

Early learning every day:

Living with a toddler

Becoming a true toddler is an exciting and terrifying event for a child. The same can also be said for you as the parent of a toddler, for we have made toddler hood into a mysterious and challenging time in the life of a child. But, coming of age into the second year of life and on to the third is a wonderful adventure! Toddlers are more complex and capable than the baby stage from which they emerged. Toddlers have an emotional life similar to that of an adolescent. They are experiencing new skills and new independence, yet they struggle with the deep need to be held, cared for and loved. They want you. They need you but then again, maybe they don't. Moment by moment the emotions toddlers experience are overwhelming.

Toddlers can do so much more than they could as babies. They can MOVE!! They can explore and test their surroundings. They can communicate and direct you to listen and to respond. This rapid development of speech and language allows them to become more complex thinkers and provides them with amazing learning opportunities. Independence and autonomy are the goals of a toddler. They are working toward and eventually gaining some control over their parents and caregivers. AH! There is the challenge and the conflict as well as the thrill of parenting a toddler.

Taking on the toddler can be an exhilarating and frustrating experience all at once. How do we give them the independence necessary for the healthy emotional, physical and social development and, at the same time, allow for the curiosity and subsequent learning to evolve?

Discipline and Guidance

Discipline means "to teach". Guidance is to lead by example and support.

This is the area that gets a significant amount of attention for the developing child, hence the mislabeled "terrible twos".

■ Toddlers tend to focus on the most immediate and dramatic aspects of conflicts. They are primarily aware of their own egocentric needs and wants. They need support in learning to see conflict as dilemmas shared

between two or more people. Eighteen to twenty-four months is the developmental window for learning empathy; a critical skill in the social and emotional development of the child'

■ Toddlers are ready to be included in the solutions for conflict. They can brainstorm a range of choices and ideas that do not involve hitting and hurting. Help them label the choices and then to experience the benefits.

■ Toddlers need to see their choices work or in action to imagine them and to make them real. Experience and experiment are key concepts that toddlers are ready to learn.

■ Help your child get started on the solution. Help them coordinate with others and to include others. That is what getting along is all about; dealing with and accommodating the other.

■ Toddlers are able to see and tell if something works. Include them in the process. Mistakes can be labeled and felt. Mistakes are part of learning and are opportunities for teaching. The emphasis should be on the contribution - not the mistake.

■ Toddlers benefit from direct and immediate assistance. Toddlers need TIME to work out the problem and to acquire the tools to help them resolve their difficulties independently.

Guidance requires clear explanations of limits and expectations. Consistency and honesty are critical to a successful intervention in the life of an exploring toddler. Take your toddler seriously and respect the explorations that will inevitably occur. With an understanding of the development and growth of the toddler we can celebrate learning, feel positive about conflicts and mitigate frustration.

The toddler struggles every day to grow and GO on their own. The toddler struggles every day with the need to be safe and to be held. This is the emotional life of the toddler-everyday!

Information for this article was provided by Early Learning New Hampshire. The organization is committed to ensure that all New Hampshire children have the opportunity to reach their full potential by expanding access to affordable quality child care and early education, supporting the child care industry; building public-private partnerships; and helping families balance work and family. www.earlylearningnh.org