**Toddlers in Conflict:**
What are their behaviors telling us?

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**Our objectives**

- To identify social-emotional competence differences between infants and toddlers.
- To discuss how stressors & family response to stressors can magnify negative behaviors in toddlers.
- To describe reactive toddler behaviors & what the "story" is behind the behaviors.

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**Early development**

- Emotional development from birth
  - early social & emotional experience
  - sensitivity of infants and then toddlers to the emotions of the caregivers
  - using a growth & development framework, examine maturation of emotional competence
  - infant cues, parent cues, toddler cues and then preschool cues… making sense of changes

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**Growth & development**

**Erikson’s Stages**

- Infant - 18 months
  - sense of trust - their world is reliable & affectionate.
- Up to 3 years old
  - sense of personal control with physical skills & a sense of independence.

**Piaget’s Theory**

- Thinking develops as a child interacts with environment.
- Infant - 2 years old
  - Sensorimotor - cognitive development is related to sight, sound, touch, taste, and smell.

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**Theory!**

Developmental theory was core to our pediatric nursing education yet...

In some ways, we are still making sense of some of it!

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But wait – there is so much more!

We know as nurses that theories all have a perspective, so if we are looking to explain behaviors, we need to look at every possibility!
Theories of early development

• Maturationist theory of Arnold Gesell
  • Focus is strictly based on maturation
• B.F. Skinner & John Watson share behaviorist theory
  • Focus on a child's experiences
  • "blank slate" at birth to be gradually shaped by the environment.
  • This theory suggests that adults critically shape a child's learning through positive reinforcement.

• Lev Vygotsky's sociocultural theory
  • considers the effect of culture on development and behavior.
  • places a greater role of language, social interaction, and society in child development
  • suggests that social interactions, cognitive development, & culture shape the child

Social-emotional development

• Each theory provides beneficial information in understanding why children behave, grow, and learn as they do.
• The core foundation rests on responsive relationships with parents that build strong attachment
• These form the foundation of mental health for infants, toddlers and preschoolers.

Comparing the infant to the toddler

What social-emotional competence differences do you see between infants and toddlers?

Looking at Parenting Styles

"I am crazy about you!" parenting styles
We have seen this mom in action...
The voice that sings…
The patience we yearn for…
And toddlers that…
Working with the cues of life

- A new mother learns her infants’ cues
- The infant learns the mothers’ cues
- The toddler pushes the envelope with new cues
- and then preschool cues…
- Importance of making sense of changes

Mirror Image

- Toddlers imitate behaviors of others
- Not all are positive, but the response of others can reinforce the behavior
- Cues become apparent when behaviors emerge

Add emotions to the mix

Any family stressor can alter cues and interpretation of cues, resulting in behavior changes & challenges

Family emotions & toddlers

- Research linking toddler behaviors to family stressors and emotionality dates back to the 1960’s
- Stressors range from difficult pregnancies to high risk deliveries
- Emotions from family changes including adapting to parenting, returning to work, extended family influences are studied
- Links of findings to recommendations are interesting!

Toddler Social & Emotional Behaviors

- Toddlers 18 to 36 months of age, N=64, observed at an Early Learning Center
- Mothers completed the BITSEA
  - Brief Infant-Toddler Social & Emotional Assessment is a 42-item tool that identifies toddlers at risk or currently experiencing social, emotional behavior problems (Briggs-Gowan, 2007)
- Pearson Correlation analysis

Findings of pilot study

- Toddlers reported as unhappy and/or fearful tend to hit other children (r=.485, p=.000) and hit their parents (r=.491, p=.000).
- These are the same children who get hurt often (r=.335, p=.007) and are reportedly destructive in their homes (r=.472, p=.000).
- Toddlers observed in the setting gave insight to normal behaviors. It was noted that the toddler newly introduced to the class had more difficulty adapting to the setting due, in part, to assertive behaviors of other children.
What we KNOW

- Toddler behaviors tell their story
- Parenting, emotional climate, & cues play a role

Observable Toddler Behaviors

Have you seen these behaviors?

Reactive

This is the toddler that has an unpredictable emotional reaction to changes in environment as well as response to limitations of behavior

Why is the Toddler Reactive?

- According to Feldman, Dollberg, & Nadam, 2011, reactive expression significantly develops over the toddler years
  - The expression & regulation of emotion is related to maternal behavior
- Chen & colleagues, 2011, further relates parent-child attachment to reactive emotions

Unattached

This is the toddler that does not get upset with change; parents can leave without emotion. This child may not engage in play with others without encouragement

What are the risks?
Labile
- This is a marked fluctuation of mood swings that may include outbursts of destructive behavior as well as hitting others & throwing objects.
- As the child approaches school age, it becomes emotional dysregulation and may or may not be tied to a spectrum disorder.
- Hwang & colleagues, 2009, studied the effect of temperament and biologic risk on development of labile behaviors.

Is this a phase?
- In short, it could be...
- According to Berlin & colleagues (2009), aggressive behaviors can be predicted by infant fussiness & maternal response.
  - In this study, these behaviors were not a phase.
  - Family emotional response plays a major role in how children learn to manage conflict.

Withdrawn
This toddler does not seek attention, will not engage in play even alone, and is many times thought to be “shy”.

What is the story behind the behaviors?
Should we worry...?
When is intervention necessary?

Back to Growth & Development
- If reactive toddler behaviors are related to conflict in their lives, will it have a lasting impact?
  - What is the role of temperament?
  - Can it affect learning?
- Can structured parenting skills help?
  - Research of Leve et al., 2009, found that toddlers benefit from parenting interventions.
Finding Meaning

• Why is it important that the pediatric nurse understands the “why” behind the behavior?
• How does this relate to practice?
• Can this lead to bullying behaviors in the future?
• What can you do to help family transitions so that stress can be managed?
References


