

# SERVING TODDLERS

*Sharing Knowledge with Infant –Toddler Teachers and Home Visitors*



# Sharing Knowledge with Infant – Toddler Teachers and Home Visitors Series

This booklet describes development, use of language and awareness of others for toddlers from 16 to 36 months, and may be used by Staff members who are working with teachers and home visitors. The document was developed by the Early Head Start National Resource Center (EHS NRC) @ ZERO TO THREE in collaboration with the Office of Head Start.

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U.S. Department of Health and Human Services  
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# Introduction

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The Sharing Knowledge with Infant-Toddler Teachers and Home Visitors Series for Early Head Start (EHS) and Seasonal Head Start (MSHS) presents basic information on child development, working with families, and the comprehensive services offered by EHS and MSHS. These modules may be used during an orientation period to provide an overview of basic information on serving infants and toddlers and their families or as part of in-service training for more experienced teachers and home visitors to review and expand their knowledge.

Each module provides basic information in a series of short presentations. Accompanying each section, there is an activity designed to help the teacher or home visitor do the following:

- **Reflect on the qualities and beliefs he or she brings to the work**
- **Problem solve, explore possible alternatives**
- **Practice skills such as observation**

These activities should be reviewed with a director or supervisor to promote reflection and ensure understanding.

This module on serving toddlers emphasizes the following:

- **How to understand the sometimes confusing behavior of toddlers**
- **How to promote development**
- **How toddlers work to figure out just who they are**
- **How toddlers use symbolic thinking in play and language**
- **Observation and self-reflection skills for home visitors and teachers**

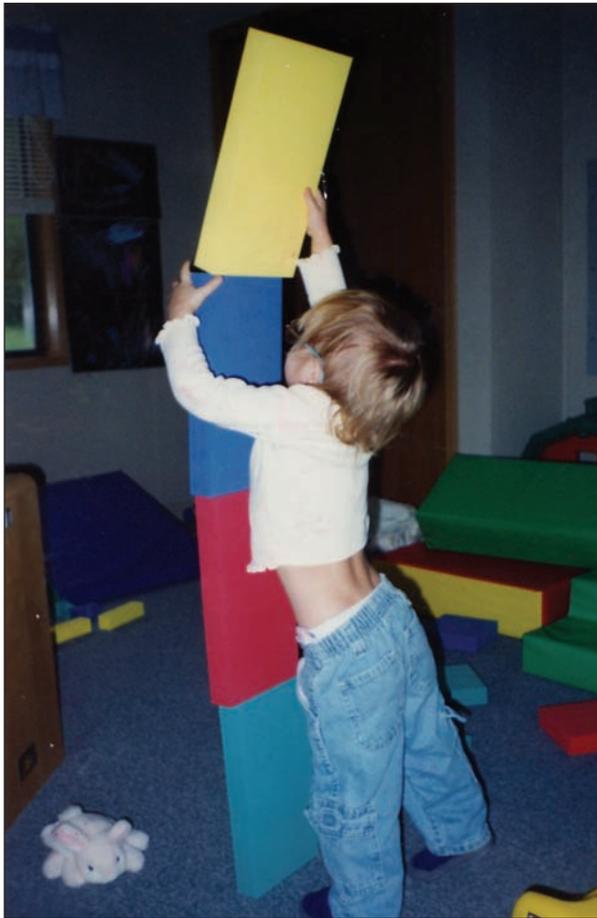


## How the Toddler Grows and Develops

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Toddlers look very competent compared to young and mobile infants, but they continue to need responsive, caring adults who keep them safe, provide comfort, and encourage their explorations. Toddlers are growing in independence as they master language; walk, run, and jump; feed themselves; and work on toilet learning.

So much is happening as toddlers practice becoming like the adults they love and yet be a separate thinking and feeling person. The toddler months can be a time of conflict, inside and all around the child. But the sensitive adult understands that these conflicts are exciting signs of change and growth.



## *Thinking About It... The Meaning of Behavior*

Try observing a toddler to understand what he or she is thinking, wanting, or trying to accomplish. The first explanations you may think of might include the following:

- He just wants attention.
- She's mean.
- He's selfish.

Using this module, as the infant-toddler care home visitor or teacher, you will learn the following:

- How toddlers grow and develop
- How adults can be responsive to the conflicting behavior of toddlers
- How the toddler's sense of self is forming
- How symbolic play and language become tools of cognitive development

Now, go a little further in your thinking. Think about these questions:

- Why does he want attention? Am I too busy or distracted to notice what interests him? Does he need the comfort of lap time as growing bigger offers him challenges?
- Why would such a young child seem mean? Is someone treating her in ways that feel mean? Could I help her learn kinder ways of being with others and still getting what she needs and wants?
- What seems selfish here? Should I be expecting someone this young to share her toys? Maybe at her age she's still only becoming aware of what she wants and feels this minute. Maybe she doesn't even know the other child wants the toy, too.

What other thoughts do you have about these three examples? Write your thoughts and questions here.

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## The Meaning of Behavior

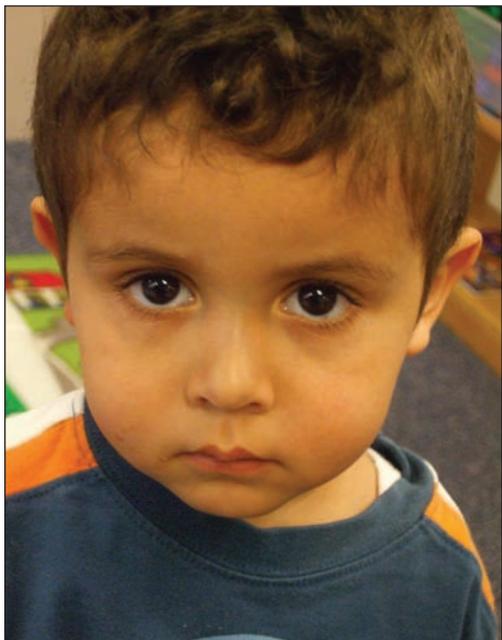
You may cry when you are sad. You may also cry when you are happy, hurt, sick, tired, or overwhelmed. One behavior can have many meanings. Your tears might not be meant as a communication, but an expression of your feelings that would come out even when you were alone.

A toddler's actions may communicate without intention. The behavior is still a window to the toddler's thoughts and feelings. When we describe toddlers as using behavior as a way to communicate, how can we figure out what the toddler means?

Toddlers' faces become more expressive. We can almost watch them thinking. They often exaggerate their actions, making their point with a strong pointing finger or a stomping foot. Simple words such as "mine" or "no" help get the point across.

Toddlers have good cause for these new frustrations. As babies, they weren't expected to share, but now they are. They were fed on demand, but now begin to eat in small groups, adjusting to adult schedules. They may still nap as needed during the day, but families probably expect them to sleep through the night at home. Toddlers count on adults to help them set routines, even if they don't seem to like it.

To help understand what a toddler is trying to say through her actions, try to watch and make note of the following:



- What was happening before the behavior (hitting, crying, or tantrum) began? Who was nearby? What was the toddler trying to do? What else was happening around her?
- See whether describing what you saw seems to catch the toddler's attention. "You were trying to build something very tall before the blocks fell. It made you so mad when they fell!" If this is right, it may either quiet the crying or increase it, but you will know it rings a bell!
- What happens after the behavior? Does the toddler hold a blankie and suck on a finger or crawl on your lap for help calming? Does she look for someone else to bop?

How do you understand it?

## *Thinking About It...*

### *The Developmental Domains, 18 to 24 Months*

Tantrums usually appear and reach their height in this period of development. As toddlers become more competent, they try to accomplish more complicated tasks, and they may meet with frustration. They are also becoming more aware of their own desires, likes, and dislikes—and the power adults have to meet or deny their wishes.

When they don't have the words to tell us what they mean because of their limited language skills and when their limited physical skills make completing their goals difficult, toddlers sometimes lose all control and fall to the ground in screaming, crying, rolling-around tantrums. Although tantrums can make you angry, it is helpful to remember that the tantrum can be terrifying to the toddler who has lost all control to such a powerful and overwhelming emotion. The toddler needs to know that the adults in his life are not also overpowered by his tantrums.

Here are some ways to provide safety and support during a tantrum:

1. Make sure the toddler cannot hurt himself or others.
2. Stay quietly nearby. You didn't start the tantrum and you can't stop it, but you can show the toddler that you are not frightened by it.
3. When it is over, offer to cuddle and comfort the child. Ask whether there is a way you can help now.
4. If the tantrum was caused by frustration because of something like a tower of blocks falling over, ask whether you can help him in building another tower. However, if it was caused by frustration because you said no to something, do not give in after the tantrum or before long, tantrums will become a tool for getting his own way.

Does your program have a consistent way for all teachers to treat tantrums?

What information do you share with families about tantrums?

What do you do to prevent tantrums?

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## The Developmental Domains, 18 to 24 Months

Infant-toddler care teachers and home visitors often take particular pleasure in the toddler years. It is such fun watching them manage their relationships and using their new skills. However, teachers and home visitors may need to spend some time reassuring parents that their sweet babies are still there—just a little busier and maybe a little more independent.

**18 months to 24 months.** Toddlers have wonderful new capacities and may move from activity to activity, trying out their new skills.

<p><b>Muscle/Motor:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Uses crayons, markers</li> <li>• Turns pages of a book</li> <li>• Walks alone</li> <li>• Finger feeds; uses spoon, cup</li> <li>• Sits in a chair</li> <li>• Uses pincer grasp—thumb and pointer finger</li> </ul>	<p><b>Learning/Cognitive:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• May “read” books to self or to dolls</li> <li>• Groups or organizes toys</li> <li>• Remembers the details of routines</li> <li>• Uses objects as other objects in pretend play</li> <li>• Enjoys challenging play materials, creative materials</li> </ul>
<p><b>Social-emotional:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Demonstrates increasing self-control; may stop when told to or tell self “No, no, no.”</li> <li>• May also lose control and tantrum</li> <li>• Is very interested in peers; may follow a certain child around</li> <li>• Attends to emotions of adults; cares about their opinions</li> <li>• Can do many things independently, but needs closeness to adult</li> </ul>	<p><b>Language/Communication:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Is quickly learning new words; may mix words with jabbering</li> <li>• Uses words together as sentences</li> <li>• Enjoys songs and fingerplays; learns the words</li> <li>• Points to pictures in books to ask names</li> <li>• May learn more than one language at a time, increasing cognitive ability and language skills</li> </ul>



As an infant-toddler care teacher or home visitor, you will work with families to do the following:

- Help them understand that tantrums are the child’s losing control and that patience will help manage tantrums.
- Enjoy the new skills and abilities of their child, and learn new ways of providing support and guidance.
- Obtain library cards and READ, READ, READ with their toddler. Telling the story or talking about the pictures is just as good!



## Developmental Domains, 24 to 36 Months

**24 months to 36 months.** During this last year of the infant-toddler period, the child may look amazingly competent, especially if the family has or is expecting another baby. Despite the flow of language and movement, however, the toddler still wants cuddling and closeness.

### Muscle/Motor:

- Throws and kicks balls
- Stands on one foot, tiptoes
- Climbs, slides, and jumps
- Eats with spoon and fork; pours from small pitcher

### Social-emotional:

- Is interested in color, size, shape, time
- Shows increasingly story-like pretend play
- Uses materials in increasingly creative ways

### Learning/Cognitive:

- Begins to understand that other people have their own thoughts, likes, and dislikes
- Tries different ways of comforting friends in distress
- Often works together for a common goal
- Wants adult approval and encouragement
- Enjoys looking at pictures of self

### Language/Communication:

- Understands and can follow directions
- Uses sentences
- Asks “Why?” or “What that?”
- Tells stories about what he or she did or saw



As an infant-toddler care teacher or home visitor, you will work with families to do the following:

- **Talk with their toddler.** Encourage families to continue to use their home language as toddlers can learn more than one language at a time.
- **Expand on the child’s use of words without “correcting”;** rather, simply repeat with more words and correct grammar. When the toddler says, “Mo muk,” the parent might say, “Sure, you can have more milk.”
- **Join toddlers in their pretend play, constructions, or creative play,** following their lead but adding enriching ideas.
- **Show interest and approval, but quietly and firmly set limits when necessary.**



## Identity Formation: The Big Idea in the Toddler's Development—You...and Me



An amazing thing happens during the toddler period. As toddlers and 2-year-olds are developing an awareness of just what it means to be themselves—the formation of identity—they are also realizing that other people have their own thoughts and feelings. In research studies, children younger than 14 months cannot believe the adult's insistence that she would prefer broccoli to a goldfish cracker. After 18 months, the toddler can understand that the adult has likes and dislikes different from those of the toddler (Repacholi & Gopnik, 1997).

Much of what feels to adults like “testing the limits” may really be testing whether adults and other children really want things that are different from what the toddler has in mind. The toddler may be trying as hard to understand the adults as they are trying to understand him!

Toddlers are using information from their relationships as they develop an internal picture of themselves. As they watch and listen to adults, they sense whether the adult thinks they are smart, fun, difficult, pretty, unattractive, or so many other attributes. They also note whether their peers choose them as playmates, see them as leaders, or avoid them.

They may feel that adults care about understanding them, are interested in them, and will help them accomplish their goals. Or they may not.

Toddlers begin to use words that identify themselves such as me, my, and of course, mine! They may use their own names in talking about themselves. They begin to experience feelings of shame and guilt when they do things they are told not to do.

The mental image of self that develops in the first 3 years of life may continue to influence a child's self-image for a lifetime.



## Symbolic Play

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Words are symbols for people, things, actions, and ideas. At approximately 18 months, toddlers are actively learning and using many words. At the same time, they are using objects for pretend play—another kind of symbol. Symbolic or imaginative play is play in which the toddler pretends to use an object such as an empty cup for drinking or for offering a drink to a doll or play in which the toddler pretends to use one object such as a block as another object such as a cup.

The first signs of symbolic play are often simple things such as using a real cup but pretending to drink from it. The next step may be feeding a doll. This play becomes increasingly symbolic as the child is learning more words and is able to maintain pictures of objects in his head and pretend that what he is playing with is that object. As the toddler copies the roles of the adults in his or her life, the play becomes increasingly life-like. Within months, the child will be playing out stories such as food shopping, preparing a meal, or fixing a car.

The involvement of older children or adults helps imaginative play to become more complex and increases the level of language used in play. Adults often offer ideas to make the story more elaborate.

The ability to move beyond the use of real objects and experiences into symbolic language and play is related to a child's later success in school. The ability to create clear, step-by-step stories in play shows the child's ability for clear, logical thinking and communication.

## References

Repacholi, B.M. & Gopnik, A. (1997) Early reasoning about desires: Evidence from 14- and 18-month-olds. *Developmental Psychology*. 33: 12-21.

## Related Head Start Program Performance Standards

- 1304.20(f)—Individualization of the program
- 1304.21(a)(1)(i) (ii) (iii) (iv)—Child development and education approach for all children
- 1304.21(a)(2)(i) (ii)—Parents
- 1304.21(a)(3)(i)(A) (B) (C) (D) (E)—Support social and emotional development
- 1304.21(a)(3)(ii)—Planning for routines and transitions
- 1304.21(a)(4)(i) (ii) (iii) (iv)—Each child’s cognitive and language skills
- 1304.21(a)(5)(i) (ii) (iii) (6)—Physical development
- 1304.21(b)(1)(i) (ii) (iii)—Child development and education approach for infants and toddlers
- 1304.21(b)(2)(i) (ii)—Social and emotional development of infants and toddlers
- 1304.21(b)(3)(i) (ii)—Physical development of infants and toddlers
- 1304.24(a)(1)(i) (ii) (iii) (iv)—Grantee and delegate agencies must work collaboratively with parents
- 1304.40(e)(1) (2) (3)—Parent involvement in child development and education
- 1306.23(a) (b)—Training