

Play and Your Toddler From Six Months to Three Years

The most important asset a toddler has is her curiosity. It will lead her into all kinds of learning experiences that are important to her growth and development. 'Play' is how a toddler learns, masters skills, and gathers up the many, many pieces of information she will need to grow up. She acquires language skills by exploring her world and building vocabulary from the interactions she has with other people and her environment.



As a parent, you provide the environment for this to happen. By encouraging your toddler to play, you are making an important contribution to the development of her abilities, intelligence and communication skills.

Toddlers Need Freedom and Safety

The best environment for a toddler is one that encourages him to explore and move about freely and safely. Child-proof your home to make it a safe place where it is not necessary to say "No" very often.

The Freedom to Play

Although there will be times when you 'organize' your child's play, most play should be spontaneous and unstructured by the parent. When toddlers have the freedom to do their own 'research' and the freedom to move at their own speed, they learn the most. Follow your toddler's lead. If she is acting whiny and bored, get her started on a different activity.

Parents are sometimes worried that their child doesn't play cooperatively with others.

Cooperative play, however, is something that comes with time. It happens on the child's own timetable. If you watch, you'll notice that a very young child will amuse herself - this is called solitary play. Months later you'll see that she's engaged in parallel play - still doing her own thing, but playing next to another child who is also doing his own thing. Finally, at about age two or so, she'll begin to play with others.

Toddlers Love to Move

Toddlers love to move their big muscles, rolling and crawling and finally, walking, running and jumping. Make sure your crawling baby has lots of safe spaces to explore. To make the space safe use baby-proof latches on doors; lock up pills, cleaning products and poisons; put gates across the top and bottom of stairs; put plants out of reach; pad sharp corners and edges of furniture; cover electrical outlets and make book shelves stable. Then you can set out toys and interesting objects for him to move towards and investigate.

Once he's up on his feet, give him a ride-on toy to push around. Get him outdoors for a walk/run as much as possible. Be familiar with all your local playgrounds and opportunities for physical play. Cardboard boxes are a big hit with young children - they make great playhouses or tunnels.

Toddlers Love to Travel

Around the block, to the garage, over to Grandma's, across the street, into the lumberyard, off to the beach - they are all adventures when you're young. These are marvelous learning opportunities! Go on expeditions, collecting souvenirs as you go - coupons from the grocery store, a stir stick from the paint shop, a bus transfer, a wildflower, a big shell, and so on. Older toddlers become collectors of 'treasures', so help them find a good container to collect their treasures in.

Toddlers Love to Pretend

One day you'll find her, proud as can be, tramping around the house in your shoes. The time has come to start the dress-up box. Collect old shoes, clothes, hats and handbags. Look out for flashy things like sequined blouses, shawls, satin fabrics, etc. Children also love dress-up clothes that reflect different jobs, like hard hats or bright yellow firefighter raincoats. They love clothes that fantasy characters would wear like capes or witches' hats.

Toddlers Love to Explore

This can mean a trip to the woods to crawl around in old stumps, turning over a big rock at the beach to watch the crabs skitter away (and carefully replacing the rock in exactly the same place) or a visit to the library to see where all the books are kept. He'll enjoy seeing where all the wood bugs live or picking his own blackberries. Take him to the garage when you have your tires rotated, or to the bakery to see bread baking. 'Exploring' can be done in many ways and your toddler will be eager for them all.

Toddlers Love Talk

During the first year of life babies don't say too much, but they are listening and this is when the foundation for language is laid. Talk to them about everything! When your child babbles or talks to you, help him by talking back.

Toddlers Love Water

Most toddlers love water! They love bubbles and bath toys that they can use to move water. Plastic containers of all sizes work well. Punch holes in the bottom of a plastic container, fill with water and make it rain! Remember though, that babies and small children can drown in just a few inches of water. *Never leave them alone in the bath or any water.*

Toddlers Love to Make Noise

As soon as they can sit up, give them old pots and wooden spoons, metal lids and things that clang! Horns that toot, peg benches to hammer on, tambourines and maracas to shake, are all great gifts for young children. You can make maracas by filling an empty plastic pop bottle with something noisy, like dried peas or pasta, then gluing on the lid

so it won't come loose. They'll love making their own music or playing along with music that has a good, strong beat. Toddlers also love to dance!

Toddlers Love to Help

Toddlers love to help. It's a big mistake to turn them away at this age, because if 'helping you' is a normal, happy thing for them to do, they will be more likely to be helpers at 10 or 12 or 15 years of age. Follow your child's lead and use your creative mind to find ways your child can help.

Toddlers Hard at Work

Children at play are really children at work. They are learning cause and effect, developing skills, building vocabulary, and absorbing all the knowledge they will need to grow up and take on the world.

This BC HealthFile has presented some ideas to help you with the challenge of parenting. There are other topics in the child development series that you may also find helpful. The BC HealthFiles link and this series can be found on the BC HealthGuide Web site at:
www.bchealthguide.org/healthfiles/index.stm



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