



PEDALS Tip Sheet: Observing SEL in Action in Toddler Classrooms

(Connection , Reciprocity , Inclusion , Opportunities to Grow )

What to Notice During Observations

Connection: Building Trust and Emotional Security

Between Caregivers and Toddlers:

- Gentle, consistent responses to toddlers' emotional ups and downs
- Offering comfort when frustration, separation anxiety, or excitement shows up
- Warm verbal affirmations ("I'm right here," "I see you're trying so hard.")
- Matching toddlers' emotions and offering co-regulation without judgment

Between Adults:

- Encouraging and supporting each other during busy or stressful moments
- Modeling calm, respectful communication for toddlers to observe

With Families:

- Greeting families by name, acknowledging their expertise about their child
- Sharing small positive updates about children's emotional or social growth

Reciprocity: Growing Two-Way Communication

Between Caregivers and Toddlers:

- Listening attentively to toddlers' verbal and nonverbal communication
- Pausing to wait for toddler responses instead of rushing interactions
- Expanding on toddlers' words or actions to deepen the back-and-forth ("You found a big truck! Let's drive it together!")

Between Adults:

- Offering ideas and responding flexibly to support each other's strategies
- Sharing feedback openly and respectfully, especially during challenging routines

With Families:

- Actively listening to family insights about a child's emotional needs or preferences
 - Inviting two-way communication about toddlers' learning, emotions, and transitions
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Inclusion: Creating a Place Where Every Toddler Belongs

Between Caregivers and Toddlers:

- Encouraging participation at each toddler's own comfort level
- Adapting group activities to welcome all abilities, languages, and styles
- Offering choices that respect toddlers' autonomy and differences

Between Adults:

- Including all team members' voices during planning and debriefs
- Recognizing and celebrating different teaching styles and approaches

With Families:

- Honoring diverse family cultures and communication styles
- Offering multiple ways for families to be involved, respecting their time and capacity

Opportunities to Grow: Stretching Social-Emotional Skills

Between Caregivers and Toddlers:

- Supporting emotional labeling ("You're feeling mad. Let's breathe together.")
- Encouraging problem-solving with peers instead of solving every conflict immediately
- Offering challenges that invite persistence, decision-making, and exploration
- Allowing safe struggle during tasks (putting on shoes, climbing) while staying close for support

Between Adults:

- Recognizing and affirming colleagues' efforts to stretch their own relational or emotional skills
- Celebrating small wins and persistence within the adult team

With Families:

- Sharing strategies that empower families to extend SEL learning at home
- Celebrating toddlers' milestones, no matter how small

Reflection Prompts for Leaders

 Where did I see Connection , Reciprocity , Inclusion , or Growth  among toddlers, staff, or families today?

 How did caregivers support toddlers' autonomy while offering emotional safety?

 How did adult relationships in the classroom model SEL skills for children to learn from?

 What small authentic moments could be celebrated more intentionally with the staff?

Important Reminders for Toddler Rooms

- Toddlers are learning emotional regulation **through** everyday relationships — not just during SEL lessons.
- Moments of conflict, frustration, and excitement are rich opportunities for SEL growth.
- Inclusion means offering **multiple right ways** to join, communicate, and succeed.
- Adults' emotional tone sets the climate toddlers absorb into their learning and relationships.

"In toddler classrooms, social-emotional learning is not scheduled — it's lived in every moment of connection, challenge, and choice."