

# GUIDING TODDLERS

## Questions and answers about autonomy and self-control

**Y**oung children work hard to learn to live in a mysterious world that bombards them with new people, words, ideas, rules, and experiences. Toddlers particularly strive for the self-control that follows a sense of independence and autonomy. They test the people and things in their environments, experience consequences, and eventually learn the benefits of positive social interactions, self-trust, and good judgment.

### Who are toddlers?

Most simply, a toddler is a mobile baby. Combining characteristics of both infants and older, larger learners, toddlers demand and require unique and specialized interactions with adults and well-planned environments that support continued development.

Like infants, toddlers rely on adults to interpret their communication, which includes crying, body language, and simple speech. Their budding locomotion skills require support—people and objects—for balance, coordination, and agility. And they are beginning to recognize that other people are in their world—each with unique needs, interests, and wills—and need direction in negotiating this new social awareness.

A toddler's behavior is erratic. Sometimes it's clingy and demanding, sometimes adventuresome, independent, and social. Both sides of the seesaw present challenges to programs and teachers who are likely to assume a higher level of skill and maturity than the toddlers actually have.

Toddlers are not prepreschoolers—simply smaller and less competent than their older peers. Instead

they are "...increasingly mobile, autonomous, social, verbal, thoughtful creatures with constant urges to test and experiment" (Greenman and Stonehouse 1996). On any day, each characteristic may bloom or be frustratingly lacking.

There is no magic age or date for skill acquisition. All children develop, but developmental milestones are always unique to individual children. As a result, successful educators regard toddlerhood as a stage of development with its own particular characteristics, strengths, and goals.

### A TODDLER'S BEHAVIOR IS ERRATIC.

A teacher's realistic expectations of toddler behaviors can make the difference between either endless frustration for children and adults or a learning environment that gently and securely offers opportunities for growth and skill development. A collection of common daily dilemmas characterize toddler classrooms. These dilemmas include separation from parents, mealtimes, group and individual safety, naps, toilet learning, tantrums, and power struggles. These dilemmas form a framework for understanding a toddler's fundamental need for trust, autonomy, and competence.

### What is autonomy?

Toddlerhood is the time when children begin to move from total dependence on adults to independence and



its related sense of competence. Toddlers, typically at 12 months of age, build on the basic trust established in infancy and start a lifelong journey learning about independence, limits, and self-discipline, the essentials of successful social living.

Erikson (1963) frames this period as *autonomy versus shame and doubt*. Autonomy is a persistent, and often insistent, push toward independence.

Autonomy is built on trust. Its result is competence, the ability to make productive, positive decisions.

Elkind (1994) suggests that a willful, defiant 2-year-old (practiced in the powerful “No”) is engaged in building a healthy identity, one separate from parents and other significant adults. “I do it” is evidence of a toddler seeking, and sometimes struggling to find, that unique identity. Without this struggle and the adults who set limits, children would be unable to learn and regulate their own behaviors.

Discipline is teaching, not punishment. Consistent, effective limit-setting is a critical task for teachers and caregivers—as is the need for respectful support. Experienced teachers know that a safe environment prepared for rich exploration is an effective guidance tool. Children who are engaged with materials appropriate to their age and developmental levels build skills and learn self-discipline.

Greenman and Stonehouse offer ideas on what creates discipline problems with toddlers including:

- inappropriate expectations for self-discipline,
- too little or too much open space,
- too few or too many materials,
- materials that are too challenging or too simple,

- too little order and predictability, and
- too much time waiting, watching, or listening instead of doing.

This list highlights the unique individual needs of toddlers and the challenges teachers face in creating and maintaining supportive learning and playing environments.

## How do environments support independence and self-discipline?

The best spaces for toddlers support learning and caring. They allow safe explorations of materials, stimulate each of the developmental domains (cognitive, physical, social, emotional, and language) and acknowledge individual temperaments and learning styles.

Evaluate the environment you provide for toddlers by considering the following questions:

**Acoustics:** Is the room free of constant background noise like a radio, children’s songs playing on tape, or an air conditioner buzz? Are voices in balance, so that adult voices are no louder than children’s? Is there a quiet retreat for children? Are there sound-absorbing materials like rugs, a tile ceiling, pillows, and soft furniture?

**Flexibility:** Is the environment adaptable to a toddler’s new skills and interests? Are there back-up materials that might stimulate new interests? Are materials and learning activities planned to encourage independence and curiosity? Are there enough duplicate materials so that children aren’t required to share or wait? Do materials support discovery and



self-help skills? Are there sensory materials in every area of the classroom? Do teachers follow children's cues with planning and preparing activities? Are activity transitions announced in advance to allow toddlers to finish play and put away materials?

**Accessibility:** Are materials stored on low, open shelves so children can make their own choices? Does storage encourage and facilitate cleanup? Is furniture (tables, chairs, and nap mats) toddler sized? Are sinks, running water, and toilets accessible so toddlers can practice self-regulation activities

independently? Do outdoor areas invite investigation and discovery in all developmental domains?

**Room arrangement:** Are there clear walkways to avoid tripping? Is there low, well-secured furniture that toddlers can pull up on? Are there noisy, quiet, large- and small-group areas? Is there adult-sized furniture for teacher comfort? Can teachers supervise all areas of the classroom, even private areas, visually?

**Safety:** Are outlets covered and electrical cords out of traffic areas? Are safety rules maintained consistently? Are there safe outlets for a toddler's climbing, balancing, and running impulses? Are materials cleaned and sanitized regularly to prevent disease? Are areas free of tempting dangers or harmful objects?

**Order:** Is the environment stable with consistent play areas? Do toddlers know what to expect in the day's schedule? Are transitions planned to keep children from waiting? Are all areas organized, orderly, and free of clutter?

### Don'ts for inappropriate toddler behavior

Sometimes knowing what not to do is helpful for adults striving to help toddlers. It's clear that some adult responses can not only undermine a child's autonomy and sense of self-control but also violate the law. Some examples:

- Hurting or humiliating a child.
- Shaking, jerking, pinching, or otherwise physically indicating disapproval, frustration, or rage.
- Using bribes and threats to force a behavior.
- Denying food or access to routine activities like outside time or a field trip as punishment.
- Retaliating (copying the child's behavior to teach a lesson) by biting back or encouraging another child to hit back.
- Making children say they are sorry. These words do little to teach a new, more responsible behavior. They minimize a child's true feelings and encourage magical thinking: "If I say I'm sorry, I can just do it again." Indeed, some toddlers may say the magic words *before* hitting, biting, or grabbing.

### How do I guide social interactions?

T. Berry Brazelton (1992) describes three stages of toddler self-discipline: 1) they test limits, 2) they tease out information about what is acceptable and not, and 3) they internalize the limits of a behavior. Positive guidance techniques give children self-regulating information. Teachers respond quickly and consistently to testing, state clearly what is acceptable, and encourage toddlers to adjust behaviors to be socially acceptable.

For example, Zach and Taylor are playing near each other with different pieces of a train set.

# THERE IS NO MAGIC AGE OR DATE FOR SKILL ACQUISITION.

Taylor's need for a diaper change forces an interruption in the play. When she returns, Zach has taken her train cars. As a younger toddler she would have moved toward Zach, grabbed the train, and maybe screeched for good measure. With guidance, a good teacher model, and developing language skills, she is able to tell Zach that she wants to play train: "This one for you, this one for me."

Guidelines for positive guidance make safety the first consideration. Always separate children who are hurting each other, themselves, or materials. Additionally,

- Use "No" sparingly. Reserve the word for immediate dangers. Using *no*, *don't*, and *stop* too often dilutes their impact and makes children less likely to respond in a real emergency.
- Tell children what to do, instead of what not to do. Saying "Don't wipe your nose with your hand" doesn't tell a child what a tissue is, where it is kept, how germs are shared, or why hand-washing is important.
- Redirect children to suitable activities. If Jenny is trying to peel paint off the table, offer her an acceptable way to use fine motor skills, like working a puzzle or separating Duplo® bricks.
- Rely on your tone of voice and facial expressions to communicate. Sometimes words aren't necessary, but it's always important that your face, voice, and words match. If you giggle while telling Dolly not to paint the wall, you're sending a mixed message and Dolly will likely test your limit again.
- Begin to give logical consequences to inappropriate behaviors. When Henry pours water on the

floor instead of in the sink, give him a rag for mopping up the mess. Henry won't do as good a job as you might, but he will begin to understand what is acceptable in water play. A sit in a time-out chair doesn't help him associate water on the floor with safety or with the need to make a different choice the next time he's at the sink.

- Give toddlers choices. Begin the life lesson in decision making by offering toddlers simple, limited, and authentic choices. An authentic choice is real. Don't ask "Would you like to put on sunscreen?" if every child gets slathered before going outdoors. It's not a real choice and sets up a power struggle if the toddler says "No." Don't ask for a decision



# GRANT IN FANTASY WHAT YOU CAN'T GRANT IN REALITY.

unless you are prepared for any answer.

Instead, offer choices—this or that—when both options are equally acceptable to you. For example, “Do you want to play with the doctor puzzle or the snap blocks while you wait for your mom?” In this case, you’ve offered two equally acceptable choices, each with merit, and each of interest to the child. Being able to choose gives the toddler a sense of control that will likely reduce the need to gain control in negative ways.

Similarly, avoid offering so many choices that the child is overwhelmed. Remember, you are the

adult! Offer two or three options and honor the child’s choice. If there is no choice (because of a health or safety risk, for example) don’t offer one. Throwing blocks is not a choice: A child can choose to play with blocks without throwing them or may choose to play in a different area of the classroom.

- Let toddlers feel independent, say “No,” and do things for themselves. Even occasional failed activities (choosing a puzzle with too many pieces, for example) is worth the emotional boost toddlers feel when adults respect their decisions.

## Practice appropriate responses

### Toddlers

### I respond by

Imitate adults

Like to feed themselves

Are eager to please

Say “No”

Are possessive

Use all their senses

Climb

Learn by doing



- Pick your battles. Try to respond proportionally to a toddler's behaviors. Biting requires an immediate and strong response. By contrast, a strong response to behavior that is irritating (spilled milk, for example) but not dangerous is a waste of time and confuses children who are just beginning to understand the differences between deliberate (pouring sand on the floor) and accidental (dropping the funnel full of sand) behaviors.

## DISCIPLINE IS TEACHING, NOT PUNISHMENT.

- Anticipate problems and prevent them. Avoid having delicate, easily destroyed or damaged materials in a toddler classroom. Make sure you have duplicates of favorite toys and materials. For example, use small cups and pitchers for serving milk and help children learn how to hold the tools to prevent spills as they learn to pour. Messes happen. Respond quietly and firmly and have clean-up materials accessible so children can learn to take care of themselves.
- Recognize and acknowledge children's feelings, even anger. Name the feeling and offer comfort. Few children choose to perform badly. Offer support, direction, and compassion to toddlers who are discovering and trying to control new emotions.
- Grant in fantasy what you can't grant in reality. "I really understand that you'd like to taste the grass, but grass isn't food for people. Let's talk about

what you think grass tastes like. Which animals eat grass? What else is green that you like to eat?"

## What are other ways to support autonomy?

Build on what we know about toddler development. Use the chart on Page 20 as a self-study tool. Identify appropriate teacher and caregiver responses to each of the typical toddler behaviors. If you're stumped, talk to a more experienced teacher or turn to any of the references listed.

## References

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