

The Latest from Toddlerland

by Tovah P. Klein, PhD



Author, How Toddlers Thrive (2015)

Director, Barnard College Center for Toddler Development

TODDLER YEARS (Up through age 5) are a time of Rapid Growth and Development. What does a TODDLER need now to ensure s/he develops well in life?

Before age 5 is a unique time. It is an opportunity to lay a healthy base for children to thrive. Learning to handle emotions, feeling loved and being exposed to learning opportunities in the first 5 years are the key to learning and succeeding later. WHY?

In the first 5 years:

- Greatest brain development occurs from birth to age 5.
- The brain is shaped by the experiences your child has, especially in their relationships with parents, grandparents & other caring adults.
- Children learn to how to relate to other people, build trust that they are good people and others will take care of them, gain confidence that they can do things on their own, and learn to handle their emotions (even hard ones!).
- All of this provides a base for how they relate, behave and learn as they grow up.

Provide children with positive experiences:

- 1) Loving, caring relationships are more important than anything else.
- 2) Use kind language when speaking to your child; calm, gentle tones. Firm and clear (but never harsh) if setting a limit, "No throwing food." Avoid yelling. Yelling upsets children and makes it harder for them to learn and to trust adults will care for them.
- 3) Recognize emotions- happy, sad, angry, frustrated. Label emotions, "That made you so mad!" "I get frustrated sometimes, too." "I can see how sad you are, you miss mommy."
- 4) Stick to a daily schedule (as much as you can) for eating, sleeping, playtime, naptime and other daily activities.
- 5) Young children need SLEEP. Regular bedtime. Regular bedtime routine.
- 6) Understand that being a toddler is hard. Be aware of your own reactions to their challenging behaviors. If you are getting overly upset, take a break in another room.
- 7) YOU are your child's role model. Learning to be a kind, loving person comes from how your child is treated by you.
- 8) Learning comes through play and everyday activities & interactions: grocery store ("Let's look for a green vegetable."); laundry (matching sock pairs; helping to fold; counting how many shirts are in the pile).

- 9) Book Reading matters. It is cuddle time and gives your child a love of learning. Sit with them. Talk about what you see in the pictures and connect it to other things in their life, "I see a dog here. Remember when we saw that dog at the park?"
- 10) ROUTINES matter a lot. Have routines for eating, sleeping, getting dressed, out the door & anything else you have to do everyday.

Be Present. Without Phones & Other Distractions. Toddlers thrive with attention, so put your tech devices away and give them your attention. Young children can feel if we're distracted and our minds are elsewhere even when we're physically in the room.

Set aside 'mommy/daddy & child time.' You may be busy. But this can be 15-20 minutes together after everyone arrives home from work and school. It can be meal time together; bath time; story time—any or all of the above. When you set aside time to spend together, your child will feel it. They feel valued. She will feel your presence even when you're sitting back on the couch watching her play on her own. When he looks up and shares a smile with you, or shows a lego he put together, your child has the comforting feeling of, "I just like knowing you are here." It builds security inside your developing child.

Play Outside whenever you can. Young children need to move. A LOT. Kicking or throwing a ball; climbing & running at the playground. Movement helps children settle down, get to know their bodies and to focus. Children who do not get exercise are more distracted at school & have more trouble listening, focusing and following directions.

Explore the great outdoors together for even 20 or 30 minutes of play in the local park or playground. This is a great (and healthy) way to reconnect with your toddler at the end of the day or on the weekend. Try bubble blowing together, or playing a game of catch. Sidewalk chalk is fun, too.

OUTDOOR SPRING ACTIVITY: Noticing buds and flowers. An activity to do together- observation, language, colors, size, shape.

Find a place in the park. Or this can be done on a walk.

Look around & notice the buds- on trees, on flower stalks. Talk about the new buds. See what your child notices.

Colors: If flowers have bloomed, label colors. Ask your child what colors s/he sees. Play 'I spy' as in '*I spy a blue flower*' and let them find it.

Matching: identify a flower and then see if together you can find another like it; or one similar, but a different color. This helps with observation skills, and there does not have to be a right or wrong answer. When your child finds a similar one, you can ask "*how are they the same?*" (you may be surprised at what your toddler considers the same- it may be different from what you are thinking).

Look for big flowers and little flowers. Look for trees with many buds or a few buds (this is fun and includes math words- big/little; many/few)

If you return to the same spot regularly: Pick a tree that has no buds or has just started. Each time you visit, note the changes. Ask what your child notices, too. You can do this through all the seasons, as the buds → become leaves → change colors → fall off the tree. This is the life cycle of the tree.

Fall: collect leaves, sort by color, by shape, by size and so on.

Take a stroll to look for letters, shapes and numbers. After work, after dinner or on the weekend is a nice time for a family walk together. Being together is calming for a child.

Look for shapes. “We can find circles.” Or “Is there a shape you want to find?” Signs be round. Manhole covers are round. There are many shapes on store signs, windows, or on the ground. Look around.

Listen to what your child has to say and ask what they see on the walk. Notice the changes going on- leaves changing colors, or buds on trees and new flowers in the spring. **Observing & noticing what is around them are important learning skills.**

Cook together. We all have to eat and little ones love to help cook. They can help in a variety of ways:

Setting the table in a child friendly way. Setting involves patterns- 1 napkin at each place. 1 fork on each napkin. 1 plate. 1 cup. Patterns are a skill needed before your child learns to read.

Helping makes children feel they are part of an adult activity.

Help prepare meals: Children can wash vegetables at the sink or help grate cheese. Cracking eggs and stirring ingredients in a mixing bowl are fun jobs that even the youngest children can help with. Children feel proud to help in this adult activity. Feeling good helps them gain confidence as in, “I can do it!” Confidence is essential for learning.

Play games together. Playing a game is a fun way to connect with your child. And they learn all kinds of skills with even the simplest game.

DECK OF CARDS: A deck of cards has many possible games. You can play a formal game like Go Fish. Or take the cards and match them into piles by number, by suit, or by color.

Matching: Take a card with a heart on it, “Let’s find another card with a heart” “

Sorting by number. Have your child pick a card. Ask them what number it is (or say it for them). “You have a 2. Can you find another card with a 2?” See how many piles you can make together. Count the piles. A great way to practice numbers while having fun.

Board Games like Candy Land are good for young children. There are colors, turn taking and counting spaces.

Blocks. Blocks, lego or other building toys are a good activity to do with your child. Let them decide what to build while you follow their direction. These are good for spatial skills, balance and being creative. All skills necessary for school and learning.

Rules: If you are playing a game and your child cannot follow the rules- no need to worry. The fun for your child is in being with you and enjoying your time together.

Laundry & other chores. We all have to get chores done. Your child can help sweep or clean up the toys. Laundry can be fun and a great time to learn!

Sorting clothes. This can be done by color, “Put all your blue shirts here. How many do you have?” or simply, “What color is this shirt?” If your child does not know colors yet, you can name them, “This is Daddy’s yellow stripe shirt.”

Socks. Match up pairs of socks. Children love to do this. They are helping you (which makes them feel good) and matching is an important learning skill.

SLEEP MATTERS!

Bedtime Routines: Children need their sleep. Young children who do not get enough sleep have more trouble learning and behaving. A bedtime routine helps them move from day time to settling into nighttime. It helps them calm down for a restful sleep. Tips for bedtime sleep:

- Keep routines short and simple. They should take no more than an hour (at most, if you are including the bath), and thirty minutes is even better. Longer routines get children stirred up as they have extra time to anticipate the inevitable separation.
- Avoid TV or electronics close to bedtime. Screens- TV, computer, pads, smartphones tend to wake children up and make them more wired. Avoid these devices close to bedtime for at least an hour before you want them to wind down.
- Let your toddler have simple choices. “Would you like to read Curious George first or Goodnight Moon?” These simple questions give a child some control, but a limited amount of it. And it keeps you moving forward toward bed. Children like to have a little choice, it feels powerful. You can ask, “Do you want to wear your long pj’s or your short ones?”
- Sing or listen to a lullaby—either can be soothing. Some parents like to add prayers or a quiet review of the day. Reviewing the day is a quiet way to connect to what your child did, and it helps their memory by going over what they did earlier.
- Create a cozy corner in their room for sleep once your child is out of a crib in a bed. Make sure the bed is against a wall, ideally in a corner, and feels like a comforting place. Winding down at night feels best when they feel cozy.

For More Toddler and Parenting Information:

Tovah Klein, Ph.D.

Barnard College Toddler Center

Facebook: how toddlers thrive (LIKE it to follow for more tips)

Twitter: @tovahklein

Web: howtoddlersthive.com (sign up for e-newsletter for more parenting tips)