care providers, or as home visitors who work with infants and toddlers – for example, in an early Head Start program – can support toddlers through co-regulation. One of the things I want to do right now, Mike, is start reframing the terrible twos. What words can we use instead of terrible?

Mike: If you give me all day, I might throw out a million different ideas: talkative twos, maybe because I love to talk, teachable twos, twinkling twos, what about tenacious twos?

Becky: Got to say, I love all of those or thrilling twos, talented twos, or trusting twos. I want to ask you, Mike, why do you think people say the twos are so trying?

Mike: I think it's because toddlers are just so intensely emotional. I'm sure everyone has a story about a very passionate toddler.

Becky: Oh yeah. I definitely have a few. And I'm sure you do too. The other day I was listening to *The Emotional Life of a Toddler* by Alicia F. Lieberman, and a quote that stood out to me was, "If adults experienced and enacted the full range of feelings available to an average toddler in a day, they would collapse from emotional exhaustion.:"

Mike: I'm tired just thinking about that. But think about how many emotions that you have in an 8-hour day. Like during the day, I am hangry – I'm hangry right now. There's sadness. There's joy. Is there a difference between a 2-year-old and a 52-year-old? The only difference I see is the knowledge and ability to really be able to use our words to be able to verbally communicate. It's our human nature to express all of our emotions, from our mental health and well-being, and we shouldn't have to hold those emotions in. We should be able to explore them. I really think we need to break out of the habit of telling children how they should feel because toddlers have big feelings. I have big feelings.

Becky: Yeah, I definitely agree. And I think that's why it's really important for adults to support toddlers in organizing, understanding, and expressing those big feelings. Toddlers are also while trying to figure out all of these big feelings, trying to figure out how to be independent and make their own choices while just beginning the process of learning independent skills.

Mike: Which can be so difficult, right? And I really want to challenge our listeners to think about their reactions to toddlers' emotions. What comes up for you? How do you view toddler emotions?

Becky: Mike, those are such great reflection questions, and let's listen to what coping with strong emotions or self-regulation might sound like in a toddler.

[Audio begins]

[Music]

Adult: I want you to see the world.

[Child yelling]

Adult 2: OK, you need another hug. [Toddler crying] Oh, I'm so terrible. It's OK. Do you want your blanky? Woo!

[Toddlers giggling and laughing]

[Music]

[Audio ends]

Mike: Self-regulation is cognitive. It's emotional. It's behavioral skills and processes that supports children and adults in coping with strong feelings and controlling impulses, and learning and getting along with others. Self-regulation is the ability to manage our feelings, our actions, our behaviors, so really, we can be in relationship with one another.

Becky: It sounds like there are a ton of skills involved in self-regulation.

Mike: It is a super complex process, and it's hard for adults to use self-regulation skills at times. And they can be tested by toddlers' behaviors. And part of our job is to really engage our skills – that teacher tool belt that we have – so we can support toddlers while they are developing their self-regulation skills.

Becky: Mike, when you said that self-regulation skills can be hard for adults, it makes me think about when I was working in group care with young toddlers, one of the very first things I learned was nap time could get – could push my buttons. And one of the things that I would do to kind of help myself self-regulate was to close my eyes, just for a second, take a deep breath, and hum a song that was calming for me. There were a handful of times where it worked, and there were a handful of times where it didn't work. And my next strategy was to rely on my – the co-teachers in my room and ask one of them, “Can you switch out with me so that I could take a break?”

Mike: Becky, if I was working with you at that time, I would be so proud of you because it's OK to ask for help. Self-regulation can be challenging, and just like toddlers, we all need help. It's OK to ask for it.

Becky: Speaking of help, let's listen to another audio clip. And this one is an example of what coregulation might sound like in a few different ways.

[Audio begins]

Adult 3: OK, what's wrong? You're scared?

Child: Yeah.

Adult 3: OK, hold me. Chugga chugga chugga chugga chugga chugga chugga chugga chugga chugga chugga ... You can hold me tight, so you won't get scared.

[Toddler crying]

[Music]

[Audio ends]

Becky: OK, and that's co-regulation in action.

Mike: Absolutely, coregulation is when adults support the development of self-regulation. Coregulation is a collaborative process between an adult and a child, where the adult provides regulatory support in the context of a shared nurturing relationship. For those who know how to ride a bike, this is like learning how to ride with training wheels on before jumping right onto the bike and going downhill. The adult responds to the toddler in a way that can help the toddler organize their feelings while allowing the toddler to lead their emotional journey. The adult is there to support, meeting the toddler where they are.

Becky: You know, I like what you said is that the adult responds to the toddler in a way that can help the toddler organize their feelings while allowing the toddler to lead the emotional journey. And this sounds a lot like what my friend does for me when I need to kind of like let go of some big feelings that she's there to help me organize, but I'm the one leading the journey.

Mike: Like I said, there's not a lot of difference between adults and children or toddlers sometimes, there's not a lot of difference between a 2-year-old and a 52-year-old. Coregulation continues into adulthood. And as adults, most of us know how to or when to seek out people we trust to help us coregulate. And for toddlers, many of these feelings and experiences are brand new. It is their first time feeling this feeling or having this reaction, and they need caring adults to anticipate, provide, and support for their emerging regulation skills. Most of the emotions that toddlers know are either happy or sad. But what about the feelings like jealousy? How are we providing toddlers with a variety of different languages and words to express exactly how they feel?

Becky: Yes, yeah so important. And it's also important to remember that coregulation looks so different for every child. That some children it might be a warm interaction like a hug or reading a book together. It could be standing close to each other and taking some deep breaths. It might also be a toddler walking away to a quiet space or just standing near them. And depending on the child, it's about trusting them to be independent and being available for them when they need you. Coregulation can build relationships, and it provides opportunities for the child to practice, learn, and see self-regulation skills.

Mike: There you go. We can just replay that over and over again, right? Coregulation is a great time to model self-regulation skills. Thinking back when I was in a group care, I had different stress balls that the children could use. But let's be honest, they were balls that I used myself. I would tell them to "Oh hey, why don't you go get a green ball if you're feeling sad?" And they could squeeze out those feelings. Part of toddlers learning how to self-regulate is actually seeing adults self-regulate. Hearing them talk about it and talking about our emotions. This is why it's so important for us as adults to be vulnerable. Coregulation is a great time to let toddlers practice self-regulation skills while also providing them the support they need to be successful at managing and expressing their feelings.

Becky: Yeah, and thinking about what you said about how important it is for us to be vulnerable. And when we share our feelings with toddlers, we want to state them matter of factly, like "I'm feeling frustrated, and I'm going to sit here for a minute." And we try not to

attribute good or bad feelings to feelings because feelings are feelings. And we can have a whole other podcast all about talking with toddlers about feelings.

Mike: Yeah, we absolutely could. Listeners should let us know if that's something you're interested in hearing. Because I can talk for days. Don't get me started. Please share your thoughts in the Teacher Time community on MyPeers.

Becky: It sounds like coregulation is really at the core of reframing the theatrical twos. It's about acknowledging that toddlers have big feelings and adults need to help them manage, express, cope, and organize those feelings.

Mike: Toddlers are passionate. They're persistent. They're social scientists as I like to see it. They have a lot of feelings that they just might not understand yet, which causes a lot of feelings in adults. Creating this belief by some that these twos are terrible. Let's sit on that as we go into a break.

[Music]

Voiceover: If you've enjoyed this episode of Parallel Play, make sure you check out Teacher Time, a series of webinars that provides teachers and family child care providers with content knowledge and teaching practices related to child development. Find separate Teacher Time webinars for infants and toddlers and preschoolers on Approaches to Learning, Inclusion and Belonging, Exploring STEM, and many more topics on the ECLKC website, under Teacher Time series.

[Music]

Becky: Great, and we're back. What can we do to reframe our thinking?

Mike: Well, first I think we need to remember that toddlers need support from adults to help manage and express their feelings. Those who care for toddlers play such an important role in the lives of young children. The work is hard, the work is challenging, and this work is rewarding. It is so vital.

Becky: Yeah, I don't think we say it enough, and I don't think early child care providers get to hear it enough. That adults have a big impact on toddlers, on the toddlers they care for, that they are literally helping build and shape a toddler's foundation for learning and living. And we also know that toddlers are constantly testing their understanding of the world around them. And the feelings they are feeling and asking the adults in their life, "Will you help me make sense of this," through their behaviors. When we can anticipate and respond to those behaviors with support, the toddler will learn that they can count on the adult, that the feeling is temporary, and that it's OK to try out different behaviors or ways to self-regulate.

Mike: Let's take a look at some research. Because by around 8 to 18 months, children might try to be close. They might try to make contact or look to familiar adults to help them express or understand these strong emotions. Between 16 and 36 months, children use a variety of

various strategies to help manage strong emotions like walking away from a situation, covering their ears and eyes, or seeking support from an adult.

And then around age 3, children are really looking to each other to help them in coping with strong feelings and emotions, and they're using and trying out strategies on their own. If you want to learn more about developmental progressions, check out the ELOF 2 GO app, that's E-L-O-F-2, the number two, GO app.

Becky: It's helpful to know that as children are moving from toddlerhood to preschool, that they need support with feelings and emotions. And of course, we know that children develop at different rates and some children might develop self-regulation skills sooner or later than the age ranges that are suggested.

Mike: Of course, I think sometimes you forget that children develop at different speeds, and that's OK. Reframing the thoughtful twos is all about meeting the child where they are at – in their self-regulation skills; helping them coregulate, honoring and acknowledging that, “Hey, yeah, you're 2, but you're having these very strong emotions.” And let's accept those emotions, even when the behavior is not OK.

Becky: Yeah, and another really help tip I learned is that toddler behaviors can be their best guess at how to regulate their emotions.

Mike: Toddlers are just learning how to self-regulate. I can't stress that enough. They are just learning how to self-regulate, and they are going to try different ways to do that. Ways that might look different than us. Remember, toddlers are scientists. They're in a phase where everything is a hypothesis, and they're trying out new and different methods to self-regulate, to see if they get the same or different results. This informs them on how to respond to that feeling. “Well, does crying help me express my feelings about being dropped off? Does it mean I go with ...” – this is my child voice – “Does it mean I go with my family member? Does it mean an adult comes over to me?”

Becky: Yeah, so many important questions to ask and get answered. I can't – I wish we could see like little thought bubbles in toddlers heads of the things that they're wondering about. And it really sounds like reframing the tender hearted twos is about the adult changing their expectations of toddler behavior.

Mike: That sounds like a Nickelodeon episode just waiting to happen. But it's all about making sure our expectations are truly developmentally appropriate. At that moment, instead of where we think they should be, based off of how old they are, human development is a spectrum. Remember to also give yourself grace and be kind to yourself in this process. I know we are doing a better job now than ever before by acknowledging our self-regulation techniques, our emotions, our mental health. But make no mistake about it, it is tough. It's important to remember that self-regulation can be tricky, and you are not alone in thinking that.

Becky: And we can ask for help when we need it. A key thing to remember about coregulation is to accept, acknowledge, reassure, and teach new skills when the child is calm.

Mike: Mm hmm, right? Having realistic expectations of toddlers will help us coregulate in a more appropriate way. We will be more accepting of the fact that toddlers are emotional, they're social scientists, and they're learning a new language. They're learning to be independent, and they need our support. Let's listen in once again to some toddlers expressing their emotion.

[Audio begins]

[Music]

Adult: [Inaudible]

[Toddlers screaming]

Adult: You sound [Inaudible]. [Toddler laughing] Look!

Adult 2: Good, you did it!

Adult 3: Thanks, Robin.

Toddler: Whoa!

Adult 4: Whoa!

[Toddlers playing]

[Audio ends]

Becky: OK, Mike, a common phrase we hear in our apartment is: "I do it." My son says it all the time. And for a while, he said, "Baby do it." And he wants to do so many things on his own. Sometimes I can honor his independence. Other times, like when we have an appointment to get to or there are safety concerns, I have to step in.

Mike: Well first, enjoy him saying, "I do it," because sooner or later, he's going to be like, "I don't want to do it." But when you have an appointment and can't miss it or safety is concern, you must be in control. In a learning setting, I think we can get stuck on our schedule. "Oh, we've got to get inside for lunchtime at a certain time." And because of that, we stop a toddler from discovering. Discovering something so we can make it on time. We have to ask ourselves, what's actually more important here? Letting the child discover the world, test out their independence, or eating lunch right at 11:00 am? Toddlers are toddlers for only so long so let them enjoy the wonders of toddlerhood.

Becky: I love that. And we should let ourselves enjoy the wonders of toddlerhood as well. And it makes me think about how toddlers are social scientists, kind of trying to figure out how adults are going to respond to certain things. I'm sure everyone has experienced the moment where a toddler starts to climb onto the table and is staring directly at the adult in the room. And in that moment, the toddler is engaging in an experiment. They're wondering how is the adult going to respond. And we have to remind ourselves that this is experimentation. It's not defiance. The toddler is not thinking, "I'm going to do this to push the adult's button." They're experimenting to learn and find out how different people respond in different situations on different days.

Mike: Different adults have different expectations, whether that is different co-teachers, home visitors, SEC providers, or family members.

Becky: I think it's really important to talk about and notice the different expectations that each adult has. Can you imagine learning about all of those different expectations, like what a process. It makes sense why toddlers have to experiment to figure them all out. And sometimes these types of experiments can push buttons for adults. And the adult might feel like the child knew exactly what they were doing, and they were trying to – they were trying to push my button. Again, in these moments, they are not defiant. They are experiments to learn about expectations. And I know I have to be super intentional about regulating myself so I can respond to the toddler intentionally.

Mike: Toddlers are also learning language. And sometimes if they're in a multilingual household, they're learning five, three different other ones. And they're learning they can express their ideas, their thoughts or wants and needs at varying degrees, both verbally and nonverbally. This is why I see our jobs as not just as an educator, but we're also a researcher. It's our job to figure out what toddlers are trying to communicate. And when we do, it is so amazing and rewarding.

[Music]

Becky: Before we wrap up, I want to let our listeners know that there are a ton of great resources on the ECLKC website about behaviors that adults find challenging, social and emotional development, and many other topics about toddlers. You can also find other podcasts like this one on several different topics. And we hope that you will check out the resources and that you find them helpful.

Mike: We encourage you to think about one thing that you're going to do to reframe the thoughtful twos. And we hope this action will carry you into your work ahead.

Becky: And please share what you learned with colleagues, friends, and families of toddlers who also may appreciate reframing the terrific twos. Thank you for joining us today, and we'll talk with you again soon.

Mike: Thank you, and I cannot wait.

[Music]