

Imitation is the Sincerest Form of Flattery

What does this proverb with origins in the 19th century have to do with the healthy social and emotional development of young children? Babies' brains develop and make sense of the world by observing what is happening around them, especially with the most important people in their lives. They practice and master new skills by imitating their parents, caregivers, and siblings. If they have good role models to imitate, their behaviors will probably flatter their loved ones—as the proverb in the title suggests!

The ability to imitate is a skill babies are born with. Because young children naturally imitate what they see others doing, it's important to pay attention to what and how we're teaching them to imitate. It's cute when 14-month-old Jason works out with Daddy, imitating the stretches and push-ups; it's not so cute when 16-month-old Sarah hits her big sister Abby because she saw Mommy hit Abby. We want children to imitate positive behaviors, not negative ones.

Tips for Encouraging Imitation

With infants:

- Repeat actions slowly and give the baby time to respond.
- Make sounds and repeat the sounds the baby makes.
- Sing songs; play a “tune” on a drum or toy piano and help the baby play the tune too.

With toddlers:

- After you show your child how to do something (like holding a spoon or putting on her shoes), let her try (and be patient while she does!).
- Model physical activities such as hopping, skipping, jumping, and crawling, and then encourage your child to do it too.
- Encourage your child to help you with household tasks, like setting the table, folding the laundry, and putting toys away. Don't be overly concerned with accuracy and correctness; praise the effort.

Tips for Encouraging Imitation *continued*

With preschoolers:

- If you want your child to read or love learning, let him see you reading and learning new skills.
- Say please and thank you to your child and others in your family.
- If you do something you wish your child hadn't seen, admit it and explain what happened.
- Match your expectations for your child with your own behavior.
- Model the kind of behavior toward others, such as empathy when others are hurting, that you want your child to imitate.

R E S O U R C E S

What Your Child Learns by Imitating You, Parents Magazine.

<http://bit.ly/2mkWZiK>

Imitation, Information for Parents. <http://bit.ly/2IYrQ4g>

Programs and families can contact the program leadership directly at PAIECMH@pakeys.org with questions or concerns.

