

# Caring for the Little Ones

by Karen Miller



Photograph by Ludwig Studio

## Dealing with Screaming

Sometimes after visiting a classroom with a *screamer*, I've wondered how the adults can stand it all day. Infants, toddlers, and two year olds do scream a lot! You know that only too well, I'm sure! Knowing why they scream and having some strategies for dealing with it can help your nerves and tolerance.

I interviewed four wonderful caregivers to write this article. They are: **Rhonda Hall**, toddler teacher, and **Leslie Smith**, two year olds teacher at the Oklahoma State University Child Development Center in Oklahoma City; and **Peggy Yackel**, lead infant teacher, and **Karen Walburg**, lead toddler teacher at Westwood Early Childhood Center in St. Louis Park, Minnesota.

Of course, how you deal with the scream depends on the child's age. Peggy has a formula: Look at the *situation*, what is happening; the *clock*, the time of day and the segment of the child's routine; and the *child*, and what the child's usual cues for help and frustration are. Some children are feisty and scream as a matter of course. But if Peggy hears a scream from a normally quiet or laid-back child, she springs to attention.

## Why They Scream

When young infants scream, it is usually an indication of pain, Peggy says, and her mission is to try to figure out what is causing it and how to alleviate it. Sometimes it's a matter of not getting to a crying baby quickly enough. If you can respond immediately, the baby can often be comforted and distracted. However, if you're tied up and can't get right there, the crying can escalate to screaming. Some older infants just scream when they're very tired.

Rhonda reminds us it's important to recognize that screaming is a *normal* behavior for toddlers. Frustration builds as their limited language abilities fail to meet their needs, and out comes the scream. Karen also tells us that toddlers often scream kind of for the fun of it. They learn it from each other. This *exuberance* scream is a happy noise, though it still can be nerve-racking; and you deal with it differently.

Leslie acknowledges that her two year olds tend to do a lot of screaming and yelling. As they are becoming part of a larger group of children, they often do it simply to be heard over the rest of the group.

Dear Reader,

We're starting something new this month which promises to be interesting and fun — an e-mail *network* to shape this column.

Here's what I would like to do. From time to time I will e-mail you a question about a topic I'm working on for a future article. We might also do some surveys. You can send me your ideas, insights, arguments, questions. I'd also love to have your input for topics you'd like to see in the future, questions, problems, situations, etc. Of course, if I use your ideas in an article, I will give you and your program credit.

Would you like to join us? Simply send or e-mail me your e-mail address and you're in! Include your name, job title, physical address, and phone number, and the name and city location of the program where you work. My e-mail address is 74352.3414@compuserve.com. It will always appear at the end of this column along with my address.

If you don't have an e-mail address, but would still like to be part of this network, send me a note, and I will call or write to you occasionally.

I look forward to some lively discussions!

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Karen Miller".

## Some Strategies

### ... Infants

Peggy has developed these *tricks* to try.

- Gently blow on the child's forehead or hair.
- Cradle the child in your arms and turn all the way around in one direction and all the way back again. The vestibular motion may be soothing enough to break the screaming jag.
- Sing. They relax. Or, recite *Goodnight Moon*.
- Whisper to them in their ear.
- Giving the child a drink of water or juice is sometimes all that's needed.

### ... Toddlers

- "When a child screams," Rhonda says, "we go over to her to try to determine what she is screaming about. We will ask her, 'What's the matter? Are you hurt?'"
- If we determine that the child is screaming out of frustration or a conflict with another child, we encourage her to use her words, and model the words for her to use. "Say, 'That's my work.'" This is fairly effective. Often children will parrot our words. Later, we can simply prompt them to use their words, and they will say, "My work."
- When the child is having a tantrum and we determine that he is not hurting, we will invite him to settle down over in our soft corner where there are lots of pillows and soft animals. We tell the child, "When you are ready to come and play again, come on over and join the rest of us." We also tell him that his loud scream-

ing hurts our ears and that is why we want him to be a little distance away from us.

- Karen notes that you can tell the difference between play screaming and screams of frustration. "I tell people who come to work in our center that they have to become a detective. What are the clues here?"
- Karen tells adults to become an *interpreter* of the scream. Give children the words to use and start labeling their emotions for them. In sharing squabbles, the phrase "It's Joey's turn now and you can be next" works quite well because the child feels like he's not being brushed off.
- Karen sometimes sings an action song that includes large motor actions if it is play screaming to redirect their vocal energy. A favorite is the "Shout and Whisper" song on Hap Palmer's *More Baby Songs* album.
- Karen cautions, "Don't assume children know what you mean when you say, 'Use your inside voice.'" Demonstrate and practice.

### ... Two Year Olds

- Leslie tells us: "I will go over to the screaming child and get down on her level, make eye contact, and touch her on the shoulder. Then, in a quiet, whispering voice, I will say something like, 'We are inside now. You need to use your quiet inside voice. In a little while, we will go outside and you can scream out there. Loud voices are okay outside.'" She might have the child practice whispering; and, pretty soon, the whole class is whispering.
- Leslie also reminds us to watch our own voices. It's so easy, as the noise level in a classroom increases, to

start shouting across the room to get the attention of a child or adult. Whenever possible, go over to the individual involved so you are not modeling the very behavior you are trying to stop.

- When it has been a particularly noisy day, Leslie will often ask herself on the way home what might have caused all the noise and what they might do differently tomorrow to change the pattern.

## Respect the Child

All of the teachers tell us to keep in mind that screaming is really an attempt to communicate. While the screaming may be irritating, the first thing one must do is acknowledge the emotion behind the scream, usually frustration or anger, and help the child deal with the situation at hand. When the child feels he has been heard, he will be more receptive to learning about other, better ways to express himself.

Karen Miller is the author of *Ages and Stages*, *Things to Do with Toddlers and Twos*, *More Things to Do with Toddlers and Twos*, *The Outside Play and Learning Book*, and *The Crisis Manual for Early Childhood Teachers* (Gryphon House).

Send comments, questions, feedback, giggles, good ideas, as well as any photos you'd like to share with other readers to:  
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