

upcoming events

All events are held in our San Francisco office. Fees for presentations are \$40/person or \$60/couple. Book group fees are \$25/person. For more information visit our website: www.symbiosf.com.

Encouraging Developmentally Useful Play

Wednesday 04 February
7:00 pm

Parents know that children learn through play - but how does this happen? What are they learning, what are the lessons of each age and period in development, and what is the role of play in this process? Is there such a thing as the wrong kind of play and can too much, or too little, play ever have a negative impact? We'll tackle these questions as well as common concerns involving sharing, discipline and possession that often come up in discussions of play habits and practices.

Parenting Strong-Willed Children

Wednesday 18 February
7:00 pm

Every toddler has moments of willfulness and defiance, that's part of their job, but some kids seem to be born with a double shot of will power. These kids are often bright and precocious, they live big and leave a wide trail behind them. Parents can look forward to watching these kids mature into powerful leaders, but often wonder if they will survive their child's toddlerhood and preschool years. In this presentation we will take a look at the aspects of discipline, boundary setting, social interaction and communication as they apply to high-octane kids.

Potty Training

Wednesday 11 March
7:00 pm

Using the lens of temperament we will address how to approach getting your child out of diapers. We'll suggest guidelines for timing and choosing a technique, explore some of the strengths and drawbacks of common approaches and provide tools for how to determine what strategies will work best for your particular, unique child.

february @ symbio



q & a

When I became a parent 3½ years ago, I swore I wouldn't be one of those moms who used the TV as a babysitter. But when my youngest daughter started toddling, getting anything done with two kids under my feet posed such a challenge that I gave into the ease of using a few minutes of video or even television to buy me time to get dinner pulled together or get ready to leave in the morning. We still keep it to a minimum and most of the time at home they play with toys or games or kitchenware. However, my partner and I have noticed that the girls spend more and more of their playtime imitating characters and situations that they see in the videos they watch. My partner works for a large hospital, and a pediatric nurse he works with tells him that the kinds of toys kids play with, and even the games they play, are very important for shaping their minds and helping them learn social skills. He's sent all his kids to Waldorf schools and he has my partner convinced that we are really on the wrong track. If it makes a big difference, I am willing to unplug the TV, buy all wooden toys, and avoid the gender stereotypical play that goes with the skillet and spatula. But part of me feels like this is over-reacting. I grew up in a big mid-western family – for sure we watched too much TV and had too many brain-numbing toys – but I think we all turned out okay. What's a balanced perspective that will help my girls grow up healthy and let their mom stay sane?

(answer on page 2)

Book Group: *1-2-3 Magic*

by Thomas W. Phelan
Wednesday 18 March
7:00 pm

Join us, and other parents, in an informal discussion of this popular approach to discipline. Whether you've read the book cover-to-cover or are just interested in the ideas it presents – come and share your questions and perspective.

Discipline with Toddlers & Preschoolers

Wednesday 25 March
7:00 pm

Discipline is an omnipresent topic for parents trying to guide young minds and protect young bodies. This presentation will consider common approaches to discipline from a psychological perspective. We'll discuss how to tailor tactics and techniques to your child's particular personality and temperament; how to balance setting limits and sharing control; and how to use discipline to lay a foundation for self-esteem, emotional regulation and healthy communication.

Private Presentations

Presentations on any topic for groups of eight or more can be arranged by appointment. These presentations can be done at your home or another space of your choice, or at our San Francisco or Marin locations. For more details, contact us at: symbio@symbiosf.com.

No More Wednesday Lunches

Sadly, due to schedule conflicts, we have had to discontinue Wednesday lunches. We will continue to explore options for providing a low fee, drop-in option for parents to access our services, and for us to have a chance to meet with kids. Thanks to everyone who joined us for some good conversations and/or some play time in our office.

The key word is balance. You partner's coworker is right that play is important in shaping brain development and social skills; and you are right in your sense that kids are resilient and that everyone benefits when parents remain sane. We certainly want to see kids given ample opportunity to engage in self-directed play (this is far more important than academic learning in the first five years), but when your kids are pretending to be Dora or imitating situations from a video – or things they see in the park or hear at daycare for that matter – they are engaging their imaginations. We applaud your circumspect approach to the TV, but we also have no concerns about children watching limited amounts of quality content. In fact, in addition to keeping them busy and helping with emotional regulation, the right programming can actually spur creativity and curiosity. So far as what toys are the right toys, this will vary from child to child based on temperament. We are not big proponents of one-size-fits-all in any area concerning child-development. For example, highly sensitive children can be overwhelmed by toys that are too brightly colored, make too much noise or have too many moving parts. On the other hand some highly distractible children will have a hard time focusing on very simple toys for long enough to become deeply engaged in play. The key is to find toys that are engaging for your child but leave some need for them to entertain themselves in the process of play. In addition, the developmental task of play will change from age to age. Your younger daughter may be working on impulse control so simple games in which she has to wait for something to happen will both test and delight her in stimulating ways. Whereas your older daughter will be in the midst of a developmental explosion of imagination and creativity, so games of role-play and make believe will help her chase the limits of her telescopic perspective. There is plenty of room in any given day for both of your girls to work their edges, and consolidate their strengths, outside of the time it takes you make dinner or take a shower. In addition, know that it's important and healthy for children to develop a habit of entertaining themselves for periods of time without parental involvement. Having some basic familiarity with the developmental tasks of each stage will probably help you and your partner to feel more secure in the tradeoffs you make between your sanity and creating the ideal learning environment for your daughters. If you feel a bit foggy on this, pick up a good basic book on infant and toddler development; you don't need to read it cover-to-cover, but use it as a reference as your kids grow. As you think about what your kids need in terms of play and play aids (also known as toys and kitchenware), think about the tasks each child is working on at a particular point. In addition to age and developmental stage, be sure to consider each of your daughters' temperament: while every 3-year-old may be nurturing creativity, very active ones will do it in very active physical play; more subdued children are likely to use storytelling or symbolic play to get the same job done. Let your kids lead you with their own preferences and interests. Your job is, ideally, to encourage the direction they choose themselves and then to create boundaries and limits that protect safety, order and, yes, your sanity.

Our son is 14 months old and has a full arsenal of assault techniques: biting, hitting and pinching, often one right after the other. He tends to hit me (his mom) or other children - often his best friend who is two months younger. He hits when angry or frustrated, and being hungry and tired make it worse. He's a very bright little guy: walking since 9 months, and is now saying at least 50 words and adding more daily. We're used to being able to give him directions like "go get the Hugs book so we can read it" and having him follow them. Not so with the "stop biting" instructions! He just moves on to hitting or pinching. What are the best ways to reduce his attacks? We try to redirect. We say "no biting," etc., we stop him from the action, and show him how to touch softly. We also let him see if another child is crying and say how he or she is hurt because of a bite. Any other ideas? Should we just expect that this will take a while to end, no matter what we do? I'm sure this behavior is developmentally normal, but it's no fun being the target of it, or endlessly peeling him off other (crying) children.

(answer on page 3)

We probably receive as many reports of violent aggression in any given week as our local police station. You are right, your son's behavior is certainly a hallmark of his age, and it's reflective of some healthy developmental progress, but that doesn't mean that you have to just duck and take it. In fact, while your understanding and patience (when you can muster it) will help your son and support a positive relationship, your unconditional forbearance would only add to his long-term distress and frustration. While hitting, biting and other forms of violence happen for slightly different reasons as children pass through the toddler and preschool years, it's always important that kids get a clear message that the behavior is not acceptable. Furthermore, it's as important for your son as for any of his victims that this message, and your response to his behavior, be effective in curtailing his impulses. At 14 months, your son's aggression happens at the intersection of his growing sense of will and his lack of impulse control. Toddlers love power and control. The drive to seek it at this age is part of what propels them to establish a distinct sense of self. When they cannot get what they want they become frustrated and the impulse to lash out offers a ready relief to the mounting internal anxiety created by frustration. However, no matter how relieving this lashing out is, it's also anxiety provoking: your son knows that you are displeased by his aggressive behavior and he feels the shift in your feeling toward him when he engages in it. The anxiety this creates is part of what drives him into the next aggressive act (it's also why many kids will laugh, run away or become provocative following misbehaving – they need a way to deal with the anxiety that the infraction creates). For a child to be anxious over a parent's response to aggression is a good thing from a developmental perspective. In the right measure, it will act as a deterrent against future aggressive impulses and create an emotional feedback loop that contributes to the formation of moral consciousness. However, getting your son's anxiety working for him (and anyone in his path) depends on two things: 1/ Your response has to have a strong enough impact to punctuate the impulsive cycle of his frustration and acting out. 2/ Once you've made that impact, he needs to be able find his way out of anxiety - otherwise he will just continue to act out. The type and force of discipline needed make an impact varies greatly from child to child and will change some with age, but it's fairly easy to gauge when what you are doing is not working. In your son's case, despite the fact that he is bright and highly verbal, it's likely that the discussion and redirection you are doing are not strong enough to be effective in the moments when he is keyed up to the point of acting out. Don't yell, and remain composed, but use a sharp, stern tone voice when you reprimand him for hitting, biting or pinching. It often helps to get right down on a child's level and look him in the face. Don't use too many words, when kids are anxious verbal processing drops. Sometimes a brief reprimand followed by a few seconds of stern silence is very effective. If he laughs or tries to distract, keep in mind that you are seeing a defense against healthy anxiety (as he gets older you can bring him back to the point by quietly telling him you know he's laughing because he's nervous because he knows he is in trouble). If his victim is another child who you need to attend to before reprimanding your son, try to hold your son there with you while you briefly soothe the other child and then turn to your son and reprimand him. The contrast between your tone and manner with the victim, and your tone and manner with your son will help drive your point home. Also, be sure you do what you need to do in order to prevent him from doing anything else violent in the moment you are reprimanding him. For some kids accomplishing this takes as little as a soft, firm verbal warning, for others it requires holding their arms still or immediately whisking them away from what, or whom, ever they are engaged with when violence occurs. Unfortunately, where your interventions fall on this spectrum have to be dictated by your son's temperament rather than your most preferred way of parenting. You want your son to know that you are in charge and that you don't tolerate violence: you don't want to ask him to stop, you want to make him stop. His knowledge that you can and will enforce a boundary around violence, and that it won't be pleasant for him when you do, will provide him with the sense of structure he needs to turn his emotional attention toward the difficult task of learning to control his impulses. When reprimanding your son, once you know you have gotten through to him, then you want to move right into helping to reduce his anxiety. At 14 months, the whole reprimand process should take less than a minute. Many parents worry that if they let their kids out of trouble too quickly they will miss the lesson. However, toddlers do not have the attention span required to clearly connect a parent's disapproval in one moment with what happened five minutes ago and so they just end up vaguely anxious which can lead right back to more hitting, etc. To help your son calm down soften your tone, ask him if he'd like to make up (with you, not his victim if he's hurt someone else) offer him a hug, or a smile; let him repeat with you what to do instead of hurting someone when he is frustrated. This is the right time to talk about touching nicely or being gentle, you can also show him how to stomp his feet or make a noise or use some other non-violent expression of frustration. If he's not calm enough so that you can reasonably expect good behavior, take him aside for a little while, not as punishment but to remove him from the stimulation and stress. Finally, one of the most important things you can do to reinforce good behavior and decrease overall anxiety is to talk about times when things got rough later when things are feeling good. This gives kids a chance to engage the situation with a calm mind, and learning is much easier in this state.

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psychological services for families with
young children

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