



GOOD TIMES WITH TODDLERS

Human Development and Family Studies
Colorado State University Cooperative Extension

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WHY IS IT IMPORTANT TO LEARN ABOUT TODDLERS?

In many families today, mothers and fathers both have jobs. There also are many single-parent families where a mother or father has to work outside the home. When parents are away from home, they need someone they can trust to take care of their toddlers. That someone might be you!

Taking care of someone's child is an important job. If you know about toddlers, you will know how to take care of them. You will be prepared to do your best work. If you know how toddlers grow and develop, you will not expect a 2-year-old to speak in entire sentences or a 3-year-old to ride a bicycle. You will know what to do when a toddler says "no!" You will know what changes to expect the next time you are asked to be a caregiver.

WHO ARE TODDLERS?

Children from 18 months to 3 years are called toddlers. Two- and 3-year-olds are toddlers because they are learning to walk and tend to "toddle" about on unsteady legs. By the time children are 4 years old, they are past the toddler stage because they have learned to walk, run, climb, open, close, talk, and make friends. Toddlerhood is a stage of independence. Toddlers want to do everything for themselves. They experiment with their newly-learned skills and ideas by rebelling against caregiver's wishes and by saying "no" so many times a day that they begin to sound like broken records!

Around 2 years, toddlers begin to understand language. Words and short sentences make an exciting new development in a toddler's thinking. They learn to connect words with

actions and objects and begin to communicate. "Go car," "bad dog," and "read book" all become familiar sayings.

Toddlers grow physically and socially as their muscles develop and they learn muscle control. They use their eyes, hands, feet, and bodies together in constant motion. They climb, push, pull, and touch everything within reach. They kick, throw, dance, chase, and fall down. Feeling and tasting also become learning methods for toddlers and can be dangerous unless the house has been safety-proofed.

Socially, toddlers enjoy family members and other children, but may be afraid of strangers like new caregivers. Two- and 3-year-olds often develop fears of unfamiliar sights (men with beards, people who wear glasses) and sounds (the vacuum cleaner, thunderstorms). They may need lots of reassurance to calm down after they have been frightened.

Willy and Nicholas were active children. Willy liked to climb and Nicholas liked to open cupboard doors and pull everything out onto the floor. When Nicholas and Willy were together, they played next to each other, but not with each other. They said "no" and "mine" often and sometimes had temper tantrums.

Temper tantrums are normal for toddlers because they have not learned how to share. They often become upset when they cannot have things their own way. Their attention spans are short and they quickly lose interest in what they are doing. Here are more facts that you need to know about toddlers:

- No two toddlers are alike. Some grow faster, some talk and walk sooner, and some make friends easier than others. These variations in development are called individual differences.
- Eighteen-month-old toddlers spend a good deal of their time working. Yes, working! To you, it may seem like play, but the movements and behaviors of toddlers are all part of their learning process. They work hard to learn! Eighteen-month-olds have so much energy they are sometimes called "runabouts." Runabouts explore everything around them. They explore corners and stairs, and they walk backwards. Some of them prefer to push their baby carriages rather than ride in them. Runabouts carry objects from one place to another and then back again. By doing this over and over, toddlers learn what a "place" is!
- At 2, toddlers like to run, push and pull. They are better coordinated than they were a few months ago. Two-year-olds watch what others do and sometimes try to imitate them. They learn what the word "mine" means and demonstrate this by hoarding toys, books, and playthings.

Two-year-olds do not know how to share and should not be forced to give up

- toys. They are learning what it feels like to own something. They get very angry and hurt if that feeling is taken away from them.
- Two-year-olds need order and may demand that things always be done in exactly the same way. This can be very hard for caregivers. Just by being there to care for the toddler, you have changed the daily or evening routine.
 - Sometimes people refer to the first part of toddlerhood as the "terrible twos." This is misleading. Two-year-olds do not mean to be difficult! It is just that the world is full of alternatives for them (yes/no, come/go, up/down, run/stop, give/take). They like to experiment with all of these choices. When they choose to do the opposite of what you have asked of them, they are learning to be independent.
 - Most 3-year-olds are easier to care for than 2-year-olds because they are interested in pleasing their caregivers. They like to listen to adults and use their eyes, ears, and emotions to learn. Three-year-olds can sympathize with your moods, tell the difference between night and day, share and take turns. They also can ride tricycles, play with other children for short periods of time, and help caregivers do things around the house.
 - Three-year-olds are active, but now they also enjoy quiet, social play like listening to records and stories.
 - Friendships are important to 3-year-olds. Many 3-year-olds use their growing imaginations to create pretend friends. They like to tell stories about these imaginary friends. This is their way of sharing their friends with you.
 - The main jobs of 2- and 3-year-olds are strengthening their independence and learning to make choices. You help them do these things just by knowing about and understanding toddler development.

AGES AND STAGES OF GROWTH

Toddlers change a lot between 18 months and the end of their third year. Most 2-year-olds learn to use their large muscles to run, throw, climb, and dance. They learn to use their small muscles to scribble and to pick up things in their hands. Most 3-year-olds learn to use their large and small muscles together to enable them to ride tricycles, draw pictures, throw balls, and help clean-up around the house.

Two- and 3-year-olds grow smarter and learn to use their brains to talk, to imitate the words and actions of others, and to create imaginary friends. They grow more aware of the people around them and learn that they are independent, separate human beings and different from others.

They learn to watch what people do and sympathize with how they feel. Toddlers learn about emotions and what it feels like to be frightened, frustrated, happy, and mad.

Toddlers also grow socially. They learn to say words and talk to people who are important to them. They learn to make friends, to love, and even (when they are almost 4) to share. When toddlers rebel against a caregiver's wishes and say "no," they learn to be independent and to do things for themselves. When toddlers go along with a caregiver's request, they learn to

please others and to get along with friends and members of their families.

Toddlers develop in four ways:

- physically
- intellectually
- emotionally
- socially

We can think of this development as a pie with four slices. If a toddler is missing a piece of pie, his or her development and growth will be incomplete.

There also is a fifth part of the toddler's growth. That is their development of language. Learning to talk changes the world for toddlers. It gives them the ability to say what they like and do not like, what they want and do not want, and to talk about their emotions.

Learning to talk depends on the development of each slice of the pie. Toddlers have to have their throat, tongue, and mouth muscles developed enough to form words. They need to have gained the intellectual ability to recognize what words mean, and to remember when to use them. Through language, toddlers learn to control and sort out emotions and how to cooperate socially with playmates and people around them.

Toddlers grow as whole human beings. It is a mistake to focus on only one part of their growth. If you learn only about a toddler's physical growth, you may believe that 2-year-olds are no different than 18-month-olds. Toddler's abilities to run, talk, feel happy, and make friends increase side-by-side. As their muscles grow, so do their emotions. As their capacity to think and remember grows, so does their need for companionship and friendship.

The [table](#) in this section, shows how average toddlers grow and develop in each of these areas - 18 months through 3 years. **Remember this is only a guide.** Some toddlers speak in complete sentences when they are 3 years old, and others know only a few words. One 2-year-old might be frightened of strangers and others might welcome them with open arms.

Nicholas and Willy grew and developed at different rates. Willy rode a tricycle when she was 3 1/2. Nicholas was not sure he could ride his trike. He often said, "I can't" and contented himself with pushing his trike in his yard. When Willy and Nicholas played together, things did not go well. Willy wanted to play with Nicholas' toys, but Nicholas did not want to share. They would grab the same toy and both shout "Mine!" As they got older, Willy learned to share sooner than Nicholas and often let him have his way. Check the following chart [Table 1: How Babies Grow and Develop] and see other ways Nicholas and Willy might have developed differently.

How you can help

The main thing toddlers learn during their second and third years is independence. This means they learn to do things like climb, dress, walk, eat, and turn pages in books all by themselves. If you are taking care of toddlers, you can help them learn to be independent.

Willy and Nicholas have a quiz for you to see how much you have learned about toddlers and how you can encourage 2-and 3-year-olds to explore and learn.

TRUE OR FALSE - "Words aren't important to me! I'll get along just fine even if I don't learn about language."

The answer is FALSE. Everyone gets along better in the world once they have learned about language. Thinking in language is called "symbolic thought." A symbol is something that stands for, or represents some other thing. For example, a siren causes us to pull over to the side of the road. The sound is a symbol. Words also are symbols. If you write or say "STAR," you do not have to draw a * for others to know what you mean. Think of all the objects, actions, and emotions we can express quickly to each other because we share a symbolic language. Words are very important!

Here are some ways you can help toddlers learn about language.

- Help children learn about objects and how to put them in groups that are alike. For example, talk about dishes, toys, clothes, and so on. Help toddlers see that even though objects may differ in size, shape, and color, they still belong to the same group. You can play classification games with almost anything you see if you keep this idea in mind.
- Help toddlers fit language to action. Talk to them while you are doing something in order to provide symbolic experiences to go with your actions. Use numbers, colors, time, and categories in your conversations. For example, say, "Twelve o'clock, time for lunch." "One o'clock, let's take a nap." "One, two, three, four, five clean toes!"
- Speak to children in descriptive language and, when you can, demonstrate what you mean. For example, use words like bigger or smaller, lighter or darker, and more or less. Show them what these words mean by comparing two objects and ask them questions like, "Which one is bigger?" and "What glass has more milk?"
- Listen to toddlers talk to themselves while they play and learn. Let them hear you talk to yourself, too.
- Read stories and sing songs with toddlers. You can learn more about these activities in the *Good Times with Music* and Rhythm* and *Good Times with Stories and Poems* sections.

TRUE OR FALSE - "I want to do everything for myself. It's a good idea to let me help you when you clean, carry, build, and run errands."

The answer is TRUE. If there is one thing toddlers want, it's ACTION, and one way to be active is by helping. When toddlers learn to walk, they experience again and again the

successful feeling that comes with reaching and taking. For example: when toddlers can reach for a brightly colored sponge, take it to the table and clean off the crumbs (just the way they have seen you do it), they feel good about themselves and can say with confidence "I did it myself."

Letting toddlers have the freedom to help in this way, though, is hard work for caregivers. Toddlers do not stay with one job for very long. Before you know it, they are on to another interesting activity. Toddlers move so fast it is hard for caregivers of any age to keep up with them. In fact, there have been experiments that show a professional athlete can not do exactly what a 2-year-old does throughout a day without reaching a state of total exhaustion.

Here are ways you can help the toddlers you care for stay physically occupied.

- Toddlers love to hold onto things, to move around with them and to throw or hide them away somewhere. However, they get tired of toys or household objects quickly. Instead of giving them several toys all at once and having them discarded all at once, try to keep toys hidden away out of the toddler's sight and reach. Then you can offer them a fresh toy exactly when they need one. Handing out toys one at a time like this will keep you both busy!
- If the opportunity arises for the toddler you care for to play with another child of about the same age, take advantage of it. Toddlers are interested in making friends but will not take a lot of guff from another child. This can lead to a clash of wills between the two children that can sound frightening, but is good for both of them in the long run. If you engineer the situation so both of them can win a little, they come away with a more realistic attitude about their own rights and independence. Do not be too quick to jump in and stop a squabble.
- Even though toddlers work hard to learn independence, they still get tired and want to rest. When they reach that stage, they want to be cuddled and held, reassured and comforted. Read a book, tell a story, or listen to some soothing music.
- Because toddlers are so active, it is important to make sure their play environment is safe. Find out what the safety rules are in the toddler's home and be sure to stick to them consistently. Toddlers will test you to see if you know the rules. Let them know that you do by using a firm voice and a patient smile. Read *Good Times with Health and Safety* to learn more about this.
- "Me do it!" is a common toddler expression. They want to do things by themselves and it is important that you let them try. If you know they cannot possibly complete a task, do not embarrass them by saying, "You can't do that, you are too little." Try saying, "Let's do it together" or "How about some teamwork?" This will preserve the toddler's self-esteem and confidence.

TRUE OR FALSE - "It's normal for me to have make-believe playmates. I'm not telling

lies when I tell you stories about my pretend friends. I really do play with them!"

The answer is TRUE. Three-year-olds think and play differently than 2-year-olds. Two-year-olds are very active and physical. Three-year-olds slow down a little bit and advance toward imaginative play. Three-year-olds are more social than 2-year-olds, and they like to play with other children instead of just next to them. Sometimes they "make up" other children and think of these imaginary friends as special people in their lives.

Children develop social skills mainly through play. They learn how to share, cooperate, have conversations, and even how to meet people while they play. As a caregiver, just the right amount of play with toddlers (and their imaginary friends) can help stimulate their social development. Here are some simple "rules of play":

- Watch children without interrupting their fantasy worlds. Listen to what they say to their imaginary friends and what situations they pretend to be in. What playthings are their favorites and why?
- Join in the play at the children's level. Let them lead the play. Do not suggest too many changes or ideas of your own. If you try to teach complicated ideas too quickly, you might confuse the children and feel disappointed if they do not respond to your ideas.
- Ask toddlers to tell you about what they are doing. Let them tell you in their own words, and do not make judgments about their play. Try not to disagree with them or to get them to see something your way. Toddlers' play may look different to you than it does to them. Let it be their way.
- After playing for a while at the toddler's pace, introduce a slightly more difficult stage of play. For example, if a child can handle a two-piece puzzle, get one out with three pieces. Or if a child likes building with blocks, show how to use cars with blocks.
- After you have introduced a new idea, back away and watch again to see if and how the youngster explores this new activity. After children learn to do something new by themselves, you can get involved again and suggest another new activity. Read *Good Times with Play* for more information about the social development of toddlers.

TRUE OR FALSE - "If I cry when I see you, you'll have to forget about caring for me. My crying means I don't like you!"

The answer is FALSE. Most toddlers develop fears of some kind, and many are afraid of people they do not know. When a caregiver with whom they are not familiar arrives to stay with them, they often respond in the only way they know - by crying, clinging, hiding, or refusing to cooperate with anything that is asked of them.

Fear is a normal human emotion. It allows self-protection. Most fears, though, are learned and can be overcome. Recognizing that a child is truly frightened and then reassuring him

or her are important steps in dealing with children's fears. Here are other ways you can help toddlers overcome fears.

As toddlers grow, they worry about being away from their parents. When they were infants, they forgot about people they could not see, but as toddlers, they remember them and know when they are not around. As a caregiver, you can help toddlers worry less about separating from their parent(s). Two things will help:

1. Always tell the child that the parent is leaving. "Sneaking out" will hurt the toddler's level of trust.
2. Absorb the toddler in an interesting activity before the parent leaves. Plan ahead so you will have an activity ready to go as soon as you enter the toddler's home. You might even bring a toy or interesting object with you so you can give it to the toddler as soon as you arrive.

- It is a good idea to get to know the toddler before you arrive to care for him or her. Once the toddler has gotten used to you, try to keep your appearance the same. (Do not arrive wearing glasses if the toddler did not meet you that way.)
- Always greet children at their eye level. If the toddler is on the floor, squat or sit down so he or she can clearly see your face. Approach them quietly and slowly. Too much friendliness can scare a small child.
- If you are going to the park, to a friend's house, or anywhere that the toddler will have other children to play with, take some time to talk about what the two of you will do there. Prepare the toddler for any animals, loud noises, dark rooms, or strangers that you may encounter. Once you arrive, let the toddler play alone or with other children if it is safe. Tell the toddlers where you will be, and then be sure to be there so they will know where to go if they need help. Station yourself nearby so you can watch the toddler at all times. Never let them go anywhere with someone else unless you know the person very well!
- Help toddlers get to know other children in groups by introducing them. Even though children seem to be very friendly, they can be scared when it comes to "breaking into" new groups of children. Show them how to make friends by making friends yourself!

LEARN BY DOING

Here are some activities that will help you learn about toddlers. Remember that toddlers are active people with short attention spans. They like to help and do things by themselves. Choose activities that fit each developmental stage.

1. Playing is learning for toddlers. Their play is different from that of older children. Pick an object like an empty cigar box, and watch how 2- and 3-year-olds play with it. Then

give it to 4-, 5-, or 6-year-olds, and watch how they play with it. What are the differences? What are the toddlers learning through play?

2. Toddlers are fascinated with objects and toys. They like to see what they can do with their hands and fingers, and what they can do with the object. Toddlers also are easily distracted. Have some play ideas prepared so you can keep the toddlers happy and occupied. Make or find a safe toy that will enable a toddler to do at least two of the following:

- take out and put in
- grasp, twist, and turn
- open and shut
- push and pull
- fit together and pull apart
- stack up and knock down
- hide and find
- pour
- pound and hammer
- crawl over, under, and through
- roll, throw, and catch
- balance and bounce

3. With the parents permission, try some art activities with toddlers. Toddlers like to use their hands to explore, so be prepared for them to be messy.

- Cover a washable floor or table area with newspapers, and tape them in place with masking tape. Use stiff, hard-to-tear paper and fat, easy-to-grasp crayons or markers. Let them scribble!
- Finger paint the refrigerator! Some refrigerator doors provide a washable easel. Be sure to have permission from the toddler's parents. You can find a recipe for finger paint in *Good Times Being Creative*.
- Make playdough, and let the children have fun cutting it with a plastic knife, pressing it into cookie cutter shapes, or pounding it with a toy hammer. This also is a way to introduce ideas like big pile, little pile, full and empty, or put together and take apart. You will find a recipe for playdough in *Good Times Being Creative*.

4. Play some games that will help toddlers learn to use their minds and language skills. Here are two ideas for games you can make on your own:

- **FEELIE BOX:** Select five or six pairs of objects: two small cars, two wooden blocks, two balls, two books, and two spoons. Lay one set of objects out on a table or the floor where the toddler can see them. Put the other set inside a box with a lid or in a bag. Ask the child to reach in without looking and to touch one of the articles. Then, ask the child (still without looking inside the box or bag) to pick the article on the table that matches the one in the box. ("Find one out here

on the table that is just like the one you are feeling inside the box.") After the child guesses, have him take the object out of the box. Once the child learns to play this game with the objects listed above, try a new set of objects that have different surfaces: two pieces of sandpaper, two pieces of cotton material, two pieces of wood, two smooth rocks, and two sponges. Play the game the same way. As the child takes things out of the box, talk about how some things are hard and others soft, some rough, others smooth, and so on.

- **MATCHING LOTTO:** Get together several old magazines. If you have friends who have subscriptions to the same magazines, try to get two copies of each issue. Cut out the same picture from each of the identical issues. Paste these pictures on pieces of cardboard. Divide the picture boards into two sets. Put one picture on the table, and ask the child to find one from her pile that is just like yours. This is like playing dominoes.

Besides matching, you also can practice naming the objects on the cards that you are holding. Talk about what you do with a boat or an apple.

RESOURCES

There is a great deal of information available about toddlerhood. Check sources like public libraries, local book stores, special television and radio programs, magazines, parent groups or classes, doctors who specialize in caring for young children, and your local Cooperative Extension office.

COOPERATIVE EXTENSION

Order these through your local Cooperative Extension office.

Cornell University - **Terrific and Terrible Two-year-olds** by Jennifer Birckmayer and **Three and Four-year-olds** by Gretchen McCrod.

Iowa State University - **Family Daycare Exchange of Information and Ideas, Infants and Toddlers** by Dorothy Pinsky, Cooperative Extension specialist, human development and family life.

The **1-2-3 Grow!** series, issues 3 through 8, by Pauline Davey Zeece and Randy Weigel, Cooperative Extension specialists, human development and family life.

Oklahoma State University - **Agenda of Growth: Three to Four Years** by Elaine Wilson.

Pennsylvania State University - **Off to a Good Start** series by Program Director James E. Van Horn, Cooperative Extension family sociologist. Ask for special issues for 18 to 21 months and 24 months and beyond.

University of Arkansas - *Cradle Crier Months Twenty-two, Twenty-three, and Twenty-four* by Dr. Betty Youngman, Cooperative Extension family life specialist.

University of Hawaii - *The Child from 2-38 by Shirley S. Weeks, Cooperative Extension specialist, human development.

University of Wisconsin, Madison - *Early Childhood Exchange*, Winter 1982, Volume 5, Number 4 by Caroline Hoffman. (Ask for others aimed at toddler development.)

Washington State University, Pullman - *Infants, Toddlers, Runabouts: Five Lessons in Human Development*, \$1.50.

OTHER RESOURCES

Growing Child - 22 N. Second Street, Lafayette, IN 47902. Subscription rate \$15.95 yearly.

Your Child From One to Six, U.S. Children's Bureau, Pamphlet No. 30, U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington, D.C. 20402. \$5.00 each.

BOOKS

A Sigh of Relief: The First Aid Handbook for Childhood Emergencies by Martin Green. This book helps you begin safety training with toddlers.

Learning Games for the First Three Years by Joseph Sparling and Isabelle Lewis. Fully illustrated, 100 ideas for games with toddlers.

Supertot by Jean Marzollo. Creative learning activities for toddlers.

What To Do When There's Nothing To Do, A Mother's Handbook. Dell Books, 1967. 601 activities for toddlers. All materials suggested are household items.

TABLE 1: HOW TODDLERS GROW AND DEVELOP

18 MONTHS	
Physical	Squats to pick up objects. Can pull or throw a toy. Walks without falling. Walks up stairs with hand held. Can kick, stack, and carry toys.
Intellectual	Shows curiosity. May say a few words. May put

	two or three words together.
Emotional	Hugs you and toys. Is impatient and frustrated when meeting difficulties. Cries when toys are taken away.
Social	Plays alone. Recognizes other children. Tries to copy other children.
TWO YEARS OLD	
Physical	Can kick. Stands on tiptoes. Jumps with both feet. Walks up and down stairs.
Intellectual	Refers to self by name. Begins to have imagination. Can scribble. Uses simple sentences. May begin to know short rhymes and songs.
Emotional	Easily frustrated. Strives for independence; learns "NO". Can be stubborn; needs rigid routines.
Social	Joins in short songs, games, story time. Plays simple "pretend" games. Learning to share, but still not very cooperative.
THREE YEARS OLD	
Physical	Runs easily. Feeds self. May ride tricycle and turn somersaults. Can cut with scissors.
Intellectual	Begins knowledge of simple concepts like: hello-goodbye. back-front, up-down. Recognizes letters and number, can count. Can use whole sentences. Creates imaginary friends and fantasies.
Emotional	Begins to show emotion in more socially acceptable ways. Is more concerned with pleasing people.
Social	Makes friends of similar ages. Likes to help. Show no preference for same sex friends.

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