

Totally Toddlers

by HOLLY BENNETT

An insider's guide
to two turbulent,
tender and terrific
years

Welcome to toddlerhood. In these two whirlwind years kicked off by the first birthday, your dependent little baby will become a competent young child. You won't see such a dramatic transformation — or such intense ups and downs — again until puberty. Parenting a toddler is a heart-melting, fun and funny experience...except when it's frustrating, exhausting and stressful.

In these pages, we chart some of the changes and challenges of toddler development — and what parents can do to help.

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Busy bodies

Walking is the milestone that divides baby and “toddler,” but there are many other physical advances challenging your child right now. One- and two-year-olds are very physical little people, learning through plenty of hands-on exploration (and sometimes demolition), and expressing emotion with the whole body.

CHANGES

Mobility Once your child is upright, the world becomes a much different place, with many new possibilities. When she is up and steady on her own two legs, watch for these next steps:

- walking while dragging or pushing a toy
- squatting to pick up an object
- climbing — not only stairs, but anything scaleable
- running
- jumping — off a low structure, then from standing
- kicking a ball

Janice MacAulay, executive director of the Canadian Association of Family Resource Programs in Ottawa, suggests there is something to learn from our response to a child's first steps: “We know we can't rush walking. We don't see falling on her bum as a ‘mistake’ or scold her when she falls.” We might do well to look at other developmental advances, such as toilet training or social skills, in the same light, MacAulay says.

Handy hands Your child's fine-motor skills will also increase over these two years, as he learns to pick up small bits of food, use a spoon and put together simple puzzles. The downside: He may also learn to undo your purse buckle or pry open a “childproof” medicine bottle — so vigilance is essential.

Drawing is a fascinating skill to watch develop. As your child's grip and his understanding become more refined, keep an eye out for:

- sensory exploration of materials like fingerpaint
- first scribbles — typically in rough circles
- first vertical lines
- drawings gradually become more “organized” and colour choice more deliberate (so the end result of a painting is less often a big muddy blob)
- around the third birthday, your child might add eyes to one of his circles and declare it a person

Chaos to construction Toddlers are passionately interested in how things go together — and they learn this by taking them apart. Your toddler will scatter her blocks or cars before she gets interested in stacking or lining them up; she will undress herself before she can manage dressing, and she will dump out everything in sight — laundry baskets, buckets of balls, wastebaskets — before she moves on to filling them up.



Knocking down Dad's block tower is not just great fun, it's a lesson in cause and effect.

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A toddler may use both hands to draw or paint. By age four, one hand is usually dominant.

“When Aidan was around 18 months, I had him in his high chair eating his oatmeal, while I was in the bathroom getting ready for work. He called out for me a few times in a happy voice, but I could tell nothing was wrong so I didn’t go in. Ten minutes later, I rounded the corner to discover he had been calling my name and flinging porridge in every direction! Every wall and piece of furniture in the room had porridge on it. I don’t think I got even a bit annoyed, it was so funny. And lesson learned; when Aidan calls I had better see what he’s up to!”

– Julia Sandusky, Toronto

CHALLENGES

Into everything Exploring is what toddlers do. They are sensory learners, curious about everything. Think of them as little scientists, asking themselves, “What is this? Can I climb it? What happens if I drop it or pull it apart? How does it smell? Does it rip or stretch or pour?”

Big ambitions, little bodies Boy, does a toddler’s reach exceed his grasp! Along with new abilities and awareness come a lot of new frustrations. The puzzle piece won’t go in, the cookies are out of reach, the wagon is too heavy to pull. Many toddler meltdowns are the cry of a small person unable to function the way that he wants to in a big world.

Meaghan Forster Raymond, executive director of the Digby and Area Early Intervention Program in Nova Scotia, points out another unwitting source of physical stress for the toddler: us! “If you watch an adult walking at a normal pace, holding a toddler’s hand, the toddler is running. We need to remember that their physical pace is slower. They can’t verbalize that they’re rushed, frayed and tired, so they have a breakdown.”

PARENT TIPS

- Encourage play that uses all of your child’s muscles: plenty of outdoor time and playthings like balls, ride-on toys, big cardboard boxes to crawl in and out of. “Mobility is new, so it’s important that children have lots of freedom to move,” says Jan Blaxall, a professor of early childhood education at Fanshawe College in London, Ont. “Make sure when you go outside or to the mall that they’re not always trapped inside a stroller, that they can walk and run around.”
- Childproof your home with your toddler’s growing abilities in mind. But don’t restrict your child to just playing with toys — toddlers need to explore real objects and do real “work.” Invite your toddler to carry a small bag of groceries for you, talk on the phone to Grandma or go for a ride in the laundry basket.
- There are many toys and activities that build fine-motor skills, but if they are too difficult, your child will quickly lose interest. Long before she’s ready to hold a pencil, she’ll be working on her grip by picking up bits of cereal or using a plastic knife with playdough. “They need lots of opportunity to do things with their own safe little tools,” summarizes Blaxall.

Mind matters

Some days it seems like your toddler is learning so fast that his brain must be in danger of bursting. You take him to the doctor for his cough and he cries and covers his arm, remembering a needle two months back. He goes, seemingly overnight, from “Can you point to the car?” to naming the backhoe and cement mixer. But it’s important to understand how immature he still is. Toddler memory is inconsistent, and self-control is shaky. Living in the here and now and lacking experience, he can’t predict the outcome of his actions or reason things out logically. Much of what looks like “misbehaviour” at this age is not wilful, but rather an inability to act like a three-year-old. “When our expectations are too high, it puts too much stress on everyone,” cautions Forster Raymond.

What toddlers don't get

In her ECE book *See How They Grow: Infants & Toddlers*, Sue Martin includes a long list of things toddlers are not ready to understand. Among them:

- untidiness
- what things cost
- why people have to go away
- why chores have to be done
- the need to visit the bathroom before leaving home
- the need to hurry
- deferring gratification

CHANGES

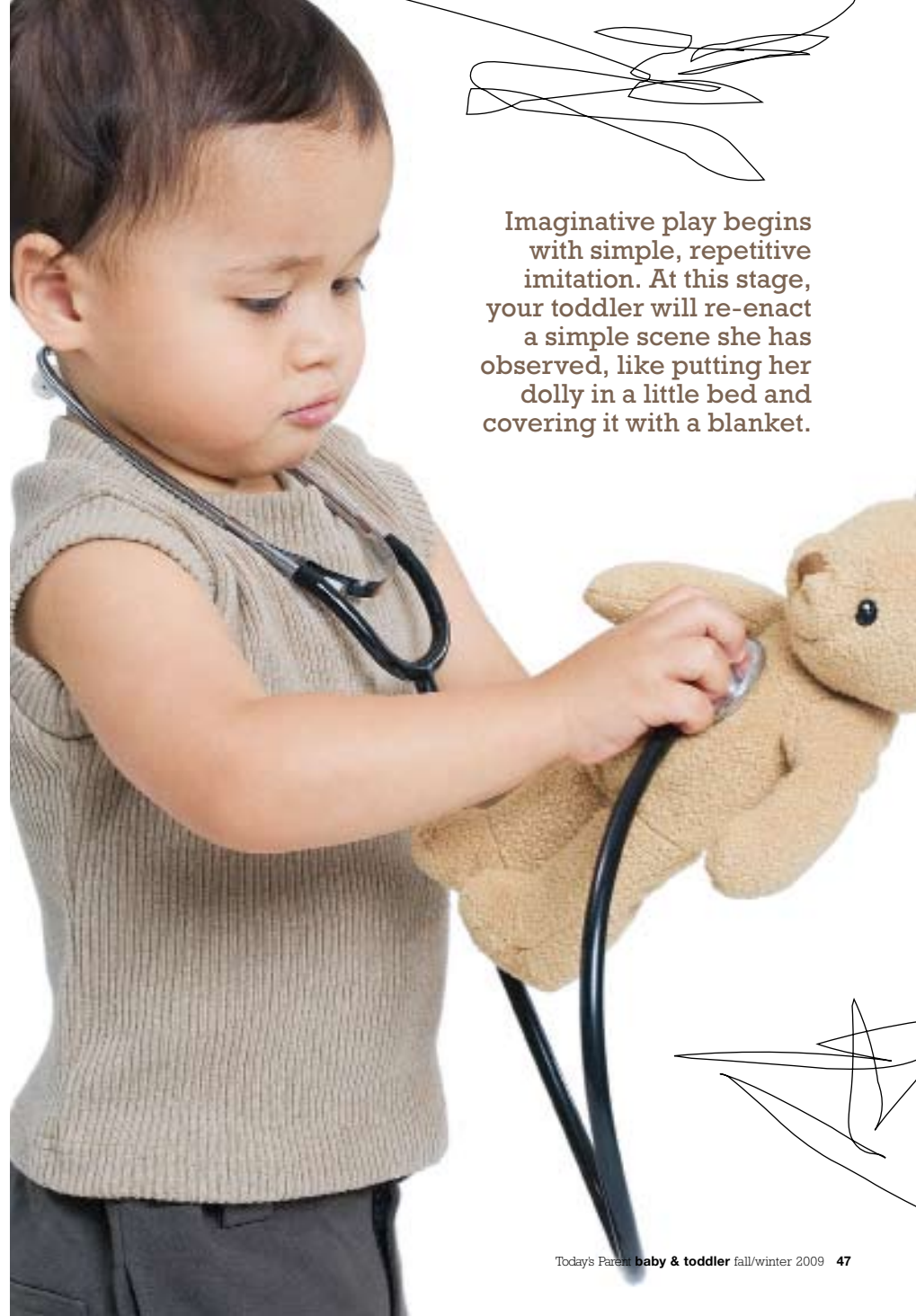
I am me. Your toddler is beginning to realize that he is an individual — separate from you, with his own tastes, desires, ideas, talents. It’s a heady — and worrisome — discovery, and he’ll be working through this idea all through this period. Who is in control of his body? What happens when his desire and yours clash? What does he own, and what does that mean? What happens to you when you go away?

Let’s pretend. The emergence of pretend play signals a host of budding abilities: trying on another identity, understanding the concept of make-believe, remembering or imagining a sequence of events. Imaginative play begins with simple, repetitive imitation. At this stage, your toddler will re-enact a simple scene she has observed, like putting her dolly in a little bed and covering it with a blanket.


Gradually, your toddler’s make-believe becomes richer: The baby cries and needs a cuddle and a diaper change before being put back to bed. But her pretend play will still focus on familiar experiences. Your toddler will pretend to cook dinner or wash the car, but cannot yet imagine how to be an astronaut or fairy. More fanciful pretending will emerge late in the third year.

Let’s talk. Is there a more exciting toddler accomplishment? Not only can your child now communicate more fully, but he can also think in more complex ways as language feeds both his cognitive and his social development.

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While most children say their first word around the first birthday (and understand many words well before that), every child has his own pace. Some add one word after another, then combine two together to form a simple sentence. Some rely heavily on gestures and expressive sounds, until one day it's like a dam breaks and the words start pouring out.

Language really takes off in the third year. Your child's vocabulary will expand dramatically and he'll begin to use the rules of grammar. Look for "mistakes" like "I goed to the zoo" or "more milks" that show your child understands how to make a past tense or plural. By his third birthday, you'll be able to have real, if simple, conversations together.

CHALLENGES

Language limitations Once toddlers start talking — and some talk very well indeed — adults tend to assume their understanding matches their vocabulary. But the truth is they are not as smart as they sound.

A toddler can solemnly tell you that a fire is hot and burns, but can't imagine or understand the pain of touching it. It seems crazy to think that a child who can recite most of a story about a triceratops would have trouble understanding a simple sentence like "Hurry up because we're late" but both hurrying and lateness are concepts beyond a toddler's grasp.

Power struggles Clashes between you and your child are inevitable in the toddler years, and many come from her need to establish herself as an individual person.

The happy baby you were so in tune with is now going to refuse or ignore your directions, make unreasonable demands and get furious at you. From her point of view, you have become equally unreasonable. As Blaxall explains, "For a year, parents have worked hard to meet their baby's needs. And now they have to start saying no, limiting their toddler's freedom. For the toddler, it's like 'You were wonderful, Mom, but now you're not giving me what I want! Why are you changing?'"

PARENT TIPS

- Toddlers are concrete thinkers, not ready for abstract learning. It's OK to teach your child to recite numbers, but he won't be able to understand what those numbers represent until he has had many opportunities to sort, stack and order real objects. Matching the red socks in the laundry pile is a great "math" activity for a toddler, and more meaningful than flash cards or DVDs.
- Your toddler will make many mistakes in her speech at first, but don't point them out (that's discouraging to a beginning talker). Just reply in a way that shows her you understand and, while you're at it, model the correct way to say it.
- This is the age to foster a love of books. Follow your toddler's lead — some love a long reading session; others lose interest after a few minutes. You'll see themes from favourite stories appear in your child's play — a sure sign that he's soaking them in.
- Understand where the famous "toddler negativity" comes from and, says Janice MacAulay, "don't take it personally — it's not about you; it's just what they have to do."

When toddlers are upset, they can't see that in 10 minutes they'll feel better. They are stuck in the now.



Young toddlers don't quite know what to do with each other, but they sure are interested!

Becoming social

Emotions are writ large for toddlers because they don't have the experience to understand or modify them. When toddlers are happy, the world is a beautiful place. When they are upset, they cannot see that in 10 minutes they'll feel better, and so their reactions often seem completely out of proportion to us. Learning about feelings — first her own, and later other people's — is just beginning in the toddler years.

The young toddler is fascinated by other children, but hampered in relating to them by her immaturity. "The one- to two-year-old is self-centred and can only understand things that she experiences," says Blaxall. But you will see huge progress in the third year. As her ability to communicate, imagine, regulate her behaviour and empathize with others increases, so will her social skills.



CHANGES

Learning about feelings A 12-month-old doesn't know what he feels, let alone why. He's just submerged in a big wave of feeling. Gradually, he learns to put words to his emotions: happy, angry, scared. He learns that it's OK to be unhappy and to say so, but not OK to say it by hurting others or breaking things. When your 2½-year-old stamps his foot and glares at you, declaring, "I'm mad and you're mean!" give yourself a mental high-five — he's come a long way!

It will be a long time yet before your child can really understand other people's feelings, but you'll see the all-important beginnings of empathy emerging now. When he brings a crying baby a blankie instead of yelling at her to be quiet, or kisses your pinched finger better, he is imitating what he's seen you do — but he is also thinking about what would make you feel better rather than what would make him feel better, and that's a giant leap.

Sharing play Young toddlers don't really play with each other; they tend to play beside each other. This side-by-side play is very enriching, says Forster Raymond: "Even very shy kids, who hang back and just watch in a playgroup, will learn a great deal from the other children." Watch a pair of young toddlers at a sand table and you'll probably see some imitation going on: "Oooh, look at that! You can bury a toy in this hole!"

It's often at the next stage that conflict arises. Now your child wants to interact with her friend, but their social skills are

so clumsy that tears and tugs-of-war are frequent. Pushing, grabbing, guarding toys — it's all part of the learning curve. "Sharing" and other social niceties are beyond children's ability at this stage.

Language helps enormously and so does understanding concepts like taking turns. Parallel play is still common right through the third year, but you'll also see the beginning of true co-operative play. At close to three, you might find your child and a best buddy building a big block wall, or giggling at each other's silly dress-up clothes. They're playing together.

CHALLENGES

Back to babyhood Toddlers are driven to independence. "I do it!" your son shrieks, turning away so you can't help with the zipper he can't possibly fasten. But all that trying comes at a price, and they need to be able to return to babyhood for reassurance, comfort, or just to recharge their confidence. Two steps forward and one step back is the natural rhythm of toddler development.

Problems arise if the adults in a child's life expect him to consistently perform at his best. "You don't need to be carried. You're a good walker," they say, or "Why are you crying now? You're fine staying with Grandma." But it doesn't work that way. Toddler independence ebbs and flows, in big cycles (18 months, for example, is a peak time for separation anxiety) and hour by hour (full of beans and racing around in the morning, but clinging and demanding after a nap).

“My best friend was a young struggling mom. One day her two-year-old daughter found her crying over how to pay the bills. She asked, ‘What’s wrong, Mommy?’ and my friend replied, ‘Oh, honey, sometimes Mommy just wishes she had more money,’ not thinking she would understand. But her daughter brought over her piggy bank: ‘Here, Mommy,’ she said, ‘you can use my money.’”

— Danica Marshall (via website)

Tantrums A toddler tantrum is an emotional short-circuit. Too much frustration, anxiety, boredom, overstimulation; add in a late nap or delayed lunch and it all becomes too much. Your toddler’s temperament will affect how often you have to deal with these emotional outbursts (some children are more sensitive to stressors or have less tolerance to frustration), but some are inevitable.

Once the tantrum is happening, it’s no use demanding that your child control herself — she can’t. Your calm, sympathetic but not overly worried presence will help her regain her composure and reassure her that you are there for her, even when things get ugly.

PARENT TIPS

- Plan playdates to minimize conflict. Put coveted toys out of sight, and have several of others — enough for each child to have one. If crafts or playdough are planned, set up a few little workspaces with individual materials. And expect to be close by, mediating and heading off trouble: Toddlers don’t have the ability to “work things out” by themselves.

- “Taking turns” is often easier for toddlers to understand and accept than “sharing.” Teach the concept by taking turns often with your child, by doing things like rolling a ball back and forth to each other (“Your turn. My turn!”) or taking turns stirring a cake batter.

- Help your child learn about feelings in a healthy way, starting with accepting hers. Give her simple words to describe how she is feeling. Talk about your own feelings too, so she can begin to see that everyone has their own emotions. As she gets a bit older, you can talk about how characters in her storybooks feel, or debrief (briefly) after a conflict with a friend. “You can say, ‘Look, Josh is crying. That really made him sad,’” says Forster Raymond. “Say it with love in your voice, not in an accusatory way.”

- Baby him when he needs it. There’s nothing to be gained by pushing toddlers to grow up faster. “Independence grows out of a secure dependence,” says MacAulay. “Toddlers naturally veer back toward infancy and forward toward becoming a big kid. We just need to go with that.” •

Extravagant affection is the endearing flip side of that toddler temper. When she’s not mad at you, she really, really loves you!



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