



Toddler Behavior in the Classroom

The goal of all the music classes I teach is to engage children in active music making within a joyful group experience. To help us reach this goal together, please keep the following observations and classroom expectations in mind:

- **Do not expect too much too fast.** Your child sees me only once a week, and this isn't enough time to establish a strong feeling of trust right away; it will come over time.
- **Model the behavior you would like to see.** Your toddler knows and trusts you. . . so it is very important that you are engaged in all the activities—*especially when your child is not!* Sing. Dance. Play the instruments. Your participation signals to your child that what we are doing is safe, important, and fun.
- **Realize that children learn in different ways.** Some will be quiet in class, simply absorbing the material, and may do the activities at home. Other children may be very active. They may not even appear to be “learning”. . . but they, too, are absorbing the tones and rhythms even as they move about.
- **Please do not force your child to participate.** Opting out of an activity is a perfectly acceptable and common response at this age. Children learn by observation.
- **Offer choices within appropriate limits.** Avoid unnecessary power struggles in our group setting. Most activities can be performed either sitting on your lap OR on the floor. Toddlers may want to be held OR may choose to walk around the circle. Sticks can be tapped on the floor OR together. Toddlers also learn by experimentation.
- **Do, however, take action when necessary.** Please do not allow your child to do something that is dangerous to him/herself or others, or to misuse the instruments.
- **Please step into the hallway to calm your child if he or she is creating a disturbance such that the group cannot continue with class.** This practice teaches sensitivity and respect for the others in the group. And if it is obvious that your child is “done” for the day before class is over, that's okay.
- **Expect toddlers to fade in and out of activities.** Very few toddlers are completely engaged for the entire length of class. Because their attention spans are short, the 30 minute class typically features at least a dozen different activities. When one or two toddlers fade out of an activity, I usually let it go. I know that the magic of the music will eventually pull them back into the moment. If too many children get off track, however, I will switch gears or alter the lesson plan to get children back to their parents' laps.

- **Understand that “learning to stop” is a skill.** I do not expect children to master the art of stopping on command until around the age of **four**. Stopping games and activities are included in the toddler class because children need practice before they can be expected to reach mastery.

Your toddler's language center in the brain is not as well developed as his/her impulse to move. Therefore, once s/he is moving, it is very hard for him/her to stop on cue. Just as the brakes on your car take a certain amount of time to stop your moving vehicle, your child's “brakes” are not fully developed. That is why they need a lot of practice and understanding when they don't stop right away.

I frequently follow a lively activity with a lullaby or rocking song. This intentional sequence is designed to help the toddler learn to regulate his/her own speed and practice self-calming techniques.

- **Give your child practice learning to wait.** Children need to be sitting down before I will hand them an instrument, and this will help them learn delayed gratification and impulse control.
- **Instruments are not toys.** Toddlers need to be shown how to handle instruments gently and carefully, and we practice this in every class.
- **Appreciate that letting go is hard.** Even mommys sometimes have a hard time letting go! What helps? Empathy, encouragement, and patience.

I will simply skip over a child who “isn't ready” to return an instrument. When we begin a new activity or try another instrument later, the same child will often lose interest and drop the first item. I have frequently watched this common behavior simply disappear over time as toddlers observe the other children, watch the instruments return from week to week, and learn from experience how to trust and let go.

- **Sing!** Your child loves your voice. Even if you sing off-key, studies have shown that this will not impair your child's ability to match pitch. Your child considers you a rock star. Your voice is your child's favorite sound in the world.
- **Listen to music at home.** The more familiar you are with the repertoire, the more we can provide a rich singing environment for the children in class.
- **Remember that a toddler is a work in progress and--by nature--unpredictable.** We've all been there, or we'll be there soon enough! Undesirable toddler behavior is not a reflection of you or your parenting; it is simply the action of a young child who is temporarily out of sync with the expectations of the moment.
- **Celebrate participation rather than performance.** We are here to make music together. Every effort deserves acknowledgement. Please help me eliminate the phrase, “Good job!” from our classroom and replace it with “Thank you for singing!” Every child is musical, every child has something to contribute, and every contribution deserves to be appreciated.

