

# Living with toddlers



**Between one and three years of age children move from being babies who need you to do everything for them, to becoming individual, independent people. They want your love and to feel safe and close to you, while also wanting the freedom to make choices and do things for themselves.**

**It can be challenging for parents as toddlers struggle with their feelings and behaviour. It can help to know what's happening for them so you can support their independence, help them learn and keep them safe.**

## Toddlers are:

- active and curious – they have to touch, open and shut, explore, run, climb and throw
- learning who they are – what they like and don't like, and trying out their will
- learning to be in charge of themselves – to walk, talk, feed and dress themselves and use the toilet
- learning to live with others – how to show love, share and take turns, and not hurt others.

## Toddlers are not able to:

- understand your reasons or see things from your point of view – try to see things through their eyes
- sit still, wait, share or control their feelings – these things take time and support to learn
- always stop themselves from doing what they have been told not to. They don't mean to disobey you. They are on the way to learning self-control but haven't quite got there yet. They still need you to gently remind them and keep them safe.

## Toddlers are likely to:

- say 'No' and show they have a mind of their own
- get cross and frustrated, and have a tantrum at times
- not be ready to share because they are just learning about 'me and mine'. For a toddler, everything is 'mine'
- want to make some choices for themselves
- find it hard to cope with changes
- want to be like their parents, eg try on lipsticks and use parents' phones and keys.

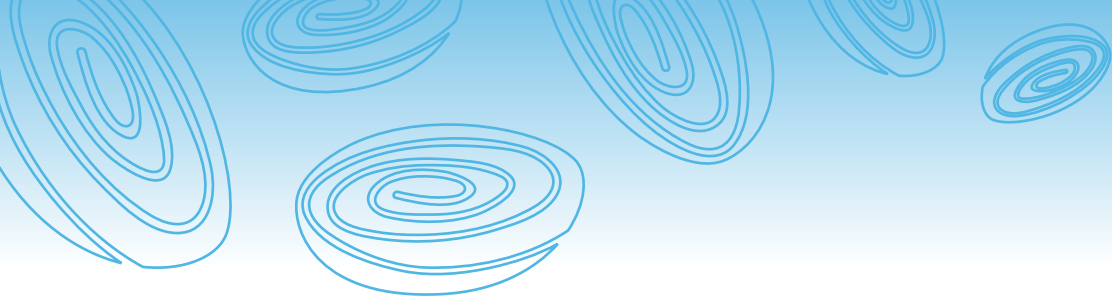
## Toddlers need:

- understanding, love, patience and encouragement
- time to explore
- to be allowed to make simple choices
- to test out their independence and come to you for comfort and closeness
- to hear lots of language and have stories told or read to them every day
- your help to start learning to manage big feelings and behaviour
- to be kept safe – they don't yet understand danger.

## Things that can stress toddlers:

Toddlers like routine, eg sleep and meal times. It helps them feel safe and secure. Things that stress them can be:

- the arrival of a new baby
- being sick
- moving house or into a new bed
- being separated from parents, eg starting childcare, a parent going into hospital or the family breaking up
- parents being angry, fighting or crying, or when there is violence.



Toddlers don't usually have the words to say how they feel. Sometimes they show stress in how they behave, such as being more defiant, quieter than usual or having aches and pains. It is important to look for and learn your child's cues.

Children have a deep need for closeness and connection with parents, so it can help to spend more time with them. Let them be more of a baby for a while. Difficult behaviours will go as they become more used to the change.

**Try to think ahead and do things to 'smooth the way' for your toddler. It's best to avoid frustration and battles.**

## What parents can do

Toddlers need your help to learn. Praise and encouragement work best because they want to please you. Punishment or forcing them to 'behave' or 'be good' doesn't help them learn and practise the behaviours you want.

- Have routines so your toddler knows what to expect, eg a bath, story and bed; or breakfast, clean teeth then get dressed.
- Don't get into battles over things that take time and lots of practice to learn, eg toilet training, eating and developing good sleep habits.
- Ignore things that don't matter too much such as a mess, but insist on important things like wearing a seatbelt.
- Make up fun games where they can practise saying 'No', eg 'Does Daddy sleep in the bath?', 'Does the cat say moo?'
- Talk about what's happening and give lots of warning of what's next, eg we need to pick up Billy from school so you'll have to pack up the blocks in a little while.
- Don't give a choice if there isn't one. If you have to go to the shops don't ask your toddler if they want to come, say 'We're going to the shops now'.
- Give simple choices, eg 'Do you want to wear your blue shirt or red shirt today?'

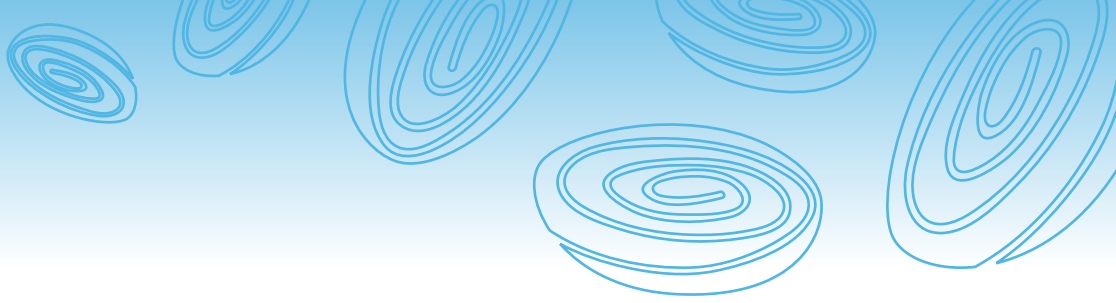
- Give an alternative instead of giving orders, eg 'Let's get out the building blocks' rather than 'Stop doing that'. Model what you want them to do.
- If there is something they don't want to do, try to make a game of it. You could say 'See if you can hop like a kangaroo to the bath', or make having a bath more attractive. Bubbles, toys or a few drops of food colouring in the water can be fun.

**Toddlers learn things in small, simple steps and they need lots of practice. Don't expect them to remember every time.**

- Be positive and offer alternatives rather than saying 'don't' all the time. Instead of 'Don't slam the door' you could say 'I know you can shut the door quietly, let's see you do it'. Then give praise for using a new skill.
- Tell them what you want in simple words. Instead of 'I'm not going to listen if you whine – it's very annoying' you could say 'Please tell me what you want without whining'.
- Don't ask your toddler why they did something because they don't yet understand reasons.
- Help them understand feelings by naming them, eg 'I see you're frustrated you can't get your shoe on. Would you like me to help?'
- If they get very upset or have a 'tantrum', remember this is normal. They need your help to calm down. Take them away from the trouble and stay with them for a while. This is a 'Time in' approach. Once they are calm you can help them understand what is expected.
- Toddlers are too young to reflect on their own behaviour or work things out for themselves. Therefore removing toddlers from a situation and leaving them on their own (as in 'Time out') is not likely to achieve what parents expect. It can add to their fear of separation.
- Don't threaten to leave young children alone as this is very frightening for them. If you are out shopping and your child gets upset and refuses to come with you – pick them up and carry them. Be firm but kind as you let them know you're in charge.

**Punishment can teach children to be scared of you rather than to do what you expect.**





## Communication

The way you talk with your child has a big impact on your relationship. The way you listen is as important as what you say.

- Be aware of your tone of voice – young children are easily frightened.
- Give your child time to talk, if they are able to, without interrupting. Get down to their level and look at them – it shows you're really interested. If they don't have the words to tell you, try to work out what's happening as best you can.
- Share activities each day. Even putting away toys together is a good way to talk and be together.
- Take time to find out what things are special in your child's life today. Simple things like watching your child do something can make them feel special.

## Help children learn about feelings

- Be a good role model - managing your own emotions helps children learn to manage theirs.
- Name feelings so your toddler learns that they are something you can talk about and learn to manage. You could say, 'I think you're feeling sad because Daddy had to go to work'. Tell them you feel sad sometimes too.
- Separate feelings from behaviour. You might say 'I know you feel cross but it is not OK to hit. When you feel cross you can tell me'.
- Read stories that show children having different kinds of feelings, eg being angry, happy, sad, afraid.
- Help children understand the difference between their own feelings and other people's. It takes many years to learn this well but you can start when your child is very young.

## Help with tantrums

Most toddlers have tantrums – it is a normal part of development. A tantrum is a sign your child is overwhelmed by feelings and needs your help to calm down. Let them know you understand how they feel as they let out all those big feelings. Be calm and reassuring. The more you help your child to become calm, the better they will get at calming themselves.

.....  
**Be patient when toddlers have tantrums. It takes time to learn about feelings and to control behaviour.**  
.....

## Help with fears

The world can seem very scary for toddlers because there are lots of things they don't know yet. It is common for toddlers to be afraid of things like the dark, dogs, loud noises, imaginary monsters, or being alone. They don't understand that:

- you will come back soon – they don't understand time
- the monsters in their dreams or imagination won't get them – they don't understand what is real and what is not
- they can't fall down the plug hole in the bath or get flushed down the toilet – they don't understand size and space.

## Things to try for fears

Toddlers usually grow out of their fears, with gentle support and encouragement. Having a safe and warm person to go to when they feel scared, and familiar routines can help. Don't dismiss their fears or say they are being silly or babyish. Say something like, 'Lots of children are scared of dogs'. Be reassuring and show you understand and have confidence in them.

**Fear of separation** - stay with your child until they feel more secure. Make sure they have their 'comfort toy' with them. Don't just 'disappear' at drop offs. Let them know you are going and will be back later. They will learn to trust you will always return.

**Fear of the dark** - stay with your child for a while to reassure them. Perhaps use a night light. Keep to bedtime routines, eg the same number of kisses goodnight or the same story.





**Fear of nightmares** - tell them 'It's only a dream, it goes away, it's not real, and you are safe'. Cuddle and comfort your child until they settle.

**Fear of monsters** - reassure them that there are no monsters. If you look for monsters in the room they may think you believe they are there.

**Scared they may fall down the bath plug hole** - let your child use a baby bath for a while, or at least don't pull out the plug while they are still in the bath. If they are scared of the toilet, let them use a potty for a while, or let them flush the toilet with your help.

**Children usually grow out of fears with support and understanding. If fears are really interfering with their life, talk it over with a professional who works with children.**

## Help with eating and toilet training

Toddlers are learning about food and often want to control what they eat. It's up to parents to provide healthy food, and for toddlers to choose what and how much they eat.

Some toddlers can be fussy eaters. Try presenting new foods with foods they are familiar with, but don't force them. They will come to try new things in time.

Toilet training needs to be as relaxed as you can make it. Wait until you are sure they are ready. If there is pressure, toddlers can easily get upset and have toilet accidents, or hang on when they really need to go. Give lots of encouragement for each small step, eg 'Well done for pulling your pants down all by yourself'. Reassure them if there are accidents, eg 'It's OK, sometimes accidents happen'. If there are problems wait a month or so before trying again.

## Keeping toddlers safe

Toddlers are often injured in accidents that are preventable such as falls, traffic accidents, drowning, burns, poisoning or pet attacks. Teaching them about danger is important but it is not enough to keep them safe. They are too young to really understand, even if they can say something is dangerous.

**The best way to keep toddlers safe is to always supervise them. Make sure your home and yard are safe too.**

## Want more information?

### Emergencies

Phone 000 for ambulance, police or fire

### Police attendance

Phone 131 444 for non-urgent police attendance

### Poisons Information Line

Phone 13 11 26

### Parent Helpline

Phone 1300 364 100

For advice on child health and parenting

### Child and Family Health Service (CaFHS)

Phone 1300 733 606, 9am-4.30pm, Mon-Fri for an appointment. The child health nurses can talk with you about your child's development and behaviour [www.cafhs.sa.gov.au](http://www.cafhs.sa.gov.au)

### Kidsafe SA

Phone 8161 6318, 9.30am-4pm

Child safety information and resources

[www.kidsafe.org.au](http://www.kidsafe.org.au)

### Raising Children Network

For parenting information including raising toddlers [www.raisingchildren.net.au](http://www.raisingchildren.net.au)

### Parenting SA

For more Parent Easy Guides including 'Tantrums', 'Time in: guiding children's behaviour', 'Toilet training', 'Bedwetting', 'Learning to talk', 'Safety for young children', 'Sleep: 0-6 years', 'Milestones: 0-4 years', 'Feeding toddlers' and 'Positive approaches to guiding behaviour: 2-12 years' [www.parenting.sa.gov.au](http://www.parenting.sa.gov.au)



**Government of  
South Australia**

### Parenting SA

A partnership between the Department of Human Services and the Women's and Children's Health Network.

**Ph: 08 8303 1660**

**[www.parenting.sa.gov.au](http://www.parenting.sa.gov.au)**

Parent Easy Guides are free in South Australia.

Important: This information is not intended to replace advice from a qualified practitioner.

© Government of South Australia.  
Revised:10/2020.