



By Mary Louise Musler

Toddlers – wiggly, giggly, adventurous. They love to explore and engage. Learn all about toddlers in this conversation with Mary Louise Musler, Early Childhood Specialist, and Drew Beeman, Toddler Program Coordinator at Rochester Childfirst Network.

ML: When someone asks you what is important when working with toddlers, what do you say?

DB: In my work with toddlers I find that the three “Rs” of early care and learning are very important – relationship, responsibility, and redirection. I also believe that it’s very important to understand their needs, desires, and challenges.

ML: What draws you to this arena and to this age group?

DB: I love my job and chosen career, and I delight in watching these little ones explore their world, and discover the inherent magic in it. Well not magic really, but to them it may seem like it. Adults must remember and never forget what it was like when everything was brand new to us.

ML: In my work in the field, I have learned that attachment is important. Do you agree?

DB: I agree. Young children need secure relationships with the adults in their lives. Not only do they need to be firmly bonded with at least one parent, they need to form attachments with their caregivers in order to feel secure in the learning environment. The studies have shown that children need secure attachments in order to learn and thrive.

ML: Sometimes people have differing views of the term discipline. Explain your view.

DB: I see discipline as teaching. I make no moral judgments with terms like “good” and “bad choices,” knowing that these little ones are not bad when they hit, they are just doing what toddlers do. Remember Bam Bam from the Flintstones? He is the perfect depiction of your typical young toddler.

ML: Can you actually teach toddlers who may be as young as eighteen months?

DB: Redirection is the name of the game when it comes to discipline. I think you can teach toddlers. We can always find a positive replacement activity and say, “I cannot let you hit your friends but you may hit the pillows.” “You may not pound with our chalk and crayons because they will break, but you may go pound with the hammer on the hammer bench.” “You may not throw blocks it could hurt someone, but you may throw the balls.” Do you see how this redirects them to make responsible choices while passing no moral judgments? I know toddlers need to pound, and hit, and throw, and run, and climb – that is developmentally appropriate behavior for toddlers. I need to provide a safe environment for them to be toddlers.

ML: Developmentally appropriate seems to be the key understanding here.

DB: It is vital. I love to provide toddlers with developmentally appropriate experiences that are diverse, meaningful, and relevant – but also just plain fun! I love creating environments where they can explore, and experiment, and discover as much as possible what the world has to offer. The three “Rs” set the stage for this exploration, and the freedom to play and explore sets the stage for a lifelong love of learning and success.

ML: It sounds as if you don’t believe in the “terrible” twos. What do you think parents need to know about toddlers and their development?

DB: I’d like parents to understand that social and emotional development is the most important focus for school readiness and lifelong success. Adults, as facilitators of their children’s growth, need to take a developmental point of view as their children grow and learn.

ML: Can you give an example?

DB: Every parent will be delighted to know that tantrums become reduced as language is learned and used. As the adults around them narrate their experiences, the children begin to associate words with their contextual meanings. We know that their receptive language comes before their expressive language. They understand us even if they cannot yet speak. They usually begin to speak, as we encourage them and use language in fun and meaningful ways. I have recently had the pleasure of hearing many of the toddlers in my care begin to speak, and sing. It usually starts when we have our gathering time and sing their favorite songs and perform finger plays. We actually do pretty much the same songs and finger plays everyday, repetition is the key.

ML: It is clear that you really love your role.

DB: I chose this career because of the wonderful childhood I had. Being a male caregiver has its challenges, as I am sure you can imagine, but I know that I play a necessary role in the lives of these children. I know I am really making a difference. I do this work because I love watching children grow and learn and I believe I have a strong influence on their future.