The Two-Year-Old

Personality Changes

Two-year-olds are wonderful, exciting, busy and very demanding. They’ve come a long way in two years and there’s much more growing ahead!

Developing Independence

Toddlerhood is a time to gain some independence or freedom from mothers, fathers and other adults. Your toddler may show independence by making choices and by learning to help himself. For example, he can decide to wear his blue or his red shirt. He can dress himself with just a little help from an adult. When allowed to make choices, children feel worthwhile and successful. They enjoy trying new things because they feel capable.

Have you heard your toddler shout “Me do it!” and you know there isn’t the slightest chance she can ‘do it’? She has a healthy sense of independence! Try saying, “Let’s go do it together!” or “How about some teamwork?” rather than “You can’t do that, you’re too little.” Keep in mind that it’s important for her to feel powerful and successful.

Sometimes it’s difficult to know when to stay out of your toddler’s way and when to step in and help. Since he’s so thrilled with his accomplishments, (Look at me!), try to let him do as much as possible on his own. If he becomes frustrated, be sure to offer help. Frustration often leads to temper tantrums.

You are the best judge of what your toddler can and can not do. Watch to see what frustrates your child. If he gets hysterical because he can’t unwrap the straw that goes with his juice box, get it started for him. Sometimes, toys can become overwhelming; try to redirect your toddler to another activity. This won’t work every time, so be ready to remove your child from the situation. When you do, allow him to calm down. Then try putting his feelings into words. You might say, “It really makes you angry when those pieces of your puzzle won’t fit together.” You might also give him a choice, “Would you like me to help you or would you like to play with your blocks instead?” Remove toys which always frustrate your child, try them again in a few months.

Guidance

Your toddler is growing and changing rapidly and as she grows, your expectations for her change; you want her to learn table manners, to learn to use the bathroom and to learn that she can’t always do what she wants to do. For now, you want your child to obey you. Yet, before long, you’ll want her to
do what’s right even when you’re not around. You want your child to gain responsibility or self-control. Parents and caregivers can help children develop responsibilities.

Try to:

- Tell your toddler what you do want her to do rather than what you don’t want her to do. Say, “Hang your coat on the hook”. Instead of, “Don’t throw your coat on the floor.”
- Get your toddlers attention before you speak. For example, turn off the TV, kneel down to your child’s level, look directly at him, gently hold him and wait until he looks at you.
- Use action as well as words. For example, you might point to the toys that you want her to pick up.
- Use short sentences, speak slowly and give one instruction at a time. Young children have short memories. They can remember only one instruction at a time. Say, “Put your doll in her crib” then “Wash your hands” then “Sit at the table” rather than “Put the doll away, wash up and sit at the table.”
- When you request something, give a reason. This will help your child understand what you’re asking. He’ll remember the reason the next time, when you’ve told him many times. For example, “Hang your coat on the hook, you may trip over it if you leave in on the floor.”
- Give choices whenever possible. For example, say “Judy is still riding the trike, so you’ll have to wait until she is finished. You could play with the wagon or climb on the jungle gym. Which would you like to do?”
- Reinforce or reward your child when she does what you ask. Use statements that show children you approve of their actions. Say, “Thank you, Hannah, for putting the toys in the toy box” or “Good for you, you came to lunch when I asked!”
- Never hit, slap or spank a child. It may stop a behavior for the moment, but you aren’t helping your child to develop self control or responsibility. What are you teaching him? You’re teaching that it is “OK” to hit others when you are angry and want you own way. Most adults don’t want children to learn this lesson.

Older toddlers can sense when they’re about to be disciplined. They will try to avoid the situation. When you ask, “Why did you pick those flowers?” your toddler may reply, “I made a tunnel in my room.” Don’t worry, you aren’t going crazy, and she’s not going deaf. This is the way many young children deal with being ‘put on the spot’. When you think about it, it works pretty well. Toddlers are sensitive to the reactions of others, and they embarrass easily. They may tell others, “Don’t look” or “Don’t laugh.”

It takes children a long time to learn to read or do math problems; it also takes them a very long time to learn the rules of their family and society.
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Changes in Thinking

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Mental Pictures

Your child’s developing physical skills are easy to see; a parent never forgets when his or her toddler stands and takes those first wobbly steps. While not as easy to see as new physical skills, many changes in thinking are taking place as well.

Next time you’re playing with your toddler try this: hide a toy under a pillow or blanket. Does she search for it, or does she seem to forget about it? If she is less than 18 months old, she may seem not to care. Her toy is truly ‘out of sight, out of mind’. She doesn’t keep a picture of her toy in her mind so, when it’s out of sight it no longer exists for her. If your child is over 18 months, she may pull on the blanket to look for her toy. She’s learning that people, places and objects exist even if she can’t see them.

A toddler can think about playing with his favorite toy without having it in sight. He doesn’t have to see his mother ‘in person’ to recognize her voice on the phone. He’s gleefully happy when riding in the car on the way to his grandmother’s house. He can imagine being there because he has a mental picture or image of his grandmother and her house.

The toddler can use her new thinking abilities to solve problems more easily; she doesn’t always need to depend on trial and error. When given a tennis ball and two cans of different sizes, she can tell which can the ball will fit into. Rather than trying to put the ball into each can, she can picture the size of the ball in relation to the size of the can.

By the age of two years, your child may begin to use symbols to stand for objects, people and events. In his two-year-old mind, a doll may represent a real baby. He can put the doll in a stroller and take his ‘baby’ for a walk.

Learning

The toddler-aged child learns by experimenting, she looks at, tastes, smells and feels everything she can. Sometimes, she can transfer information she’s learned in one situation to another. For example, your child may remember that her boat floats in the bathtub, so it may float in the mud puddle too.
The toddler also learns by imitating people around him. He may enjoy sweeping with a broom, putting paper in the trash or folding clothes. He’s pretending that he’s Mom, Dad or another adult.

You can help toddlers develop thinking abilities by giving them new objects to play with. A toddler will enjoy playing with many household items, anything from dress-up clothes to pie dough. Dough has a wonderful taste, smell and feel. Also, it can be pushed and pulled and pounded! In addition to sparking a toddler’s imagination, dress-up clothes have special smells and be fascinating to touch.

**Words, Words, Words!**

Your toddler has probably begun to realize that words are useful and fun. Also, they stand for objects, people and places. She may now use language to get information, think aloud, tell a story and get what she wants.

The toddler’s receptive speech, or the words she understands, is much greater than her productive speech, or the words she uses when speaking. Toddlers may understand and use between 200 and 800 words, most of these words are names of people, places and objects. She also uses ‘action’ words such as “go bye-bye.” She’s able to put together complex sentences by connecting simple ones (“All gone”, “Me bye-bye”) with ‘and, or and but’.

To increase their language abilities, toddlers need to hear adults speak to them in many different ways. For example, you can:

- Give information: explain what is going on or what you are doing. “See the puppy, she’s chasing her ball”, or “I’m going to squeeze some detergent into the sink, add water and wash the dishes”.
- Give reasons: connect what you do with why you are doing it. “I’m going to lock the car door so no one will fall out”.
- Give descriptions: explain relationships and events. “See the baby? You were that little once, but now you’re bigger.” “See how much smaller your toy mouse is than your teddy bear”.
- Praise you child. Praise helps your child to feel good about herself and helps language development. “You picked up your shoes, good job!”
- Ask questions. Help your toddler join in conversation. Ask him questions such as, “Are you feeling sad?” “Do you want to find something to do together?” “Can you tell me what color my shoes are?”

Language development is a continuous process. Taking time to read short, simple stories and to talk and listen to your child will enhance development.