

## Strategies for Responding to Infant and Toddlers' Challenging Behavior and Supporting Infant and Toddlers' Social Emotional Development

### Social Emotional Development Goal

#### Help Child to:

- Experience, regulate and express emotions
- Form close and secure interpersonal relationships
- Explore the environment and learn

#### All Strategies for Responding to Infant and Toddler Challenging Behavior Should Meet the Following Criteria:

- Acknowledge distress
  - Offer comfort
  - Use words to connect with the child
  - Be attuned to (or in sync with) the child's individualized needs
  - Help the child achieve the understood intention
  - Be developmentally appropriate
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### Sample Strategies:

#### Systematic Strategies

- Attempt to understand and empathize with the child's experience
- Observe to understand the meaning of the behavior using the Behavior Observation Report
- Track and document frequency, duration, and intensity
- Chart time of day behavior occurs
- Use self reflection to appropriately respond to behavior
- Share reflections/access thoughts and opinions of others
- Monitor progress of social emotional skill development and reduction in concerning behavior

#### Strategies to Soothe

- Make soothing noise (e.g. saying, "shhhhhhhhh", "shhhhhhh"), or arrange white noise (e.g. running a vacuum cleaner, white noise machine, or hair dryer)
- Rock the child: try different ways and stay with what the child seems to respond to (*side to side, back and forth, up and down*)
- Hold and carry to keep infant close to one's body
- Outside time, fresh air
- Sing, either familiar songs, or a repetitive tune with the child's name in it
- Encourage sucking (pacifier, fingers)
- Experiment with different types of "holding" such as facing out, gently holding one leg in a bent position (*prevents the child from over-extending and arching*), etc. Check with the family to see if there are positions that seem to help the child.
- Encourage transitional objects of comfort (e.g. *blankets, dolls, stuffed toy, etc.*)
- Stay calm
- Stay physically close
- For older toddlers, acknowledge their feelings verbally while physically soothing ("You are crying. I wonder if you are sad? You really wanted to play with that doll.")

### **Modify Environment and Interactions**

- Reduce and/or minimize number of infant care teachers
- Make adjustments based on child's temperament (e.g. *offer more time for a slow-to-warm up child; offer more physical activity for a active child*)
- Make appropriate environmental changes (e.g. *reduce stimulation, increase stimulation*)
- Shadow child (e.g. *for a limited time provide as much one-on-one attention and monitoring as possible*)
- Provide extra time and attention including touch

### **Provide Increased Predictability and Consistency**

- Create consistency in routines (e.g. *diaper the same way in the same place using the same language; read books before nap;*)
- Use consistent simple words (e.g. *"Food?; You want food?"; "Look with your eyes"*)
- Develop a plan of action/responses and stick to plan
- Set limited clear consistent limits (e.g. *"Gentle touch"; "We only bite food or teethers"*)
- Use objects to help children understand what is coming next. (*Hand them a diaper it is time to change their diaper, show them two objects in a row as a "First...Then" schedule*)
- Use simple visual schedules or "First...Then" visuals to support predictability (*"What do we do next? After playtime we check diapers. There you are in the picture and I am checking your diaper!"*)

### **Model, Coach, Teach Appropriate Behavior**

- Teach expectations (e.g. *"This is a gentle touch"; "Feel the gentle touch"*)
- Teach sign language or gestures for common words (*Many children can learn gestures before they can consistently use words. Try "more", "help", "want"*)
- Validate child's feelings and/or experience (*use exaggerated facial expression, tone of voice and gestures to mirror the child's emotion*)
- Tell children what TO DO in positive terms (*"Bottom on the chair"; "Feet on the floor"*)
- Notice when child is engaging in desired behavior (*"You gave Sam a turn with that toy"*)
- Acknowledge positive behavior (*"That's gentle touching"; "You're so calm now." "You pointed to the toy"*)
- Suggest labels for the child's and others' emotional experience (*"You look sad."; "Tyrus seems angry"*)
- Use books to illustrate emotions and social skills (e.g. *"How Do I Feel?"; "No Biting"*)
- Read *"I Can Get Calm"* (available to download) ahead of time, then offer options from the book
- Remind the child that they can go take a break in the 'be by myself' area, acknowledge their feelings, calm themselves down, and then think, think, think of a solution

### **Use Distraction**

*NOTE: Distraction is most useful when a child is interested in a toy or activity that is not safe or not available. This technique is not to be used to distract from feelings. When a child is upset, that feeling is to be acknowledged and the adult can be physically present and supportive. See **Strategies to Soothe** above.*

- Offer alternate activities (*"You really want to touch that light switch. Let's play with this pop-up toy instead."*)
- Offer substitute behavior (*"You want to bite? You can bite this teething ring"*)
- Play a favorite game or sing a song (*I know you want to go outside. It is too cold. Let's sing Row Your Boat!"*)