Toddlers:
What to Expect

Janet Gonzalez-Mena

Which of these paragraphs best describes toddlers?

Toddlers don’t sit still for a minute. They have short attention spans and are highly distractible. They always want their own way, and won’t share or take turns. Toys always get lost or broken when toddlers play with them.

Toddlers are active explorers. They eagerly try new things and use materials in different ways. Toddlers want to be independent and they have a strong sense of ownership.

The first description compares toddlers with older children and looks at typical toddler behavior in negative terms. The second is a positive outlook that respects toddlers and their natural behavior.

When teachers or parents think of toddlers as miniature preschoolers, we run into problems because our expectations are not appropriate. For example, inappropriate expectations can turn toilet learning into a struggle of wills between adult and child. Meals can be chaotic because toddlers play with their food. Circle time can be a nightmare because toddlers keep wandering around or interrupting. Adult-directed activities get disrupted as toddlers choose their own ways instead of following what the teacher has in mind. Puzzles get dumped, toys are pulled off shelves and hauled to another area of the room, and verbal attempts to intervene are ignored as toddlers go about their business.

What can parents or teachers of toddlers do, either at home or in-group programs, to work effectively with toddlers? Few parents have any background in child development, and many teachers have been prepared to work with older children. The differences between toddlers and preschoolers, and how can we make the most of these often maligned months of early childhood?

What toddlers are like

Toddlers learn with their whole bodies – not just their heads. They learn more through their hands than they do through their ears. They learn by doing, not only by just thinking. They learn by touching, mouthing, and trying out, not by being told. Toddlers solve problems on a physical level. Watch toddlers at play for just 5 minutes and you will see them walk (which looks like wandering), climb, carry things around, drop things, and continually dump whatever they can find. These large muscle activities are not done to irritate adults – they are the legitimate activity of toddlers. Piaget calls this the sorimotor stage of development (1952, 1954).

Toddlers can become absorbed in discovering the world around them. If you are convinced that toddlers have short attention spans, just watch them with running water and a piece of soap. Handwashing can become the main activity of the morning! Eating is another major activity, as many toddlers switch from neat to very messy in a short time. Filling and dumping are great skills to use with food or water. Of course, toddlers do put things in as part of the process, but they are more likely to end with dumping!

Limit group activities to eating and maybe music or a short story time.

Other toddlers are reluctant to mess around in their food once they can handle utensils well.

In addition to these primarily cognitive and physical skills, toddlers are also working on a number of socioemotional challenges. They are still developing trust in the adults who
care for them, so parents and teachers need to work closely to help children learn how to cope with important events such as separation.

Toddlers are in Erikson’s second stage – autonomy (1963). Their rapidly emerging language clearly demonstrates what it means to be autonomous: “Me do it” shows the drive for independence. “Me – mine!” indicated toddlers are beginning to see themselves as individuals with possessions. And, of course, the “NO!” toddlers are so famous for is a further clue to their push for separateness and independence.

Some of the major accomplishments of this stage of growing independence are self-help skills such as dressing, feeding, washing, and toileting. All of these skills involve a great deal of practice, and the inevitable mishaps. Learning to use the toilet, like all the other self-help skills, is a physical feat, as well as an intellectual and emotional one. It takes time for the child to gain physical control, to understand what to do, and to be willing to do it.

With all of these major accomplishments emerging during toddlerhood -- from approximately 14 months to 3 years of age – what, then should toddlers do all day, at home or in a group program?

**Some common pitfalls**

Both parents and teachers have been influenced by the push to demonstrate that children are _learning_ something. Those who are unfamiliar with the remarkable natural learnings of the toddler period often feel compelled to create so-called learning activities as proof that the adult is teaching the child.

These activities often become part of a curriculum such as one I observed. For the first 45 minutes, the teacher helped children cope with separation as their parents said goodbye. The children were helped to remove their coats and hang them up, diapers were changed, and some children used the toilet. The children playing with toys argued, got frustrated, or asked for adult help.

---

**Organize routines so waiting does not consume most of the child’s day.**

What a pleasure it was to see a program responding to the variety of learnings so much a part of toddlerhood – separation and trust, self-help skills and autonomy, and problem solving through hands-on play experiences.

Just then a bell rang, and the children were herded into a group, organized, separated into smaller groups, seated at tables, and given what were termed learning activities to do. Later, the director apologized: “We were late in getting started,” she explained. For her, the valuable time was the organized activity time, not the 45 minutes when toddlers were involved in taking steps toward the major accomplishments of toddlerhood!

Of course, toddlers learn from activities, just as they learn from any experience – but activities are _not_ more valuable than the rest of what happens in a typical day at home or in a program. Most importantly, _activities are only valuable to the degree to which they are appropriate for the age group._

If the activities are too advanced – perhaps requiring toddlers to sit at tables, to wait 10 minutes for their turn, or to color in the spaces of an adult’s drawing—children will learn to limit and restrict themselves, to feel unsuccessful, to sense a lack of respect for themselves as individuals. An opportunity for children to explore with their senses in more creative ways will have been lost.

Sometimes traditional preschool activities can be modified for toddlers. For example, given collage materials, many toddlers will experiment by licking the glue, eating the paste, or gooping one or the other into their hair. The adult will spend more time restricting behavior than facilitating creativity, which is the purpose of making a collage.

One way to make collages appropriate for toddlers is to use Contact™ paper, sticky side out, and provide children with a number of safe objects to stick to it. A group of 12- to 24-month olds at the Napa Valley College Child Development Center worked on a collage for several weeks as they continued to discover things to stick on the Contact™ paper left on a wall at their level. The continuing rearrangement of the collage elements showed how much more important the process is than the product at this age.

Some other activities that readily modified are presented in Table 1.

---

**How to fit programs to toddlers**

Adults who recognize the special needs of toddlers, such as sensorimotor learning and the development of autonomy, don’t just tolerate this age group – they genuinely like toddlers. What do these knowledgeable adults do, ten, to create a home or group setting that fits toddlers?

1. **Structure the environment**

   (rather than depending on adult rules). Put out only as many things as you can stand to pick up when they are dumped. One teacher suspended a bucket from the ceiling filled with things just for dumping. Make sure everything is touchable (and mouthable, depending on how young the children are). Provide space and equipment for large motor activity...
Preschool activities that can be modified for toddlers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Preschool Activity</th>
<th>Modified toddler activity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Easel painting</td>
<td>Water on chalkboards</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paint and paper</td>
<td>Thick soap suds with food</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sponge painting</td>
<td>Squeeze sponges in trays with a little water on the bottom</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cooking with recipes</td>
<td>Cutting or mashing bananas or similar one-step food experience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pasting tissue paper</td>
<td>Crumpling white tissue paper (to prevent dyes from running colors when chewed)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(climbing and jumping) inside as well as outside. Include plenty of softness (a mattress for jumping, pillows for wiggling on). Supply toys that can be used in many ways, such as blocks, as well as toys that are realistic (McLoyd, 1986). Remember, toddlers who are too excited, or bored, are apt to make themselves and everyone else unhappy, so keep activities and materials at a level they can handle. Watch the children’s behavior to determine when the right amount of toys are available. Their needs may change from day to day.

2. Expect toddlers to test limits. That’s their job, so the more the environment sets limits, the easier it will be for you. Again, judge whether the limits are just right, rather than too strict or too lax, by observing the children’s behavior. If children insist on climbing on the table, for example, perhaps another climbing structure, or large pillows, or a crawl-through tunnel is needed. Are children randomly wandering without getting involved? Maybe more staff, or more attentive staff, are needed to be anchors for children as they reach out to new activities. Or possibly more variety and some new materials need to be offered. Rotate items— even after a week or two some will have new appeal.

3. Stay out of power struggles. Toddlers can be very stubborn so it is a waste of energy to continually butt heads with them about enforcing limits. Use choices to avoid power struggles: “You can’t walk around while you eat, but you can sit in either the blue chair or the red chair.” Give toddlers frequent choices, but be sure what you offer are suitable alternatives. Usually a choice between two options is sufficient.

4. Direct behavior gently, but physically. Don’t depend on words alone. Prevent dangerous behavior before it occurs—hold a threatening arm before it has a chance to be hit. Lead a child by the hand back to the table to finish a snack. Don’t let children get in trouble and then yell at them. If you find yourself saying, “I knew that was going to happen,” next time, don’t predict—prevent it.

Direct behavior gently, but physically. Don’t depend on words alone.

5. Expect lots of sensorimotor behavior. All furnishings, equipment, toys, and materials should be sturdy and safe enough to be dropped, mouthed, or climbed on. Dumping puzzles is as much fun as working them. The sound as the pieces hit the floor seems to be music to toddler ears. You can help children see the fun of putting puzzles back together, but don’t expect to convince them right away that construction is more pleasurable than destruction.

6. Limit group activities to eating and maybe music or a short story time. Even then, form small groups, and expect children to leave to pursue something more exciting when they lose interest. Eventually they will want to be involved in larger and longer group activities, but toddlers are more individual doers than group listeners.

7. Share, wait, and use kind words to solve problems, but don’t expect children to always follow the behavior you model. Toddlers cannot share unless they first fully experience a sense of ownership. They need to see over and over again that they can trust that a favored item will not be taken away, or to find there are enough snacks for everyone so that grabbing and hoarding are not necessary. Have several of the same favorite toys.

Waiting is hard for adults and children—just remember the last time you had to wait in line! Organize routines so waiting does not consume most of the child’s day. If a wait is unavoidable, keep children active with fingerplays or songs, for example, so they have something to do while they wait.

Even when toddlers lose control, adults need to maintain theirs by using words, rather than hitting or using harsh punishment, to solve problems. Choose words that respect children and support their needs, not words that ridicule or shame. For example, respond to a toileting accident with “Oh Rosita, your clothes are all wet. They’re probably uncomfortable for you, too. Let’ find your dry clothes and then we’ll wipe up the puddle,” rather than “Look at the mess you made! Are we going to have to put you back in diapers?”

8. Be gentle and help children talk through problems. Fights and struggles are bound to occur, but children will learn to solve problems with each other sooner if you do what Gerber (1979) calls sports announcing—“I see how much you want that,
Jason” – rather than refereeing – “Amanda had it first, so give it to her.” Avoid making arbitrary decisions for children, and instead help them search for constructive solutions.

9. Expect difficult behavior. Resistance to activities (wandering of in the middle of a song), rejection (NO!), and crying when they say goodbye to parents are all good behaviors – that’s what toddlers should be doing. These behaviors show clearly that the children are in Erikson’s stage of autonomy. Toddlers who are not developing well may appear depressed, have low self-esteem, seem to lack attachment to their families, or use one behavior in every situation. All toddlers won’t exhibit difficult behaviors, but it is important to recognize such behaviors as normal and natural.

10. Define curriculum in realistic terms. An appropriate curriculum for toddlers is one that centers around

- self-care activities (such as eating, sleeping, toileting, and dressing),
- learning to cope with separation,
- making new attachments with children and adults, and
- free play in a safe and interesting environment.

All appropriate physical, cognitive, and socioemotional goals for toddlers fit easily into these activities.

11. Let toddlers be toddlers. Don’t structure your curriculum around preparing toddlers for preschool by pushing them to act as if they are in a more advanced stage of development. When they have done very thoroughly what they need to do as 18-month-olds, or as 2-year-olds, or almost 3s, they will be ready to take on the tasks of a more advanced stage.

When we see toddlerhood as a special and distinct stage of development with its own set of tasks and behaviors, toddler’s behavior becomes more understandable and manageable. Then we are not tempted to impose watered-down (or worse yet full-blown) preschool activities upon them. When we stop comparing toddlers with older children, and appreciate them for what they are, toddlers become very likable individuals. They will feel better about themselves because the adults who care for them respect them for what they should be – toddlers.

References


