

Infant and Toddler Peer Relationships

Announcer: Hello, and welcome to Research on the Go, a podcast where we explore some of the latest research in the field of child development and the implications and the practical applications of this research.

Beth Zack: We're happy to have you here with us today to talk about supporting infant and toddler peer relationships. My name is Beth Zack, and I'm here with my colleague, Marley Jarvis.

Marley Jarvis: Hi, everybody. You might be thinking, you know, isn't it a little early in development to be thinking about peer relationships and especially infants.

Beth: But we know that these relationships actually start earlier than we might think. In fact, there's research from the '70s. Those researchers found that newborn infants are already influencing their peers in the hospital nursery. They found that those newborns tended to cry more often after hearing another newborn cry compared to when there was silence.

Marley: Bouncing way back to the '70s.

Beth: Yes.

Marley: Of course, that begs the question, isn't it possible that they were just responding to the noise, the racket from the crying.

Beth: They thought about that, too. And they found that it was more than that because those newborns didn't cry as often when they heard a computer-generated cry. The research suggested that it was the emotions in one baby triggering similar emotions in others. It's like they felt an emotional connection to their peers.

Marley: That's really cool.

Beth: It really is. We know that infants are born with a social connection to adults, but it seems that they have this early connection to their peers too. Of course, that's not to say they don't have a lot of learning and development that happens during infancy and toddlerhood to help support those peer relationships. That's really what we're going to be focused on today, many of the ways both big and small that children develop skills to support those relationships with their peers.

Before we jump into content, we're going to go over our learning objectives. The first is to describe how infants and toddlers begin to understand themselves and others. The second is to identify strategies to help infants and toddlers build healthy relationships with their peers, including children with disabilities, so that all children feel like they belong. We know that building belonging is an important part of supporting children's emotional well-being and the

development of healthy peer relationships. Speaking of support, we can't think about peer relationships without going back to those very first relationships with the adults in their lives.

Marley: You know, it's through their relationship with responsive, caring adults that infants and toddlers really learn to trust and to connect with others. This happens in the context of consistent supportive routines. Over time, that infant-adult relationship develops into what researchers call an attachment bond, which you may have heard of before. An attachment bond is a lasting emotional bond that forms between infants and their primary caregivers, which can be parents, education, staff, grandparents, and so on.

Beth: Even though we're referring to adults, these early relationships can form between infants and older siblings or other relatives too. In many cultures, families rely on older children in their family or other relatives to care for those younger members and we know that young children can form those same attachment bonds to them, too.

Marley: That's such a good point. When children feel safe and secure, they develop the confidence to explore their environment.

Beth: We know from research that children who experience those warm, positive, responsive relationships with caregivers tend to have better social skills. Those better social skills, well, that's related to more academic success and overall happiness. Children with better social skills tend to learn more from their peers and also just to feel better about themselves.

Marley: I like that. I mean, really, infants and toddlers are learning from us. This all makes sense. You know, the way adults treat young children sets their expectations. It's kind of teaching them skills for how to relate to their peers. It's more than just building trust and a connection. Infants and toddlers are learning how to use social cues and language and things to communicate what they want and what they need. They're learning how to identify and understand their own, as well as others' emotions. That love and that support that they feel from adults, they're bringing that into the friendships that they're forming.

Beth: Dr. Robert Emde is a pioneer in the field of infant and early childhood mental health. He referred to this as an effect of relationships on relationships.

Marley: It's linked, you know. Infants and toddlers are learning from us and those relationships, and that's sort of passed on there.

Beth: When we model care and concern with infants and toddlers, then infants and toddlers will learn to show that same care and concern with others including their peers.

Marley: As they learn what to expect from others, they're also gaining an understanding of their own identity and where they fit in the world.

Beth: Yes. A family's culture plays a big part here in what their expectations are in relationships as well as a child's sense of identity. Programs have a responsibility to get to know a family better, to understand their values, their expectations around building peer relationships.

Marley: This is really true. Early relationships support infants' and toddlers' social and emotional development, including their relationships with peers and sense of identity and belonging. Both of these pieces are subdomains in the social and emotional development domain of the ELOF, or the early learning outcomes framework.

Beth: When children see themselves as valued, they will learn to value and respect their peers in the same way. They're also developed pride in their identity, which our identity is what makes us, us. It includes things like our beliefs, our cultures, our languages, our traits, and how we see ourselves and understand ourselves. A strong sense of self, that provides the foundation for young children's relationships with their peers.

Marley: Education staff, teachers, family, childcare providers, and home visitors during group socializations, all education staff can create a caring community by connecting with each and every child. It's the adult's role in supporting infants' and toddlers' peer relationships is going to be a theme here throughout the rest of the webinar. But now, we want to start thinking about how children develop relationships with their peers from the time that they're babies.

Beth: Yes. How a baby relates to their peers, it's going to look different from how a young toddler does. And, of course, how a young toddler does, it's going to look different from a child about to enter preschool. And because of that, we thought today we would highlight a few milestones across those first three years that support the development of peer relationships.

Marley: For each of these milestones, we're going to describe research and touch on children's developing skills that underlie each of those milestones. We're going to discuss and show strategies of how adults can support these earliest peer relationships because, really, adults can teach these skills from an early age.

Beth: Which is an important point we want to highlight today because we often get asked, so what happens when a child isn't around peers. This could be for a number of reasons. Could be extended illness, maybe little or no access, or a pandemic like we've experienced with COVID-19. Disruptions to normal routines and those social rhythms, they can impact how a child relates to their peers. Many of you might still be seeing this firsthand in your learning spaces. But the good news is that, as Marley mentioned, we can model and teach these social skills. With patience and support, children can develop the social skills they need for positive peer relationships.

Marley: We're here to tell you that there really is a lot happening during this first year. Infants learn about their social world from watching other people. And that includes watching other infants. This first developmental milestone is that infants show interest in other infants. And they do this in a lot of ways.

Beth: That's right. They love to look at each other. But the reason why they can do this is because, as their vision develops, those spaces that are closest to them, they are coming into better focus. Around two to three months we see those infants smile at their peers, and they'll reach out and touch a peer who's lying next to them on the ground.

Marley: Then think about their language skills developing further. Infants will start to babble at their peers. This is around six to nine months. And, of course, infants who are deaf are going to babble using their hands in the same way that hearing babies will babble using their voices.

Beth: So amazing. As their motor skills develop, they start using their whole bodies to engage with peers. They're learning through movement, both on and then eventually with each other. The cool thing is that infants show these behaviors around the same time or just a little bit after they show them with adults. We also see peer preferences begin to emerge as early as six months.

Marley: Which maybe seems really early. It's kind of impressive.

Beth: It does seem early, but it's true. I'd love to share this research study with you, which combines two things that I love, babies and books. In this study, researchers showed six-month-olds and nine-month-olds pictures of infants of different ages. What they found was that the six-month-olds showed more interest in those photos of six-month-olds, and the nine-month-olds showed more interest in photos of nine-month-olds.

Marley: What you're saying is they prefer to look at peers who were like them.

Beth: Exactly. They also found this same pattern when they compared crawling and walking infants too. Crawlers prefer to look at crawlers, and walking infants prefer to look at other walking infants. Researchers believe that they do this to better understand themselves and to connect with others.

Marley: Beyond books, we can see actual friendships blooming as early as six months old. Infants engage with familiar and unfamiliar peers in different ways, and they have particular peers that they want to be in here. This has been found in other cultures, too, such as the kibbutz toddler houses in Israel where children are raised communally.

Beth: Yes. By 30 months, there's research that shows that toddlers are beginning to choose friends based on their race. From a racial equity lens, now, adults have a role in helping infants and toddlers relate to their peers who are racially different from them from the time that they're babies. Our language that we use is so important. Describing how children are relating to each other is another great strategy for supporting early peer relationships.

Marley: Beyond language, you can include books of similar age babies in the space, like you mentioned before. You can add large baby-safe mirrors so infants and toddlers can see themselves and their peers and just continue to be warm and caring and responsive to infants' and toddlers' needs.

Beth: Yes, which I'm sure all of you work so hard to do every day.

Marley: We alluded to this with the first milestone, but this next one is all about shared understanding. Not only do infants prefer to look at infants who are like them, but they use the

shared understanding of how others are like them to relate to their peers. One of the ways that they do this is through imitation.

Beth: And peer imitation, it's more than just copying actions. That's part of it, too. Children imitate to make a social connection with their peers, to initiate interactions, and to create that shared understanding. It's like they're saying, I understand what you're doing. Look. I can do it too. And now, hey, we can do it together.

Marley: Absolutely. Let's talk about some of the developmental milestones that underlie shared understanding of imitation. First, children need to have the motor skills to imitate certain actions.

Beth: Right. And then there's another big milestone that they need and that's joint attention skills. Joint attention is that ability to share their attention between objects and a social partner. It's what allows infants to respond to what an adult or peer's paying attention to and share what they're interested in, in an environment. It's not only important for imitation but also just back-and-forth interactions.

Let's look at some research now on early peer imitation. Marley, I think you're going to love this one because they trained a 14-month-old to be a model for a series of imitation tasks. Rather than have an adult show different 14- and 18-month-olds how to use different objects, they trained this 14-month-old peer, who these children had never met to show them.

Marley: Which is really great. I do really love these. I can't imagine training a 14-month-old to do this. I have to say I'm very impressed.

Beth: Yeah. I know, right. After they watched that 14-month-old show how to use these different objects, there was a delay of either five minutes or two days. And then the researchers brought those children back in who were watching, and they gave them the same objects to see if they would play with them in the same way that the peer model did.

Marley: Essentially, they're looking at whether or not they imitated their actions.

Beth: What they found was that children imitated the peer's actions with the object after both that five minutes delay and even two days later.

Marley: That's a pretty amazing example of social learning from peers and pretty young toddlers.

Beth: It is. And it goes back to making a connection to peers to someone who is like them. Given a similar study, they compared 14- to 18-month-olds, deciding whether they were more likely to imitate an older peer or an adult. The older peer or adult demonstrated different sequences like putting a bear to bed. And this time they found that the toddlers imitated the older peer more often than they imitated the adult.

Marley: I can see the practical application here, you know, especially for family childcare providers. Typically, you might have children of different ages in the same learning space there or even home visitors working with families of children with different ages. This really underscores the importance of encouraging older children to be models for younger children so infants and toddlers not only learning from the adults in their life but from the peers too. And we can take advantage of that and support that.

Beth: Yes. When children imitate their social partners, they're learning not only about themselves and the world, and then they also see how others are like them.

Marley: There's lots of great strategies. I think it's also a good reminder that children are watching us and adults, too. They will imitate how we treat other adults, how we treat their peers, and how we treat their families. It's another reason that it's so important to model kindness and gentle interactions and how to take turns and care for each other.

Beth: And you can also read books or tell stories that demonstrate the same. Imitation is an example. But remember, this is about shared understanding, too. As adults, we have a role to show that we're willing to listen and to understand and learn from children, even the littlest ones, and meet them where they are. As you do, you can think about their temperament and their ability level, their culture, and languages, and how that makes them who they are.

Marley: Right. For example, again, a child with autism may have a harder time with shared understanding because they typically have difficulty with a kind of joint attention skills. They might need a little bit more support to engage in those back-and-forth interactions with their peers.

Beth: That's a great example. The adult has a role to help each individual child to feel safe in their learning space, so they develop that confidence to explore and engage with their peers. For home visitors, you can encourage families to attend group socials or other events where children have opportunities to practice skills with their peers.

Marley: This brings us to our third and final milestone for today. And it's a big one, prosocial behavior. Prosocial behaviors, if you're unfamiliar with that term, includes a lot of different things for things like sharing, helping, comforting, and cooperating with each other.

Beth: And did you know that prosocial skills in preschoolers actually begin to develop before most children are two years old?

Marley: Which is really early. That's impressive.

Beth: It is. But, I mean, again, it's just those first signs. Learning to be prosocial is still a work in progress.

Marley: Absolutely. And it's important to keep in mind there are a lot of cultural differences in why or how we form relationships. For example, the dominant culture in the United States often values independence, which focuses on individual thinking, even assertiveness. But many

cultures value interdependence, which favors group thinking and a concern for others. Children and families who value interdependence may have many strengths, including empathy for others and building shared understanding.

Beth: They're prosocial pros.

Marley: Exactly. Think about your own values. Do you tend to value independence or interdependence or maybe both? Our values can really impact how we set up our learning spaces, whether — or how we encourage peer interactions, those prosocial behaviors like share and cooperation and how we, you know, introduce new children into a group. It also influences how children might interact with their peers, too.

Beth: Your role as education staff is to provide that strengths-based approach. To honor a child and their families, their culture, and their values like interdependence, for example, to support children as they learn and grow. We know that culture is an integral part of how a child thinks and feels about themselves. And then how a child thinks about themselves, that influences how they relate to others.

Marley: We can't think about prosocial behavior and how children relate to others without thinking about children's emerging self-awareness during these first three years here.

Beth: Yes. That's so true. The time when children are beginning to understand that sense of me and mine, they start to hear it. With that, they begin to develop an awareness that other people can have different thoughts and feelings and wants from their own. This is called theory of mind.

Marley: I can see how this is an important development for children's ability to relate to their peers. When a child understands that their peer is sad because they don't have their favorite teddy bear, they're more likely to show care toward them.

Beth: Yes. It supports peer relationships and those prosocial behaviors because they start to begin to put themselves in someone else's shoes. We need to develop these skills to have successful relationships with peers and adults throughout life.

Marley: When children see adults treat them or their peers or even other adults with respect and they have adults find strength in their identity and their culture, they're going to learn to feel that same pride in themselves.

Beth: They'll begin to show those prosocial behaviors and develop that respect for their peers too.

Marley: When we create this type of welcoming learning space, children will feel like they're part of the group, like they belong. And when children feel a sense of belonging, it's easier for them to navigate the social environment and develop relationships with their peers.

Beth: Yes. Exactly. Now I'd love to share some research from a couple studies on prosocial behavior. This first study is so sweet. It's about one-year-olds developing care and concern for others. What the researchers did was they took a baby doll, and they swaddled it; and just like part of his face was peeking out. And they hit an audio device inside that swaddle, and it played a recording of a baby crying.

Marley: It both looked and sounded like a real baby.

Beth: Exactly. Then researchers left one-year-olds alone with this doll and then their parents to see how that toddler would respond to this baby's cries. The baby was just out of the child's reach. But there were comfort items around like a blanket and a stuffed animal. Parents also filled out a questionnaire about a child's social understanding. They answered questions like, Does your child recognize themselves in photos? And do they say me or mine?

Marley: What did they find?

Beth: They found that toddlers responded in different ways. Children who scored higher on social understanding from that questionnaire that parents filled out were more likely to respond with empathy to that baby's distress. They showed concern with their tone of voice, the words they said like "cry: and "sad," facial expressions such as a furrowed brow or a frown. They pointed to the crying baby and they were also more likely to offer those comfort items, which brings us back to theory of mind. Some of these children were better able to take the perspective of a crying infant and respond with early forms of empathy here.

Marley: I have to ask, why did some children show this type of prosocial behavior earlier than others?

Beth: To answer that, I want to bring us back to where we started and that's children's earliest relationships where researchers have found that the language adults use plays an important role in supporting children's empathy skills like helping. I have another study to share, and I promise these are all connected. I'm going to come back to that baby doll study too. In this study, parents read different picture books with their 18- to 30-month-old toddlers.

The researchers looked at the type of language parents used and then they also tested those toddlers to see if they would perform a prosocial helping task. For example, there was an adult who was shivering from cold, and they looked to see if the toddler would bring them a blanket.

Marley: How is the language parents use related to their child's prosocial behavior?

Beth: Right. Those parents who, during the book reading asked their child to not only label emotions but asked questions and talked about emotions with them during the book reading, those children were quicker to help.

Marley: To bring them a blanket?

Beth: You got it. They didn't find this relationship for parents who only labeled emotions during book reading without asking their child questions.

Marley: Which is really interesting. Essentially, the type of language and how they used it, the quality, really, is what mattered.

Beth: Exactly. To connect this back to that crying pretend baby doll study, it's possible that those children in that study who showed more care and concern for the baby doll, maybe their parents also ask them more questions about emotions like these researchers found.

Marley: The big take-home here is that language that adults use really matters.

Beth: Encourage you to talk about not only your own but other people's feelings. Using characters in a book can be a really great place to start. Begin to guide children in their thinking about how they feel and how their peers feel. You can also help families do the same. We want to move on to another type of prosocial behavior that we start to see in toddlers and that's turn-taking and cooperation.

Marley: Great. Glad that we're talking about this because parallel play is often emphasized with this age group. It's important and absolutely does happen. We do want it to make clear that peer relationships is more than just playing side time.

Beth: Research shows that even one-year-olds play cooperative games with peers. These games often require shared understanding and even turn-taking. Even though children are in these early stages of prosocial skills, they can still engage in this way. Also, it's a good reminder that, because they haven't mastered turn-taking or sharing, we also shouldn't expect them to. We're not going to do this all the time.

Marley: And actually, Impact Zero to Three has conducted a parent survey. They found that parents thought that toddlers can share or take turns well before they're actually developmentally able to. There's practical implications here. Our expectations can change how we view behaviors. When adults understand that toddlers are still working on these skills, they're going to be a little better able to provide the support that children need.

Beth: That's right. Those adults and older peers, they can continue to be wonderful models to support the development of these behaviors over time.

Marley: That's a great reminder prosocial behaviors are still very much a work in progress through toddlerhood and beyond.

Beth: Yes.

Marley: We have scaffolding turn-taking, both verbally and nonverbally, as a strategy here to support early peer relationships. How else, Beth, can adults support turn-taking and cooperation in making children?

Beth: Praise those prosocial behaviors when you see them. It's also helpful to create small groups, and design spaces for children to play together.

Marley: You can also provide opportunities for collaborative games and activities so things like drawing on a big sheet of paper together or playing with a parachute. It's a really fun way to involve peers at different ages. Again, great strategy for family childcare homes. What other materials do you use in your space to encourage cooperation and turn-taking?

Beth: We've talked about some of the joys during this time so seeing those emerging prosocial skills. But with those joys, you know, there's also conflicts during this time period.

Marley: Absolutely. And conflicts between peers absolutely do happen. But they can also help children learn and grow. A big part of the learning process is how adults support children when conflicts arise. Build children's language skills and emotional understanding, these things help by talking about people's feelings throughout the day, not just when conflict shows up. Continue to build children's self-awareness by talking about concepts like yours versus mine and talking about how a child's actions maybe made a peer feel. Having this awareness is a really important part of empathy and learning to care for others.

Beth: Sometimes it's helpful to let children figure out those conflicts on their own if they're not hurting each other. We like to say be a sportscaster. Describe what's happening either as the conflict unfolds or as they're working on solutions, but don't solve those problems for them. Then younger children might need a little bit more of your support. You could offer some solutions to try. Children build confidence in who they are and their abilities when we give them that space to work through problems or to choose solutions on their own. That confidence will carry over into the relationships with peers and adults too.

Marley: Right.

Beth: I want to do a quick resource shout-out here for addressing conflict and challenging behaviors. We have a whole Baby Talks Webinar that was devoted to addressing infant and toddler behaviors that challenge adults. This is also available in the iPD. Our friends at Teacher Time recently delivered a webinar on Problem Solving and Relationship Skills with Infants and Toddlers. These are wonderful resources and encourage you to check them out if you're looking for more info on that area. Even though these conflicts are bound to happen, we can create these prosocial environments to support infants' early peer relationships. To do that, we need to think about not only the physical environment but that social environment too.

Marley: We already talked about the physical environment of it, like having materials and toys that help cooperative activities. But we also need to think about how accessible those materials are to children with disabilities or suspected delays. Are they able to participate alongside their peers? If not, how can you adapt the materials or the activity or the space so they can.

Beth: Part of creating physical environments is setting up space for two so children can have that one-on-one time to get to know each other and play with different peers. For the home

visitors with us, you can think about setting up those same spaces for small group time during group socializations.

Marley: That's great. Let's talk more about the social environment now.

Beth: It's about creating environments that build belonging for all children. When children feel safe and seen and understood, that's when they develop the confidence and pride in their relationships and their abilities and their identities. They develop a healthy sense of self, and their peer relationships thrive.

Marley: What you can do is design activities so children have the chance to engage with all of their peers in their learning space. Remember, this is especially important for including children with disabilities or suspected delays and encouraging peer relationships between all children. Having children of different ability levels within the same learning space is really important. But that alone is not enough to promote peer relationships. There has to really be intention on how you support interactions between all children.

Beth: I love this strategy because we know from research that toddlers love to move together. We mentioned this for our first developmental milestone. One of the ways they connect and communicate with each other is they do this by running and laughing and rolling.

Marley: Absolutely. This is a great model for creating equitable learning spaces where adults use inclusive practices that build children's prosocial and friendship skills.

Beth: Yes. I love that we ended on that note because it essentially brings us right back to where we began again so emphasizing the essential role that adults play in supporting infant and toddler peer relationships. The way adults treat young children sets their expectations. It teaches them skills about how to relate to peers and other adults too.

Marley: Children learn so much about themselves and other people through these peer relationships, and they learn prosocial behaviors like cooperation and concern for others. They gain practice working with others. That includes working through conflict like we talked about and sharing ideas. In supportive environments, they start to understand what it feels like to belong.

Beth: Yes. Thanks for that sort of recap for us, Marley, I'm going to leave you with one final thought. These early peer relationships lay the foundation for the quality of children's future peer relationships. It's extra important to invest in peer relationships from the time children are babies.

Marley: With that, we're pretty much out of time. Thank you again for your time and attention and for all that you do on behalf of children.

Beth: Yes. Thank you so much, and we hope to see you next time. Remember, all styles and formatting are baked into this template. Only use one return between paragraphs. Before saving, make sure to fill in all meta data (Title, Author (agency string) and keywords) by editing

the Properties box: File > Properties. Save this file and attach to a new task and/or upload to Box.