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Toddlers: One to Three

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Toddlerhood is an era of independence and exploration. During this time self-esteem is starting to develop, learning right from wrong is beginning, and depending more on one's self and less on parents is present.

Physical Development

Most toddlers can walk and love the mobility. Unfortunately, this new found freedom is frequently met by accidents. Unintentional injuries are the number one cause of death during this age. Consider the following:

- 20-25% of all children get an injury severe enough that they require medical attention, must miss day care, and/or be on bed rest
- More than 7,000 infants and toddlers are injured when their high chair turns over
- An estimated 12,000 children drown and 5,000 are hospitalized because of near drownings
- Motor vehicle accidents claim the lives of over 500 children

Motor Development At about two, young children can run and jump; follow such directives as touch your head, shoulders, knees or toes; and grip and hold such object as spoons and forks to feed themselves. Around two-and-a-half to three, they can put and take off clothes, write, and draw.

Potty Training Toddlers start to recognize the signs indicated by the muscles involved in bladder and bowel elimination by about 2 1/2. Before this time, they have very little control over these muscles. Successful potty training occurs toward the end of the second year with 60% being trained.

It increases even more during the third year. By age four, only 2% are not trained. It is important for parents and caregivers to know that children control their bowels and bladder when they are ready.

Language Development

Even though young children coo and babble, they usually do not start using "real words" until about 12 months. The first words are typically names such as mama, dada; common objects like ball, cat, dog; or actions such as hi and bye.

Between 12 and 18 months, children add about three words to their vocabulary per month. When they turn about two, a vocabulary explosion happens. Toddlers will begin to use simple 2-3 word sentences. Frequently, they can count, recite the alphabet, name body parts, colors, and shapes.

Cognitive Development:

Reasoning and Problem Solving

Young children are curious and love to experiment with the environment. They learn through trial and error and by watching and imitating others.

In the photo shown, the toddler is creating learning experiences as she experiments with her spaghetti. Even though this will be a clean-up job for the caregiver. It is an important learning process for the child. Eventually she will understand that food should only go in the mouth.



Toddlers have the tendency to overuse words, ideas, and concepts so they will fit into a category they already know. For example, a 2-year-old may call an orange and apple or a cat a dog.

In the case of the fruit, the toddler understands that both are edible foods with similar shapes. With the cat and dog example, the child understands that both objects are furry and have four legs. Eventually, their thought process changes and room is made for “new” items.

Social and Emotional Development: Feelings and Interaction

By the end of the first year, children have the ability to show that they are angry. Unlike infants who do not understand that objects continue to exist if they are out of sight. Toddlers are quite aware that people and things continue to exist, thus a child may search or yearn for a person or thing. A child may become angry if he or she does not receive the thing he or she is desiring.

Anger is typically displayed by loud angry crying, stomping, and throwing themselves down. This happens because as an infant advances to a toddler, they have a greater ability to express anger; are unable to understand such concepts as sharing; and are seeking to become their own person.

Between a year-and-a-half and two years, children understand that emotions can be connected with what one wants and does not want. They also are beginning to learn to express such emotions as pride, embarrassment, or guilt.

A child lowering his or head or hiding his or her face when he or she is caught breaking a rule or acting inappropriately is an example.



A toddler may also say “ooohh” or “uh oh” if he or she has done something inappropriate.

Toddlers can be very egocentric. Egocentrism is the belief that one’s own perspective is shared by others. Ask any parent or caretaker if the words “no” and “mine” are used frequently and you’ll get a resounding “yes!” It can appear that a child is “selfish.” In reality, this happens because of their limited ability to take another’s perspective and the desire to be independent.

Quick Facts

- Keeping young children safe is very important.
- Most accidents and health problems can be prevented.
- First words are typically spoken around 12 months.
- By 3, most children are potty trained. Before this time they have little, if any, control over bodily functions.
- Positive interactions with caring adults help development.
- Play is very important. It helps physical, cognitive, social, and emotional development.
- Favorite blankets, stuffed animals, and toys are frequently used to help reduce stress and anxiety.

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