

Encourage Brain Development in Toddlers

Toddlers are at an exciting and critical time in their brain development. Spending time with them, and providing them with a variety of experiences, helps toddlers begin to develop the intellectual skills that they will use for the rest of their lives.

DEVELOPING MEMORY SKILLS

By age one, toddlers are able to remember events that took place earlier. At first, these memories may only last a few hours. However, toddlers are gradually able to hold onto their memories for longer periods of time. They can watch what another person is doing and then repeat the action later. Most of these memories will not become long-term memories. Most adults remember little of what happened to them as toddlers. However, developing short-term memory makes it possible for toddlers to learn.

Toddlers do not need flash cards to build their memory skills. Songs and rhymes are simple, effective ways to strengthen memory. Reading familiar books gives toddlers opportunities to remember the sequence of events in the stories. In older toddlers, memory skills can also be built by asking questions that require remembering things that happened in the past.

Consistent routines help teach toddlers how the world works and create familiarity. Having rituals at bedtime, during meals, or at bath time helps the child learn what to expect next.

For toddlers, repetition strengthens brain connections and makes it easier for them to learn to do new tasks. However, experiencing new places and learning new skills are also essential for brain development.

DEVELOPING PROBLEM-SOLVING SKILLS

Toddlers begin to develop more sophisticated problem-solving skills. They have learned about cause and effect. They throw or manipulate objects to see what will happen. Toddlers like to do things themselves. When a toddler faces an obstacle, resist the temptation to interfere. Instead, give the child time to come up with his or her own solution. Step in only when it is obvious that the toddler is becoming overly frustrated.

Choose materials and toys that give toddlers opportunities to develop their problem-solving skills. For example, with sand and water, they can fill containers of various sizes. Puzzles and shape sorters require “figuring things out.”

USING IMAGINATION AND CREATIVITY

By age two, toddlers begin imaginative play. They love to pretend and play make-believe. They are learning that one object can be used to represent another object. They may pretend that a block is a cup and “drink” out of it. When asked, take part in their imaginary world.

Music is a wonderful way to encourage creativity and imagination. Many toddlers will try to invent new sounds and nonsense words to fit songs they already know. Art materials, such as clay, markers, crayons, and finger paints, give older toddlers opportunities for creativity. Dramatic play activities, including dressing up or pretending to be someone else, encourage use of the imagination. Large cartons can become rooms or buildings. Dolls and puppets also promote imaginative play.

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ENCOURAGING LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT

It is during the toddler years that children learn to put words together to form sentences. To encourage language development, talk to toddlers. Encourage attempts to speak, even when what they say cannot be understood. Pointing at objects and saying their names helps build vocabulary. Describe events and routines that happen throughout the day. Sing songs and recite rhymes.

Between the ages of two and three, toddlers begin to construct simple sentences and can pronounce words more clearly. Toddlers this age can understand far more words than they actually

speak. Having conversations with toddlers helps increase their speaking vocabulary.

STIMULATING THE SENSES

Although their senses are better developed than infants', toddlers still need sensory stimulation. Provide opportunities to see, hear, touch, taste, and smell related to everyday routines. Taking a few moments to have a toddler smell a flower or a candle or to listen to outdoor sounds in the evening will encourage a toddler to use his or her senses and pay more attention to the world. Talk about what they are experiencing.

Taking Action

Imagine that you will be babysitting for a toddler for two hours. Prepare a plan of activities that you could provide to encourage the toddler's brain development. Include the child's age, the amount of time you would spend for each activity, and a brief explanation of why you chose each activity.

Language Milestones: Ages One to Three

Babies pay attention to language, responding to familiar sounds such as their parents' voices. In the first few months of life, infants learn to recognize the sounds of the language that is spoken at home. Between nine months and one year, they learn to recognize their own names and to wave goodbye and shake their heads to say no. Between one and three years, children progress from using single words that name objects to speaking in complete sentences.

All children do not learn to speak at the same rate. Some begin to speak a year or more behind the "average," and they still learn to speak well. Parents' interaction with their children does influence the timing and quality of children's language skills. Toddlers whose parents talk to them a great deal develop much larger vocabularies than those whose parents are quiet. Television is not a substitute. To learn to speak, babies need to communicate with their loved ones.

Age of Child	Typical Language Milestones
13 months	The child may not say full words but use actions to complete ideas. For instance, the child may say "da" and point to a doll. Responds to "no."
14 months	Gestures still play a role. A child who wants to play with a toy may bring that toy to a caregiver. Children this age like songs and nursery rhymes.
15 months	The child can follow two-word commands and point to objects that are named.
16 months	The child may be able to say a few words and may enjoy word games. The child continues to enjoy songs and finger plays.
17 months	The child may begin to use words to express his or her own needs, for instance, by saying "eat" or "water."
18 months	The child may learn as many as twelve words a day. At this age, the child may begin to refer to himself or herself by name.
19–21 months	Realizing that everything has a name, a child points to objects and says "What's this?" The child begins to combine words. The child responds to simple questions, such as "Would you like a cracker?"
22–24 months	The child begins to open conversations and uses words to express feelings. By the end of two years, the child uses about 200 words and may understand many more. The child can answer "what" and "where" questions, combines words into phrases, and understands simple directions.
25–30 months	Vocabulary continues to grow. By 30 months a child may use about 500 words. The child builds three- and four-word sentences with both nouns and verbs. The child uses the pronouns "I" and "me." The child begins to ask "Why?"
31–36 months	The child uses about 900 words, can follow commands that have two or three parts, and asks "when" and "how" questions. The child can use tense (talk/talked) and number (boy/boys), and can understand size comparisons (big/bigger).

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Choosing Children’s Books

In order for young children to develop a love of reading, they must enjoy and learn from what they are read or what they read themselves. That is why knowing which books to choose is so important. Whether you are reading a bedtime story to a two-year-old or choosing a gift for an older child, here are some considerations that can help you make good selections:

- **Interests.** As children gain experience with books, they start to like some types more than others. Does the child like stories with animal characters or real life? Some children enjoy books that rhyme.
- **Subject.** Look for topics appropriate for the age of the child. Is the situation connected to children’s actual experiences? Does the story present choices or ask children to think about the consequences of their actions? Does it allow them to stretch their imagination?
- **Illustrations.** Visual appeal is especially important with younger children. Are the illustrations eye-catching but not so complicated that they will be confusing? Is the style appropriate for the subject matter?
- **Plot.** Are the events of the story easy to follow? Are they connected to the experiences and interests of a child? Does the story contain an element of surprise to hold the child’s attention?
- **Characters.** Can a child identify with the characters or their situations? Do the characters handle their problems in constructive ways that make sense to children?
- **Tone.** Does the writer show respect for children or talk down to them? Is the tone humorous or suspenseful? Would it appeal to children?
- **Dialogue.** Is there conversation in the story? Do the characters speak in a funny or realistic way? Is the dialogue appropriate for the subject matter?
- **Rhyme and rhythm.** Does the book use rhyme or catchy phrases that the child might enjoy repeating? Does the sound of the sentences help to dramatize the meaning of the words?
- **Educational value.** Does the book try to teach a particular lesson—possibly about history, science, or getting along with others? If so, does it explain that idea clearly?
- **Freedom from bias.** Does the book avoid stereotypes of people and groups?

Taking Action

Using the guidelines above, design a one-page evaluation form for children’s books. At the bottom of your form, include a space for comments. Then choose a children’s book and evaluate it, using your form. Explain whether you would use it. If so, with what age group? If not, why not? Is the book suitable for children who already have a strong interest in the subject or for all children?