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Teaching Toddlers to Solve Social Problems

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Linda Rose Clarke

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Abstract

Toddlers' peer conflicts, common in early learning centres, have the potential to be powerful learning events, however, the quality of learning is often dependent on how teachers respond. There is a paucity of research that explores how teachers can promote toddlers' learning within the context of toddlers' peer conflicts, especially in Aotearoa New Zealand. Prompted by this deficiency, this study explored teachers' self-reports of their roles, their teaching practices and the conditions that influence and, specifically support, teachers' responses to toddlers' peer conflicts, within the contexts of four early learning settings. The study used a mixed methods approach, with focus group interviews and a web-based questionnaire, to explore the perspectives of 31 toddler teachers. Findings suggest that the key teaching roles were to: protect toddlers, physically and emotionally; advocate for toddlers without judgment; and to role model and coach social-emotional skills. Through these roles, and by utilising conflicts as teaching and learning opportunities, teachers' intentions were to empower toddlers and teach them social-emotional skills that they might later use independently. In this context, teachers' professional decisions regarding how and when to intervene in toddlers' peer conflicts were made in response to concerns for toddlers' safety, both physical and emotional, and were guided by teachers' knowledge of, and relationships with, the toddlers involved. Results suggest that effective teaching practices were supported by: positive, responsive relationships; teachers' in-depth knowledge of toddlers and toddlerhood; professional learning; perspectives of toddlers as learners and of conflicts as learning events; teachers' emotional awareness; and the desire to maintain toddlers' dignity, esteem and mana.

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