

PARENTING BABIES, TODDLERS AND YOUNG CHILDREN

ParentLink guides use 'he' and 'she' in turn. Change to suit your child's sex.

Between the ages of one and three years, your toddler's world is growing rapidly. This is a time of many changes for toddlers. The most important development for children in these years is that they become separate, independent people. This can be a challenging time for many parents. It helps if parents understand these changes and are able to help their toddler to become more independent.

Toddlers are still babies in many ways and need a lot of love and support from their parents. They move between wanting to be independent and 'I do myself' and wanting to be close to their parents. They are longing to feel safe and wanting to be free. What toddlers want most is your love, despite how they may act at times.

Knowing what is happening for your toddler at this stage of development may help you to be more patient and understanding in the way you parent.

About toddlers

Toddlers are:

- **active and curious;** they have to explore, touch, open, shut and throw
- **learning who they are;** trying out their wills
- **learning to be in charge of themselves;** learning to walk, talk, feed themselves
- **starting to learn** to manage their clothes and toilet training
- **learning about living with others;** starting to learn how to show love, how not to hurt others, how to share and take turns.

Toddlers are not able to:

- **understand your reasons;** they cannot understand things from your point of view
- **sit still, wait, share or control their angry feelings;** all these things take time and support to learn
- **always stop themselves from doing what they have been told not to;** they still need adults to remind them, protect them and to keep them safe.

Toddlers are longing to feel safe and wanting to be free

Toddlers are likely to:

- say 'No' and to show they have a mind of their own (even sometimes when they would like to say 'Yes')
- get cross and frustrated at times
- not be ready to share because they don't understand personal boundaries yet
- want to make some choices for themselves
- find it hard to cope with changes
- want to be like their parents, for example try on lipsticks and use parents' things such as phones and keys
- want to feel very secure and safe but at the same time to be free
- not manage and 'fall in a heap' sometimes.

Sometimes when they are on the way to learning self control, children will say 'No! No! No!' to themselves while they do something that they shouldn't. They are not meaning to disobey you. They are on the way to learning what they must not do, but haven't quite got there yet.

Toddlers need:

- understanding
- encouragement
- time to explore
- to be allowed to make simple choices
- to be able to test out their independence and come back to you for comfort
- to have help when they are struggling with feelings and behaviour
- love and patience.



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Changes which can cause difficult behaviour

Toddlers usually like to know what is going to happen and have some routine. Changes in a toddler's life can be stressful. A toddler does not have the words to say how he is feeling so he may show this stress through his behaviour. Some of the things that can stress a toddler are:

- arrival of a new baby
- being sick
- moving house, or even into a new bed
- being separated from his parents, for example, when a parent is sick, someone goes into hospital, starting childcare or the family breaks up
- parents being angry, fighting or crying.

During these times spend more quality time together and let him be more of a baby for a while. These behaviours will go as he becomes more used to the change. Do not use punishment.

What parents can do

Your children need you to help them learn to be independent and feel good about themselves. The task for parents is to help them to do this and to try to avoid battles. Life for toddlers is full of frustration so the smoother parents can make it, the better it is for all.

Toddlers do not need to be forced to 'be good'. They need your approval, love and affection more than anything else. They will still test limits and need you to help them to find ways to manage frustration and be independent.

Toddlers need to be taught in small simple steps and need lots of practice. Do not expect your toddler to remember every time.

Some things to try

- Don't get into battles about things that may be ongoing and hard for the child to learn, such as toilet training, eating and sleep.
- Make up fun games where your child can practise saying 'No', for example, 'Does daddy sleep in the bath?', 'Does the cat say moo?'
- Don't give your child a choice if there isn't one. For example, if you have to pick up an older child from school, don't ask your toddler if she wants to come, say, 'We're going to the school in the car now'.

Toddlers do not need to be forced to 'be good'. They need your approval, love and affection more than anything else.

- If there is something she does not want to do, try to make a game of it. You could say, 'See if you can hop like a kangaroo to the bath', or make having a bath more attractive. The use of bubbles, toys or a few drops of food colouring can be fun.
- Distract instead of ordering. For example, 'Let's get out the building blocks' rather than, 'Stop doing that'. Model what you would like your child to do.
- Give simple choices, for example, with food and clothes. 'Do you want to wear your blue shirt or your red shirt, today?' Some young children find it very difficult to make choices for a while and may need you to choose for them.
- Be positive. For example, instead of saying, 'Don't slam the door' say, 'I know that you can shut the door quietly, let's see you do it'. Then give praise for learning a new skill.
- Give clear messages to your toddler. Tell her exactly what you want her to do in simple words. For example, instead of, 'Don't jump on the sofa', try, 'You can jump on the...'
- If your child refuses to come with you and there is no time to use any of the above methods, pick her up and carry her. Don't threaten to leave her as this is very frightening for young children.
- Punishment does not work for toddlers because they are too young to fully understand that what they did was wrong. Punishment can teach toddlers to be frightened of adults and it does not teach them what they should have done.
- 'Time out' is when you put a child by herself for a short time to think about what she has done wrong. 'Time out' methods of discipline are not appropriate for under three's as they do not understand what it means. 'Time out' can add to fear of separation. If needed, take your toddler away from where the trouble is and keep her with you for a while.
- 'Time-in' helps children learn to manage feelings and behaviour with the help of an adult. They need an adult to be with them and hold them and help them to understand about what feelings mean.
- Ignore things that don't matter too much, for example, a mess, but insist on important things, for example, wearing a seatbelt.

Communication

This must work two ways to be successful. The way you listen is as important as what you say. The way you talk shows how you respect and care. The way you respond has a big impact on your relationship.

- Give your child time to say something, without interrupting or thinking about how you'll respond.
- Look at your child's face when he's talking—it shows you're really interested.
- Your toddler's behaviour may say more than his words—pick up on the cues.
- Share activities each day (even putting away toys together). It's a good way to talk and be together.
- Take time to find out what things are special in your child's life today.

Help children learn about feelings

- Give names to feelings for your young child so that she learns that feelings are something that you can talk about and learn to manage. For example, you could say, 'You're feeling sad because daddy had to go to work', 'I can see you're feeling very cross'.
- Separate feelings from behaviour. For example, you might say, 'I know you feel cross but you must not hit. When you feel cross you can tell me'. Your child will not understand all of this at first but it is very important learning.
- Read stories that show children with different kinds of feelings—angry, happy, sad, afraid etc.
- Begin to 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.
- Most toddlers have tantrums—this is a normal part of growing up and becoming independent.

Be smart with toilet training

The thing to avoid at this age is a battle of wills.

Toddlers are not usually very good at changes and like the things they are used to. This can mean that they don't want to try new foods. It usually works best if you present the new foods that you want them to eat, with foods they are familiar with, but don't force them to try the new food. They will come to try new things in time.

Toilet training needs to be relaxed and as hassle-free as parents can make it. Toddlers can easily get upset and have toilet accidents or hang on and not go when they really need to, for example, if there is tension or they are busy with something.

Keep toilet training positive with lots of 'Well done', 'You did that so well', 'It's okay, sometimes accidents happen'. This way your child will want to cooperate and toilet training will not be difficult. If there are problems, leave toilet training for a while and try again later.

Help with fears

The world can seem very fearful to children of this age, because there are lots of things they don't understand yet, such as:

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

Things to try for fears

- **Fears about cuts and bruises.** Put a band aid on sores and hurts even if you don't see the need for it. Try a kiss on the injury first—sometimes that's all that is necessary.
- **Fears about going down the hole.** Let your child bathe in a baby bath for a while, or at least don't pull out the plug while he is still in the bath. Let him use a potty instead of the toilet or let him flush the toilet himself with your supervision.
- **Fears about nightmares.** If he has a nightmare tell him that 'It is only a dream, it goes away, and you're safe'. Cuddle and comfort him until he settles.
- **Fears of monsters.** Tell him that there are no monsters. Don't look for monsters in the room, because he may think that you believe there are some there to look for.
- **Fears of separation.** Stay with him until he feels more secure. Let your child have his comforter or dummy when he needs it. They help children to deal with fears. Children usually need to keep them until they are three or four years old.
- **Fears of the dark.** Stay with your child to reassure him. Perhaps use a night light. Let him sleep in the same room as a brother, sister or parent. Keep to bedtime routines, for example, the same number of kisses goodnight or the same story.

Let your child know that you understand he has fears, and you don't think he's silly or babyish.

Special note: It is never useful to force children to face their fears and can often make things worse. They usually grow out of them, with lots of support and understanding. If fears are really interfering with your child's life talk it over with a professional who works with children.

Keeping toddlers safe

Toddlers need to have a safe environment. They are too young to know how to behave safely. Telling them and teaching them about danger does not keep them safe. Keeping your toddler safe is your responsibility.

Keep a first aid kit in the house and car. Keep emergency phone numbers in easy reach and where everyone (including babysitters) knows where to look. Do a first aid course for children if you can. Discuss safety with grandparents and other carers.

Burns and scalds

- Never drink hot drinks such as tea and coffee while carrying or nursing your toddler.
- Keep hot things well back from the edge of tables. Turn saucepan handles away from the edge of the stove. Use a stove guard.
- Use placemats instead of tablecloths.
- Have short or curly electric cords that don't hang over the side of benches.
- Be careful of hot irons and cords dangling when ironing.
- Remember that many toddlers can light matches and lighters, and unscrew the globes of the Christmas tree lights.
- To help prevent scalding from hot water, make sure that the hot water for your bath, shower and basin comes out at 50 degrees centigrade or less. You can attach a tap protector directly to the tap, or your plumber can install a device which automatically mixes cold water with the hot, to limit the delivery temperature. The water heater itself should maintain stored water at 60 degrees centigrade minimum.
- Run cold water into the bath first.
- If a child has a burn or scald, cool the burnt area under running cold water for at least 20 minutes. Never use ice to cool the skin. If the burn is bigger than about a 20 cent piece, see a doctor.
- Use fireguards for open fires, pot belly stoves and radiators.
- Have a fire extinguisher or fire blanket in the kitchen.

Car safety

- Babies, toddlers and children must have properly fitted and approved child restraints or child safety seats. Use a child restraint, suitable for the child's age, size and weight, on every trip.
- Always stop the car when you need to turn around to attend to your child in the back seat. It is so easy to get distracted and have an accident.
- Make sure that there is nothing on the dashboard (even a box of tissues can do a lot of harm in an accident).

- Never put anything heavy in the back of a hatchback or station wagon unless it secured strongly.
- Never leave children and babies alone in cars.
 - children get bored and can explore the car's knobs and buttons which can lead to dangers
 - children can become distressed or may try to struggle free from their seatbelts and become injured
 - children may be in danger of someone trying to steal the car with them in it
 - children can become seriously ill when temperatures in cars change quickly in summer and winter.

Choking and suffocating

- Check that there are no small objects or coins left lying around. Watch for small batteries from things like cameras.
- Don't give your child hard pieces of food such as nuts, apple or raw carrot to chew. Give cooked or grated vegetables.
- Toddlers should sit down when eating.
- Don't force your child to eat anything he does not want.
- Tie empty plastic bags with a knot in the middle so that they cannot be put over your child's head.
- Cords or ribbons on toys, dummies and clothing should be short (less than 10cm) so they can't choke your child.
- Cords on curtains and blinds need to be short or out of reach.
- Replace dummies before they are worn.
- Some old or antique cots and high chairs are not safe for young children.

Water safety

Most children who drown are under four years old. Drowning happens very quickly and quietly. Young children can drown in only a few centimetres of water.

Teaching your toddler to swim will not prevent drowning.

- Stay with your child whenever he is near or in water, such as the bath, paddle pools, buckets or at the beach, creeks, rivers, swimming pools and dams.
- Keep a lid on nappy buckets and keep them out of reach.
- Water can collect in all sorts of things after rain. Empty them!
- Make sure that the paddle pool is emptied after every use.
- All other pools should be fenced, with a self-locking gate, self-closing gate. There should be nothing near the fence that a toddler could use to climb on.

Electrocution

Use an earth leakage circuit breaker in your fuse box or switchboard. It will switch the power off if there is an electrical fault and so prevent injury. It needs to be installed by an electrician.

- Buy covers for powerpoints to stop toddlers poking things into them.
- Don't use electric blankets for young children.
- Be careful of electrical appliances near water—it is easy to get electrocuted.
- Put all electrical appliances away after use.
- Use only wall-mounted heaters in bathrooms and install them up high.

Falls

Falls are the major cause of toddler injury.

- Pad sharp corners of furniture or round them off.
- Make sure furniture, such as television sets, cannot fall over.
- Use barrier gates or lock doors to stop your child going into dangerous places, such as stairs.
- Don't have bunk beds when there are toddlers in the house.
- Use the harness in the high chair and pusher.
- Don't leave young children alone on change tables, high chairs, playground equipment etc.
- Teach your toddler how to climb down as she is learning to climb up.

Farm safety

There are many safety issues for children on farms with dams, machinery, chemicals, workshops and sheds with equipment, animals and vehicles.

Passive smoking

It's easy to protect your children from passive smoking—make your home and car smoke-free.

- Avoid smoking around children.
- Chemicals in cigarettes and tobacco smoke can affect children's health.
- Children are more likely to smoke if they see you smoking.

Poisoning

Toddlers explore everywhere they can reach and still put things into their mouths. They cannot understand poison signs.

- Keep kitchen and laundry detergents out of reach, best in a locked cupboard. Dishwasher powder is particularly dangerous.
- Use a child resistant medicine cupboard for all medicines (including oral contraceptives).
- Check that visitors, including grandparents, don't leave bags with tablets in them in your child's reach. Also, don't put any medicines in your bedside drawers.
- Lock garden products away.
- Keep poisons in their original, labelled containers.
- Never put poisons into food or drink containers.
- Put locks on shed doors and keep shut.
- Write the Poisons Information number (131 126) next to your telephone.

Sun

- Whenever possible keep children in the shade. Teach them to play in the shade.
- Make sure that their favourite play areas are shaded.
- Children can get sunburnt even on cold, cloudy summer days.
- Sunlight through the glass of car windows can burn the skin.
- In the sun use a hat and clothing that covers arms and legs, such as cover-up bathers.
- Sunscreen can be used in small amounts on young children on areas that are not covered by clothing. Some sunscreens irritate the eyes and sensitive skin. It needs to be re-applied often. Zinc cream is an effective sun block.

Toys and play

- Check toys and play equipment regularly for sharp edges, splinters and loose parts.
- The surface under climbing frames and swings should be soft and impact absorbing.
- Toys for young children should not have small, loose parts that can be broken off and swallowed. Keep older children's toys with small pieces (marbles, building sets etc) away from toddlers.
- Baby walkers often cause injuries and should not be used.

Keeping toddlers safe *(continued)*

Traffic safety

- Make fences and gates toddler-proof.
- Toddlers need to be held when they are near roads. They may begin to remember rules about crossing roads but they are unable to understand them, no matter how many times they are told.
- When you are moving the car at home it is safest to have your child in the car, so she cannot be run over.

Shopping

- Never leave babies and young children alone in the car while you shop.
- Supermarket shopping carts can tip up, especially if a toddler pulls on them or jumps around in them.
- Don't let young children wander in the aisles while you shop.

Reminders

- The most common cause of problems with toddlers is adults expecting them to do things they are not yet able to do.
- Your toddler needs to test out her independence against you—but know you are there for comfort.
- It is a struggle for your toddler in learning to be independent—he needs encouragement and your patience.
- Try to avoid having battles—give simple choices to your toddler.
- Focus on the things about your toddler that please you and tell her often!
- Ignore things that don't matter too much and be firm on the important things, such as health and safety.

Contacts

Child and Family Centres (parenting information and support)	9am–5pm Monday–Friday: Gungahlin	6207 0120
	9am–5pm Monday–Friday: Tuggeranong	6207 8228
	9am–5pm Monday–Friday: West Belconnen	6205 2904
Maternal and Child Health	8am–5pm Monday–Friday	6207 9977
KidSafe ACT (child safety information)	8am–3pm Monday–Friday	6290 2244
Parentline ACT	9am–9pm Monday–Friday, except public hols	6287 3833
Poisons Information Centre	24-hour	131 126

Websites

www.cyh.com	Parenting and child health information
www.parentlink.act.gov.au	Other parenting guides, including Discipline, Learning to talk, Milestones, Tantrums, Toilet training
www.raisingchildren.net.au	Raising Children Network—covering topics for parenting newborns to teens
www.zerotothree.com	Information on healthy development of babies and young children

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