

Supporting Families: What Everyone Needs to Know about Toddler Development

Marie Masterson, Ph.D.

Essential resources to build competence and positive behavior are found in:

- Enjoying the Parenting Roller Coaster: Nurturing and Empowering Your Children Through the Ups and Downs (Gryphon House)
- Let's Talk Toddlers: A Practical Guide to High Quality Teaching (Redleaf Press)

Adults overestimate how well toddlers can behave, yet underestimate their need for cognitive and language stimulation. Consistent nurture, exercise, nutrition, limited media, adequate rest and sleep, rich language interactions, and appropriately stimulating play support positive behaviors.

Consistency is the key to skill-building and security.

- When food always is given at the table, that's where toddlers go to eat.
- When prompted to say please – toddlers learn manners.
- When adults responds calmly, toddlers learn to be calm.
- When toddlers are nurtured, they become nurturers.

Exercise and active movement through indoor and outdoor play is essential.

- Toddlers need to move constantly, but adults expect them to be still.
- They need 15 minutes of vigorous activity every hours or 3 hours a day.
- They are body driven, but don't recognize thirst until urgent. Offer often, "Drink?"

Toddlers need the following, but only 1 in 3 children get enough exercise (HHS 2017).

- Seventy minutes of running, jumping, playing ball and other vigorous exercise daily increases ability to learn and regulate (Hillman 2014).
- Fifteen minutes per hour or 3 hours per day of exercise for children under age 6 (Pate & O'Neill 2012).

Nutrition impact brain and body development and behavior.

- Sugar, artificial colors, preservatives, and artificial additives impact behavior.
- Children will choose from healthy foods when modeled and available.
- Behavior and development are impacted by poor nutrition.

TV and media have a negative impact on behavior and learning.

- Lowers executive function (Nathanson et al. 2014).
- Increases bullying behaviors (DeVooght 2015).
- Lowers language skills (Chonchaiya and Pruksananonda 2008).
- Interferes with language development (LaPierre 2011).
- Media viewing for toddlers is related to lower attention function at age seven (American College of Pediatricians 2016).

The following are essential guidelines for media use:

- For children under age two, no screen time, including TV, video and DVD viewing or computer.
- For children over two years old, only thirty minutes total of screen time *per week* in child care.
- Computer use in increments of no more than fifteen minutes with adult interaction/support.
- No screen time during meals or snacks. This is relationship-building talking time.

Sleep is necessary for health. Get some sleep yourself – and ensure your child has adequate sleep preparation (e.g., bath time, reading time, tucking in routines, snuggling time with you). Hours needed:

- Newborns – 16 to 18 hours a day.
- Preschool-aged children – 11 to 14 hours a day
- School-age children – At least 10 hours a day.

Stress and mental health impact the emotional lives of children.

- Sixty percent of adults do not realize infants are impacted by arguing or stress of the adults.
- Only 34% know a child can sense when parents are angry or sad and can be affected by these moods (Zero to Three 2009).
- Fifty nine percent do not know infants can experience sadness and fear by 6 months (Zero to Three 2016).
- More than 1 in 5 parents think children can control their emotions, such as not having a tantrum when frustrated by 1 years of age (2016) by 2 years (2009).
- Forty three percent think children can share and take turns before the age of two, when this skill does not develop until between 3 and 4.
- Fifty six percent believe children have ability to resist desire to do something forbidden before the age of three, yet most children cannot do this until almost 4.
- Children’s ability to manage emotions and regulate behavior continue to develop from age three through the preschool years (Moilanen et al. 2010).

Language rich interactions are essential building blocks for development.

- Vocabulary at the **age of three** predicts reading at third grade and future academic success (Head Zauche et al. 2016).
- Language nutrition, early language exposure that is *rich in both quantity and quality* is necessary through talking, interacting, and reading (Weldon 2014).
- Child-centered conversation boosts cognitive processing skills and vocabulary (Suskind et al. 2013). Tune in. Take turns. Talk more.
- Language is needed for self-talk (how behavior and emotions are managed), and the ability of a young child to ask for the help he/she needs.

Children cannot change the world to meet their needs. It is up to adults to know them well, to connect and listen, to watch and understand how the things they say and do impact children’s responses. When toddlers become adults, they will care for themselves in the ways we have treated them – with healthy gentleness and patient responsiveness or with impatience and unhealthy choices. The goal is to provide experiences that build security, competence, and healthy perceptions of the self. We must meet their basic need for health, safety, and security – and empower them with skills and competence for life.