



What Children's TV Can't Do For Your Toddler

You're a parent with a small child who is learning by leaps and bounds – crawling and cooing today, walking and talking tomorrow. When you think about your child's development, you undoubtedly want them to be successful intellectually, physically, socially and emotionally. But beyond that, don't you also want to have a solid relationship with them?

There is a way to give your young child a head start in life and build your relationships with them at the same time: Through parent-child classes that help lay the foundation for your kids' future and promote a strong relational bond.

Guided by a professionally developed curriculum and led by trained instructors, parent-child classes typically focus on working together to develop your child's physical, social, emotional and intellectual skills. Using music, exercise and games, children can learn a range of skills, including rhythm, body awareness, number concepts, core body strength, hand-eye coordination, cooperation, following directions and fundamental sports skills.

Parents and children work together in teams, with moms or dads offering lots of support and praise for their infant or toddler. While parent-child classes typically have a focus on having fun, they are more than just free play; they involve structured activities that help kids build skills sequentially.

Enhancing the parent/child relationship

At their most basic level, parent-child classes benefit both parties by offering one-on-one time for parents and children without distractions from household chores, ringing phones, television or other siblings.

Researchers have found that these classes also help parents learn much more about their children than can be gleaned from everyday interaction, facial expressions or rudimentary conversations. Curriculum-based parent-child classes can help parents develop sensitive, appropriate responses to the individual needs of their child. Knowing how to respond best to your child helps them develop a secure attachment to you, and in turn, provides a strong base for future relationships.

Further, the type of instructor-led guidance offered in organized parent-child classes can help focus parents' attention on the importance of discovering their child's individuality, including his temperament, preference for physical contact, and even reaction to stressful or new situations,

Instructor-led classes offer built-in team building because children and their parents have to work together in encountering new challenges and activities. Parents also get to watch their child blossoming physically, socially, in their self-confidence, and in their ability to follow directions and do things on their own.

Tips for Parents

Let go of expectations.

To truly be team players in parent-child classes, it is important to let your child have a voice in what you do and not simply take orders from the parent. This might be different from the communication dynamic at home, but allowing independence in a controlled class environment is critical to helping your child develop self-confidence.

When choosing parent-child activities, steer away from an environment where instructors give "have to" messages – such as, "you have to try a forward roll" or "you have to form a circle." A more positive environment offers structure and activities as options, but recognizes that kids need the opportunity to explore on their own and not always be with the group.

Be sensitive to what your child does and does not like.

Parent-child classes offer great opportunities to learn what motivates your child versus what frightens them.

For example, many children do not like to rotate backward because they can't see where they are going. Other kids do not like to be upside down. When parents learn and respond to the likes and dislikes of their child, it develops trust and reinforces the fundamental message that parents are there to provide for their child's safety.

Motivate – don't direct.

While in class and trying a new activity, parents should ask motivating questions such as "Do you think you can walk on the balance

beam? Can you show me?" rather than directing: "Let's go walk on the balance beam."

Be a role model in class.

Your child may not seize the opportunity to try new things, but that doesn't mean you can't. Encourage your child to try things outside their comfort zone by demonstrating them yourself.

Parent-child classes are gaining in popularity, and virtually every community offers opportunities to attend them. Explore offerings at your local YMCA or community center. Local swimming pools and the Red Cross often offer parent-child swimming classes.

Privately-owned facilities, such as The Little Gym, offer gymnastics-based classes for infants and toddlers and their parents.