

# 12 Key Principles for Supporting Kids' Learning

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**Respect!** Let's commit to a fundamental belief that everyone here (kids and parents) is *doing the best they can* given their developmental level, skills and knowledge, and challenges in their past and current environment. And... we all have bad days. When *you* have a bad moment, call yourself on it, apologize as needed, forgive yourself and commit to doing better. When someone else is having a bad moment, don't judge.

**Kids do well if they can.** If someone (kid or adult) is "mis-behaving", ask yourself: What skills do they lack? What support do they need? What stressors are making it hard to do well right now? When those things are noticed and addressed, behavior improves.

**Everyone does better when they know what to expect and what's expected of them.** Consistent routines, clearly explained expectations (not "unwritten rules" they need to guess), well thought-out limits and follow-through on promises (both promised rewards and promised consequences) create an environment where a child can do well.

**All feelings are OK. (Not all behaviors are.)** We all have lots of big feelings. We're all learning how to manage them appropriately. When a child is calm, we can teach appropriate ways to express feelings. When someone has big feelings, it helps to validate that. If their feelings led to bad behavior, *also* address that: "Wow, you were mad she took your toy. I understand. But you hit her, and that was not OK."

**When someone flips their lid, co-regulate before anything else.** When we are calm and feel safe, we have access to our whole fully developed brain. So a young child can speak in sentences, follow the rules, make fairly good choices. But, when we are really scared, or sad, or mad, or just overwhelmed by too much stimulus or too many demands, we "flip our lids." We can't speak, we can't be reasoned with... If you have a child who is in full meltdown, it's not the time to teach or to explain or to ask them to make better choices. Instead, co-regulate. Get yourself calm, get down to their level, speak in a quiet voice. Set clear limits and tell them what needs to happen next.

**Every kid is unique and has different needs and capabilities.** We are a multi-age class, so our kids are at different developmental stages. Development is asynchronous, so you might have a child with high skills in one area and low in another. Also, we all have different interests, different temperaments, different sensory and support needs, different degrees of flexibility before we hit a breaking point. If you find yourself worrying that your child is "behind" other children, or find yourself judging other children for areas they're struggling in, remember this range. Judge each child's progress based solely on – is *this child* progressing well from where they used to be?

**These kids are little. They're still learning.** These kids are practicing everything. Practicing kindness, practicing sitting still and listening, practicing good choices, how to do things without making a mess. They're going to make a lot of mistakes along the way or have days they're not doing well. We'll just keep working on it. Instead of telling them "don't do that", tell them what TO DO. Instead of assuming they know how to behave well, tell them what would be a positive action to do in that moment.

**Growth Mindset / Power of Yet.** "You can't do it *yet*, but you'll get there." At times, a child can *almost* do something – they're working on a puzzle, and they know how it's supposed to work, but just can't do it. That is super frustrating!! Don't feel like you have to rescue them – sit by their side for support and encourage them to keep trying – suggest things to try but don't jump in and solve it. When they make mistakes, say "hmm, we learned something that doesn't work. What else could we try." But... also notice when something is just too hard (or at least too hard in this moment). Teach that it's OK to say "I can't do this yet. I can set it aside and try again some other time."

**Process over Product.** With crafts, we might have a sample of what a final product *could* look like. But the process is always more important. We honor a child's right to make their own choices about what to do. (As long as they're following the "make don't break" rule.) What they learn in the process of doing something is more important than the product. So, while you are welcome to help them to do it themselves, please don't just jump in and do it for them so it will "turn out nicer." That's not the point!

**We are child-led, play-based.** We set up a variety of great learning opportunities, but it's up to the child to decide what they want to try, and how long to do it. If they start a project and don't want to finish, that's OK. If they only try two activities in a day, they didn't "miss out" on everything else. They focused on what mattered to them.

**Freedom Within Limits. Everyone Gets to Feel Safe. Everyone Gets to Play.** We try to give children lots of choices. They'll make some good choices and some bad. We want to let that happen so they learn from their mistakes. But, for the sake of safety (physical and emotional) and fairness, parents and teachers must set appropriate limits. We decide what options are on the table, and they decide from amongst those good options. If they do something unsafe or unfair, we set limits. For example, rough and tumble play is tons of fun, but only if everyone has consented and everyone stays safe.

**Four Keys to Brain Development: Novelty, Repetition, Downtime, and Safety.** Every time we experience something for the first time, we make new connections in our brain. Novelty is so exciting! Every time we see something familiar or repeat something we're good at, we build competence and confidence. Repetition and routine is soothing! None of us can be learning and doing all the time. We all need breaks to rest and integrate new learning. Finding a balance of novelty, repetition and downtime and ensuring a child always feels safe and loved is the best way to support learning.