



# Parenting a Toddler

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## Introduction

Somehow it has happened. Your tiny, little baby has grown into a toddler who can run, jump and express her opinion. This handbook will help guide you through the toddler phase, which runs from 18 months to three years. During this time, children become more independent. They master new skills and are eager to use them. They're curious about the world and their place in it. This is a fun and, at times, challenging phase as your child asserts herself as her own person.



## 1. Developmental Milestones

Every toddler is different but most do similar things by certain ages. Talk with your pediatrician if you're concerned that your child is very late in reaching a milestone. The following milestone charts can help you gauge your toddler's development.

| At 18 months, my toddler:                    | Yes or No |
|--|-----------|
| Plays pretend, such as feeding a doll        |           |
| Has temper tantrums                          |           |
| Says several single words                    |           |
| Follows a simple command, such as "sit down" |           |
| Walks alone                                  |           |
| Drinks with a cup                            |           |
| Eats with a spoon                            |           |

| At two years, my toddler:                        | Yes or No |
|--|-----------|
| Becomes defiant at times                         |           |
| Knows names of familiar people and body parts    |           |
| Says sentences of two to four words              |           |
| Plays make-believe games                         |           |
| Stacks two to four blocks                        |           |
| Completes sentences or rhymes in picture books   |           |
| Kicks a ball                                     |           |
| Is beginning to run                              |           |
| Climbs onto and down from furniture without help |           |
| Walks up and down stairs holding on              |           |
| Throws a ball overhand                           |           |
| Makes or copies straight lines and circles       |           |



| At three years, my toddler:  | Yes or No |
|--|-----------|
| Shows affection and concern for friends without prompting                  |           |
| Takes turns in games   |           |
| Understands the idea of "mine" and "his" or "hers"                         |           |
| Dresses and undresses herself  |           |
| Follows instructions with two or three steps                               |           |
| Understands words like "in," "on" and "under"                              |           |
| Says his first name, age and sex   |           |
| Says words like "I," "me," "we," "you" and some plurals (cars, dogs, cats) |           |
| Talks well enough for strangers to understand her most of the time         |           |
| Carries on a conversation using two to three sentences                     |           |
| Works toys with buttons, levers and moving parts                           |           |
| Plays make-believe with dolls, animals and people                          |           |
| Does puzzles with three or four pieces                                     |           |
| Turns book pages one at a time   |           |
| Builds towers of more than six blocks                                      |           |
| Screws and unscrews jar lids or turns door handles                         |           |
| Pedals a tricycle  |           |
| Walks up and down stairs, one foot on each step                            |           |



## 2. Parenting Your Toddler

At times you'll marvel at the new skills your toddler is learning. Other times you'll wonder if he is trying to set a record for using the word "no" the most times in a single day. This stage of development can be both thrilling and exasperating. Toddlers like to do things themselves but may not yet have the ability to succeed—or to cope with the frustration of failing. Be prepared for tantrums. Try to stay positive and calm in every interaction with your toddler. Keep things light and enjoy the excitement of living life fresh again through the eyes of your little one.

### Positive parenting tips

Help your child learn by reading, playing, exploring and talking together.

- Set aside time each day to talk and play.
- Read books together.
- Point to pictures in books and ask her to name the objects. Do the same with body parts and objects around you.
- Finish words that your toddler starts. For example, when he says, "baba," say "Yes, that's your bottle."
- Play matching games like shape sorting and simple puzzles.
- Encourage your child's growing independence by letting him help with dressing himself and feeding himself.
- Create predictable routines so she will know what to expect each day. For example, follow the same steps for bedtime (bath, brush teeth, read book, lights out).

### Introducing healthy habits

Start your toddler on a lifetime of healthy habits by setting a foundation of nutritious eating, physical activity and limited screen time.

- Give him water and plain milk instead of sugary drinks.
- Let her choose from a selection of healthy foods. Children this age tend to become picky eaters. They're not growing as fast as when they were babies and don't need as much food. Keep trying new foods; it might take time for your toddler to learn to like them.
- Limit screen time. Don't offer any screen time if your child is younger than two.
- Encourage his natural tendency to run, kick, climb and jump.

## Positive discipline

The word “discipline” comes from the Latin word for learning. As a parent, you are your child’s most important teacher. Your influence and guidance will help her learn how to get along in the world.

- Focus on controlling yourself rather than your toddler.
- Try to keep your sense of humor. A little bit of silliness can stop an oncoming tantrum in its tracks. It can also lower your own rising blood pressure.
- Don't ask questions that require a yes or no answer because chances are he will say “no.” Instead, offer a choice: “Would you like to wear the blue shirt or the red one?”
- Redirect her attention when you sense a tantrum coming on.
- If he refuses to do something that needs to be done—such as get in the car for day care or help you clean up his toys, try humor, songs, silliness and games. “The tickle monster is coming to tickle you into the car seat.” Or, “let’s see if we can get all of these toys put away before we get to the end of this song.”
- Save your “no’s” for the important things so your toddler doesn’t learn to ignore them. Instead of saying “no,” redirect her behavior.

## Follow through with consequences

Some consequences happen naturally (If you throw your book in a puddle, it will be ruined and you won’t have the book anymore). Others are the result of rules: Dad says if you hit your friend, playtime is over. And still other consequences are positive rewards for good behavior: Mom says “thank you” when you bring the plate to the sink after dinner. Here are some ways to use discipline and consequences:

- Make sure the consequence follows the behavior. Toddlers have short attention spans and need immediate consequences to make the connection with the behavior.
- Make sure negative consequences relate to the behavior. If he isn’t playing nicely at the playground, the consequence will be to leave.
- Follow through with both positive and negative consequences every time. Consistency and predictability will help her learn rules and encourage good behavior.
- Reward the behavior you want rather than call attention to the behavior you don’t want. Say, “I love it when you walk so nicely beside me.” Or, “Thank you for helping me to put away your toys without me asking.”
- Always explain a consequence to your toddler by pointing out the behavior that led to it: “Good job, putting your toys away! Now we have time to play a game!” or “We had to leave the playground because you threw rocks after I asked you to stop. Someone might get hurt if you throw rocks.”
- Be consistent by responding to your child’s behavior in the same way every time. He will learn the rules faster if your expectations are consistent.

## Using timeouts

Sometimes the best way to help a child regain self-control is to take him away from the situation that caused the upset. Timeouts allow you both to cool down.

- Designate a safe timeout spot away from toys and distractions.
- Give her a warning that if the misbehavior continues, there will be a timeout.
- If the behavior continues, calmly explain the reason for the timeout.
- Keep your child in timeout for one minute per year his age. For example, a three-year-old would spend three minutes in timeout.
- If she tries to leave timeout, calmly put her back as many times as necessary.
- Do not allow anyone to interact with him during the timeout.
- After timeout is over, be sure to catch and praise the next positive thing your child does. This reinforces that good behavior results in positive attention.

### 3. Keeping Your Toddler Safe

Because your child is moving around more, he will come across more dangers as well. Dangerous situations can happen quickly, so keep a close eye on him. Here are a few tips to help keep your growing toddler safe:

#### Around water

- Empty bathtubs and buckets immediately after using. A child can drown in less than two inches of water.
- Keep bathroom doors closed.
- Fence off backyard pools and use a self-latching gate.
- Do not leave your toddler unattended near any type of water, including lakes, oceans, bathtubs or buckets. Drowning is the leading cause of injury and death among this age group.

#### In your home

- Place plug covers on all unused electrical outlets.
- Block off stairs with a small gate or fence.
- Lock doors to dangerous places such as the garage or basement.
- Keep kitchen appliances, irons and heaters out of reach.
- Turn pot handles toward the back of the stove.
- Keep sharp objects such as scissors, knives and pens in a safe place.
- Lock up medicines, household cleaners and poisons.
- Store any guns in a locked cabinet out of your child's reach.
- Encourage her to sit when eating and to chew food thoroughly to prevent choking.
- Check toys often for loose or broken parts.
- Encourage him not to put pencils or crayons in his mouth when coloring or drawing.
- Do not hold hot drinks while she is sitting on your lap. Sudden movements can cause a spill and burn your child.

#### In the car

- Do not leave your toddler alone in a vehicle, even for a few moments.
- Make sure that he sits in the back seat and is buckled up properly in a car seat with a harness. The middle of the back seat is the safest place in the vehicle.
- Keep your child in a rear-facing car seat until she reaches the top height or weight limit allowed by the car seat's manufacturer. It's the best way to keep her safe, according to the [National Highway Traffic Safety Administration](#). Once your child outgrows the rear-facing car seat, she is ready to travel in a forward-facing car seat with a harness.

## Toy safety

When purchasing toys for children, it is important to choose ones that are safe and age appropriate. The U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission (CPSC) offers the following guidelines for buying, maintaining and storing toys.

### *When buying toys*

- Choose toys with care. Keep in mind your child's age, interests and skill level. Avoid toys with small parts he could choke on. Avoid toys with long strings or cords, which may become wrapped around his neck, causing strangulation.
- Look for quality design and construction.
- Throw away plastic wrappings.
- Read labels. Look for and heed age recommendations. Look for other safety labels including: "Flame retardant/flame resistant" on fabric products and "Washable/hygienic materials" on stuffed toys and dolls.

### *When maintaining toys*

- Check all toys periodically for breakage and potential hazards. A damaged or dangerous toy should be thrown away or repaired immediately.
- Use sand paper on wooden toys that have developed splinters or sharp edges.
- Examine all outdoor toys regularly for rust or weak parts that could become hazardous.

### *When storing toys*

- Never hang toys with long strings, cords, loops or ribbons in cribs or playpens where children can become entangled. Remove crib gyms from the crib when your child can pull up on hands and knees; some children have strangled when they fell across crib gyms stretched across the crib.
- Teach children to put their toys safely away on shelves or in a toy chest after playing to prevent trips and falls.
- Use a toy chest that has a lid that will stay open in any position and will not fall unexpectedly on a child. For extra safety, be sure there are ventilation holes for fresh air.
- See that toys used outdoors are stored after play—rain or dew can rust or damage a variety of toys and toy parts creating hazards.



## 4. Potty Training

There is no magic moment when every child is ready to toss away the diapers and use the toilet. Some toddlers show an interest in using the potty or toilet as early as age two. Others aren't physically or emotionally ready until they're closer to three.

### Signs your toddler is ready for the potty

The checklist below will help you determine whether your child is ready for the potty.

|  |   |
|--|---|
| <b>Start potty training if your toddler:</b>   | ✓ |
| Can follow basic directions                    |   |
| Is interested in the potty or toilet           |   |
| Tells you when it's time to change the diaper  |   |
| Stays dry for two or more hours during the day |   |

The timing should be right when starting potty training. It's not a good idea to introduce the potty or toilet during a stressful time, such as the birth of a sibling, moving to a new home or starting daycare.

### Tips for potty training

If your child is ready to transition out of diapers, try the following:

- Take scheduled potty breaks. Stay with your toddler while she sits on the potty. Spend this time reading a children's book about potty training.
- Learn to read the signals and help your toddler recognize them, too. If your toddler looks like he needs to use the potty, get him there quickly.
- Dress your child in clothes that can be removed quickly when it's time to use the potty.
- Try using incentives, such as a sticker chart or a trip to the park.
- Praise all attempts, even the unsuccessful ones.
- Let your child pick out underwear and celebrate this transition to big kid pants.

Potty training can last three to six months, and it may take longer for your child to stay dry at night. Patience and consistency are key.

## Resources

American Academy of Pediatrics

[www.aap.org](http://www.aap.org)

KidsHealth

<https://kidshealth.org/>

U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission

[www.cpsc.gov](http://www.cpsc.gov)

Zero to Three

<http://zerotothree.org>

**MILITARY**  
**ON  SOURCE**