

Helping Toddlers Succeed (at the Park, Playdates, Outings, and Other Social Situations)

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Early childhood specialist Lisa Sunbury and I were speaking with a mutual friend who was concerned about a problematic playdate her toddler had recently experienced.

During our conversation, Lisa shared a personal goal that I agree with completely: “I feel like it’s my job to help my child to succeed in these situations.”

Nothing disappoints me more than hearing respectful parenting misinterpreted as abandoning children to fend for themselves in every social situation and behave however they wish – a false interpretation that, sadly, gives Magda Gerber’s approach a bad name. As much as I believe in offering children opportunities to develop social intelligence experientially and supporting them to explore and experiment with only minimal intervention, I also believe that kids need and deserve our help to behave within the bounds of social rules and mores.

It is *never* respectful to give children free rein to disturb, interfere, or otherwise behave rudely or aggressively. Loving our kids means not only ensuring their physical safety, but also protecting them from being perceived as brats or bullies. Though the unavoidable will happen, there is much we can do to help them succeed.

So, where is the line between protection and hovering interference? Here are some guidelines:

Safety

Spot

Calmly observe and spot babies and toddlers when they are using equipment or structures that are relatively high off the ground or present other possible dangers. This is particularly important the first few times a child attempts new challenges or when there is another child nearby, because even the most agile child can be bumped and knocked down by another.

Don’t assist

I don’t recommend lifting children onto equipment, steps, walls, or other structures, or allowing them to jump off these structures into our arms. By placing them in positions

they aren't able to attain themselves, we risk giving kids a false sense of their own ability that can be dangerous. (I share details in my post Don't Stand Me Up.)

Be a “buddy-guard”

Children need our help if they have a tendency to behave unsafely or aggressively with other children, or are in the presence of others who seem unsafe or aggressive. Buddy-guards are the epitome of “chill” and offer emotionally neutral interventions and protection rather than anxious hovering or disapproval. As buddy-guards, we block hitting, biting, pushing, etc. as competently as possible while matter-of-factly acknowledging the impulse and the feelings behind it (if those are clear to us).

For example, we might place our hand between the children to prevent or deflect the unsafe behavior while acknowledging, “You feel like hitting. I can't let you hit. It seems you don't want this boy so close. Maybe one of you can move over a little.” Buddy-guards understand that this is impulsive, unreasonable, typical behavior and that verbal reminders alone or scolding will not be helpful in preventing it. Kids need our assurance that we have their back as they pass through these uncomfortable phases.

If aggressive or unsafe behavior persists, we can be certain our children are signaling their overwhelming discomfort (perhaps they're feeling too tired, hungry, or emotional) and need to leave.

Courtesy

House Rules

To help our children succeed we must ensure that they follow the “house rules” of any particular environment. This means helping them to understand or at least adapt. We may personally disagree with some of the specifics of that framework, but it's not our prerogative to argue or try to change them. For example, we may believe a friend is too rigid in her rules for her kids' play or disagree with her policy that kids should sit while they eat or drink, but we've made the choice to insert our child into the situation, so we must accept our friend's rules. It's not our place to question or test these limits, nor is it respectful to leave our children high and dry.

Public playgrounds

A public playground is no different. There are certain rules of interaction and play that have evolved for the local kids, and we should help our child – as a guest – to understand and abide by them. The ability to adapt to ‘local custom’ is a basic element of social intelligence that will serve our kids throughout childhood and beyond.

Toy taking

The years I've spent observing toddler behavior in the learning labs we offer at Resources for Infant Educators (RIE) have taught me that toy taking is one of the most common early ways toddlers engage with each other and definitely not akin to "stealing." However, I would not allow my child to remove a toy from another's possession unless I was certain that the other parent was totally on board with this type of exploration. (I share more about encouraging experiential social learning in *Share... Wait Your Turn... Don't Touch... Playdate Rules That Limit Learning.*)

Basic awareness and consideration

Children can't be expected to be aware of the needs of others, so I would guide my child by preventing her from climbing up playground slides or remaining at the bottom for more than a moment, cutting lines, or otherwise blocking equipment when other children are waiting to use it. (If my child had that equipment to herself, then all those behaviors would be fine, of course.) I also would not allow my child to use a piece of public equipment for more than a few minutes if others were waiting for it. Young children tend to get focused in their own time and space, so I'd be there (in my chill buddy-guard mode) to non-judgmentally ensure courtesy as well as safety. "This boy wants to use the slide now. Can you move away yourself? Here, I'm going to help you move out of his way, so he doesn't bump into you when he slides down."

Restaurants, stores, etc.

Call me strict, but for both courtesy and safety reasons, I don't believe in allowing kids to do anything remotely disturbing in public places, which includes being loud or noisy, running around, taking items off of shelves, etc. The way I see it, we owe it to our children to protect their dignity in these situations. If they can't manage to be there, it's time to take them home and reconsider the appropriateness (or at least the timing) of bringing them again.

Don't expect words to be enough

Children are often able to follow our verbal requests and directions, but I would always be ready to follow through promptly with gentle physical assistance. Social situations tend to be highly stimulating and distracting, and even children who know the rules quite well can need our help in following them.

Preparation

Works like magic

In *Another Parenting Magic Word*, I share how preparing our children ahead of time for situations and experiences encourages them to feel included, empowers, builds confidence and a sense of security, eases fear, helps them accept and even look

forward to new, challenging, uncomfortable or seemingly unpleasant situations and transitions and more — all of which pave the way for cooperation and success. Respectfully explaining “house rules” would be a key aspect of that preparation, and I would do so in a we’re-all-in-this-together manner (rather than laying down the law). “Grandma is sensitive to loud noises, so if you feel like yelling when we’re at her house, please let me know and we can go outside.”

Or, perhaps, we help our toddler, who is experiencing typical, age-appropriate possessiveness, to choose a few toys that he *might possibly* be okay with sharing with the cousin that will be visiting later that day. This can raise the odds of a more successful, peaceful playdate, though with toddlers there’s never a guarantee.

Trust

The power in letting kids do it

Once we’ve set our basic limits, I believe in letting children do the rest. In other words, once I’ve prevented my child from taking a toy from a peer at the park (or if I was too late and she took it, helped her to give it back), then I wouldn’t suggest to the children that they take turns, or try to comfort my child by offering another toy to play with, etc., all of which would be imposing my own adult mending on the situation. Why not? From what I’ve noted in my 20 years of work with infants and toddlers, our solutions and directions completely underestimate our kids. I’ve seen children settle these situations in a myriad of ways or, just as easily, decide to just let go of them and move on, which I perceive as flexible and powerful.

Our interest in making it work for our kids tends to stem from our own discomfort and personal projections that do not reflect what our children are actually feeling or needing. Our interventions can unwittingly teach children that they *need* us to erase their disappointment and show them what to do next, but they learn so much more and build confidence when we acknowledge their feelings while resisting the temptation to fix things. And beyond ensuring their success by setting appropriate limits, what our kids need most from us is our basic trust in their social learning process. Healthy self-confidence and social intelligence will always go hand-in-hand.

I share more in my books *Elevating Child Care: A Guide to Respectful Parenting* and *No Bad Kids: Toddler Discipline Without Shame*

I also recommend *Falling – A Lesson In Friendship Forgiveness*, and *Moving On* by Lisa Sunbury, *Regarding Baby*