



Toddlers

Toddlers are:

- active and curious — they have to touch, open and shut, explore, run, climb and throw
- learning who they are — what they like and don't like, and trying out their will
- learning to be in charge of themselves — to walk, talk, feed and dress themselves and use the toilet
- learning to live with others – how to show love, share and take turns, and to not hurt others.

Toddlers are not able to:

- understand your reasons — they can't see things from your point of view
- sit still, wait, share or control their feelings — these things take time and support to learn
- always stop themselves from doing what they have been told not to. They are on the way to learning self-control but haven't quite gotten there yet. They still need you to gently remind them and keep them safe.

Toddlers are learning lots of new skills as they become more independent. Try to be patient.

Toddlers are likely to:

- say 'No' and show they have a mind of their own
- get frustrated, and have tantrums
- not be ready to share because they are just learning about 'me and mine'. For a toddler, everything is 'mine'
- want to make some choices for themselves
- find it hard to cope with changes
- want to be like their parents, e.g. try on lipsticks and use parents' phones and keys.

Toddlers need:

- understanding, love, patience and encouragement
- time to explore
- to be allowed to make simple choices
- to test out their independence and come to you for comfort
- your support when struggling with feelings and behaviour
- to be kept safe — they don't yet understand danger.

Things that can stress toddlers:

Toddlers like routine — it helps them feel safe and secure. Things that stress them can be:

- the arrival of a new baby
- being sick
- moving to a new house, or into a new bed
- being separated from parents, i.e. starting childcare, when a parent goes into hospital or the family breaks up
- parents being angry, fighting, crying, or when there is violence.

Toddlers don't usually have the words to say how they feel. Sometimes they show stress in how they behave, such as being 'bad', quieter than usual or having aches and pains. It is important to pick up on these cues.

It can help to spend more time with your toddler and let them be more of a baby for a while. Difficult behaviors will improve as they become more used to the change.

What parents can do:

Toddlers need your help to learn. Praise and encouragement work best because your child wants to please you. Be consistent with discipline. Say what you mean and mean what you say. Help them find ways to manage the frustration they can sometimes feel as they learn new things.

- Don't get into battles over things that take time and lots of practice to learn, e.g. toilet training, eating and developing good sleep habits.
- Ignore things that don't matter too much such as them making a mess, but insist on important things like being secure in their car seat.
- Don't give a choice if there isn't one. If you have to pick up an older child from school don't ask your toddler if they want to come, say 'We're going to the school in the car now'.

- If there is something they don't want to do, try to make a game of it. You could say 'See if you can hop like a frog to the bath', or make having a bath more attractive. Toys in the tub can be fun.
- Distract instead of giving orders, e.g. 'Let's get out the building blocks' rather than 'Stop doing that'. Model what you want them to do.
- Give simple choices, i.e. 'Do you want to wear your blue shirt or red shirt today?'.

Toddlers learn things in small, simple steps and they need lots of practice. Don't expect them to remember every time.

- Be positive and offer alternatives rather than saying 'don't' all the time. Instead of 'Don't slam the door' you could say 'I know you can shut the door quietly, let's see you do it'. Then give praise for using a new skill.
- Tell them what you want in simple words. Instead of 'I'm not going to listen if you whine — it's very annoying' you could say 'Please tell me what you want without whining'.
- Take time to manage their behavior. Take your toddler away from a troubling situation and stay with them for a while. They need your help to calm down. Once they're calm you can help them understand what is expected.
- Don't threaten to leave young children alone as this is very frightening for them. If you are out shopping and your child gets upset and refuses to come with you — pick them up and carry them. Be firm but kind as you let your child know you're in charge.

Communication:

The way you talk with your child has a big impact on your relationship. The way you listen is as important as what you say.

- Be aware of your tone of voice – young children are easily frightened.
- Give your child time to talk without interrupting. Get down to their level and look at them – it shows you're really interested.
- Share activities each day. Even putting away toys together is a good way to talk and be together.
- Take time to find out what things are special in your child's life today. Simple things like watching your child do something can make them feel special.

Help children learn about feelings:

- Be a good role model — managing your own emotions helps children learn to manage theirs.
- Name feelings so your toddler learns that they are something you can talk about and learn to manage. You could say, 'I think you're feeling sad because Daddy had to go to work', 'I can see you're feeling frustrated'.
- Separate feelings from behaviour. You might say 'I know you are frustrated but it is not okay to hit. When you feel frustrated you can tell me'.
- Read stories that show children having different kinds of feelings, i.e. being angry, happy, sad, afraid.
- Help children understand the difference between their own feelings and other people's. It takes many years to learn this well but you can start when your child is very young.

Help with tantrums:

Most toddlers have tantrums — it is a normal part of growing up and becoming independent. A tantrum is a sign your child is overwhelmed by feelings and needs your help to calm down. Let them know you understand how they feel as they let out all those big feelings. Once calm, remind them you love them before you help them learn from what happened.

Be patient when toddlers have tantrums. It takes time to learn about feelings and to control behavior.

Help with fears:

The world can seem very scary for toddlers because there are lots of things they don't know yet. They don't understand that:

- you will come back soon — they don't understand time
- they can't fall down the plug hole in the bath or get flushed down the toilet — they don't understand size and space
- they can't lose parts of their body if they are hurt — they don't understand their bodies are all part of them
- the monsters in their dreams won't get them — they don't understand what is real and what is not.

Things to try for fears:

- Fear of cuts and bruises — put a band-aid on sores and hurts even if there is no need for it. Try a kiss on the injury first — sometimes that's all that's needed.
- Scared of going down the hole — let your child use a baby bath for a while, or at least don't pull out the plug while they are still in the bath. Let them use a training potty instead of the real toilet or let them flush the toilet with your help.
- Scared by nightmares — if they have a nightmare tell them 'It is only a dream, it goes away, and you're safe'. Cuddle and comfort your child until they settle down.
- Afraid of monsters — tell them there are no monsters. Don't look for monsters in the room because they may think you believe they are there.
- Fear of separation — stay with your child until they feel more secure. When you have to leave, do it quickly so as to not drag out the ordeal.
- Scared of the dark — stay with your child for a while to reassure them. Perhaps use a night light. Keep to bedtime routines, i.e. the same number of kisses goodnight or read the same number of stories.

Let your child know you understand their fears and you don't think they are silly or babyish. Don't force them to face their fears — it can often make things worse. Children usually grow out of fears with lots of support and understanding. If fears are really interfering with their life, talk it over with us.

Help with eating and potty training:

Toddlers are learning about food and often want to control what they eat.

It's up to parents to provide healthy food and drinks for toddlers. Some toddlers can be picky eaters. Try presenting new foods with foods they are familiar with, but don't force them. If a child is normal neurologically and developmentally is okay for them to refuse food and be hungry. Just be careful not to let them fill up on milk or juice. They will learn that they need to eat.

Toilet training needs to be as relaxed as you can make it. Make sure they are ready and don't rush it.

Give lots of encouragement for each small step they master, e.g. 'Well done for pulling your pants down all by yourself'.

Reassure them if there are accidents, i.e. 'It's okay, sometimes accidents happen'. If there are problems, wait a month or so before trying again.

Keeping toddlers safe:

Toddlers are often injured in accidents that are preventable such as falls, traffic accidents, drowning, burns, poisoning or pet attacks. Teaching them about danger is important but it is not enough to keep them safe. They are too young to really understand, even if they can say something is dangerous.

The best way to keep toddlers safe is to supervise them. Make sure your home and yard are safe by thinking through things that could potentially hurt them due to their curiosity.

Adapted from ACT Parent Link, Parenting SA, Women's and Children's Health Network.