

BANANAS CHOOSING CHILD CARE HANDOUT

What Toddlers Need in Child Care – Age 1 through 2 Years

by Helen Neville, BS, RN

Each stage of child development presents different challenges for families and child care providers. This handout is one in a series of four which examine developmental needs in different age groups and suggest how child care settings can best meet those needs.

What do Toddlers Need in Child Care?

A Warm, Stable Relationship with a Caregiver – More than anything, toddlers need a caregiver who notices and responds to individual needs and wishes. Toddlers need a warm, positive emotional environment; they need to be liked for who they are. Ideally, they are cared for by the same caregiver for several years, not just a few months. The more time toddlers spend in care, the more important are long-term ties with the same caregiver.

Lots of Practice Learning to Talk – Most toddlers say very little to other toddlers. They learn to talk from adults (and older children). Adults need to start conversations about things toddlers see and do, as well as what they seem to think and feel. “Look at that ball roll. It rolled off the table. Where do you think it went?” Adults need to speak slowly and clearly, listen and add new words once it is clear that the earlier ones are understood.

Hugs and Cuddles – Toddlers often need to snuggle when discouraged or tired. Hugs usually refuel emotional energy. Adults need to offer (but not insist on) supportive pats, hugs and snuggles throughout the day. Invite toddlers to sit on your lap as you play finger games, look at books together or sing songs.

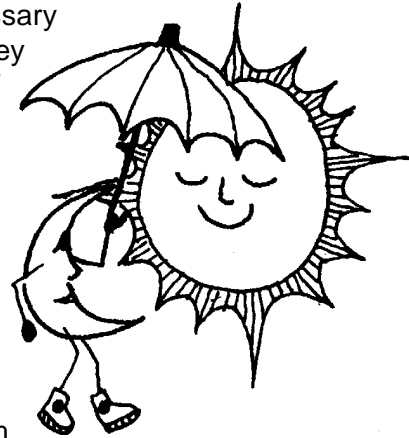
A Peace Keeper – With their active minds, toddlers think of lots of things to do and explore. Toddlers keep checking the rules to see if they have changed or whether different adults enforce the same rules differently: “Mommy didn’t let me pull the cat’s tail yesterday. Will she let me pull it today? Or will Dad let me?” Repeat the rules often, as toddlers need to hear the same rule many times. Unfortunately, the part of the brain which *stops* toddlers from doing things (the “forebrain” which is just behind the forehead) doesn’t yet work well. Many toddlers *are unable to stop themselves* from doing forbidden things. That’s why toddlers may repeat the rule, “No pull kitty tail,” but then they pull it anyway.

Remove their hand if necessary and tell them again what they *can* do: “Pet the kitty gently,” while showing how to pet the cat softly.

Similarly, toddlers also need help to learn how to play with others and share their belongings. Toys are often more interesting when someone else is holding them, which is why toddlers often grab toys from each other. They need reminders to point at what they want, instead of simply grabbing whatever they fancy. They also need help learning how to take turns. After all, we’d be upset if everyone expected us to share our wallet and car keys with anyone who reached for them! Many older children find it equally hard to share their toys with toddlers. Adults can help older children play the role of peacekeepers by showing them how to make strategic trades. For instance, if the younger child grabs the older child’s favorite stuffed bear, the older child could offer to trade for a different animal or toy.

Flexible Routine – Toddlers cannot tell time. Instead, they use the order of daily events to understand what is likely to happen next. A general routine makes their world seem more predictable. For example, first indoor time, then clean-up, followed by snack and story time. However, allowances need to be made for children’s curiosity, mood, whether they’re feeling tired, hungry or ill, etc. So if it’s story time, but many youngsters are still antsy and active, take them outside to run off their energy instead of insisting on the usual reading.

Help in Doing What They Want – Toddlers learn from doing. Caregivers need to encourage and support toddlers’ interests (unless it is dangerous, hurts others or harms property). Describe their actions with enthusiasm: “You’re a good climber!” Encourage fantasy play by providing the props for older toddlers to talk on a toy telephone, play dress-up, wash plastic dishes, etc. Practicing real-world activities helps toddlers understand their world. It also lays the groundwork for children to master problem-solving skills later on.



Considerations for Parents

How Many Hours in Child Care? – Childhood experts Drs. T. Berry Brazelton and Stanley Greenspan suggest that policy makers in the U.S. help parents limit regular time away from toddlers to about 30 hours per week (as they do in many other industrialized nations). Regardless of these recommendations, many parents have to work longer hours in order to pay for food and housing. The more parents are away, however, the more important it is that toddlers have a warm, long-term relationship with their caregiver, and that parents build a loving, responsive relationship with their little ones.

How Many Children? – Almost all toddlers do better with a small number of other toddlers around. (Imagine how unsafe we might feel with a group of unknown adults who often push, shove and grab!) This is especially true for quiet, shy toddlers, for children with lots of stress at home and for those who thrive on having things done the same, predictable way.

Ages of Children – Given the same number of children in care, a mix of ages may be preferable to a group made up exclusively of toddlers. This is especially true if the older children enjoy and are friendly to the younger ones. A child care setting with children of different ages can offer toddlers the chance to learn more from older children than what they would pick up from their age mates. Energetic toddlers may also do better around older children since they are less likely to accidentally hurt an older child than a younger one.

“My Toddler Cries When I Leave Her” – Separation can be hard for both parents and toddlers. Toddlers cry when parents leave because parents are so important, and little ones don’t yet understand that their parents will return. After a couple of weeks, most toddlers connect with their caregiver and settle down shortly after parents leave. Some toddlers continue to cry long after their parents go. They look continually sad, may not play and may remain too upset to eat. These toddlers may need to start with shorter separations, or have more time to make the adjustment while parents are present. Occasionally, toddlers may fare better with a different caregiver.

What About Toilet Training? – A few toddlers start using the potty all on their own – usually because they are copying older children. Some flexible toddlers willingly follow the leader to the bathroom and are happy to sit briefly on the potty. If they visit at times of likely success, such as after eating, or upon waking from a nap, they



may even “pee” or “poop” while there. Some toddlers wiggle or stand a certain way when they need to go and can be easily and successfully led to the toilet. However, if some toddlers are rushed to the toilet or forced to sit, their muscles tighten, making it impossible for them to relax and let go. It’s important not to push children who resist invitations to the toilet because they can develop serious constipation. Also, pressuring toddlers too much might simply trigger toddlers’ resistance to toilet training. Sooner or later, most of us are potty trained.

Your Relationship with the Caregiver – You should get regular updates about what your child does and enjoys while in care. It is important that you and the caregiver share basic beliefs about child rearing and that you can comfortably discuss any issues or concerns with your child’s caregiver. Because of their experience with many children, caregivers usually have a good idea about what to expect in terms of toddler development. If your caregiver sees reason for concern, get further information from your doctor.

Likewise, make sure to inform the provider of any special health or developmental needs your child may have. Provide the necessary information so that the provider can feel comfortable and confident in providing the right care for your child. Picking children up at the appointed time is important to both your child and the caregiver. Finally, caregivers, like the rest of us, like to know that they are appreciated.

Will this Program Help my Child Learn? – Toddlers learn through concrete experiences and play. It is important to find a caregiver who offers your child many opportunities for exploration. Look at the suggested activities on page 4. When visiting a program, see which of the activities are offered. Ideally, visit several times to get a better sense of the range of things to do.

Considerations for Caregivers

Address the Needs of All Children in Care – Caregivers face both general and age-related issues in providing good care for toddlers. They need to understand, respond to and connect with each toddler. One of the biggest challenges is to continually notice and respond to the wide range of individual differences among toddlers. For example, some toddlers need more or less sleep, fall asleep more quickly or slowly, get hungry more or less often. While some toddlers easily separate after a couple of days, some cautious ones need weeks to feel comfortable in new situations.

Personal Belongings and Favorite Things – When caregivers honor toddlers' personal preferences for security objects, a favorite dish or chair, toddlers feel more in control of their environment and therefore more confident. Security objects help them remember that they will return home to their parents or guardians. If a child fears losing a favorite small toy from home, encourage the child to keep the toy in his or her pocket, lunch box or cubby.

Pace of Life – Some toddlers are always on the move, while others prefer to sit and look at picture books or use their hands. In general, toddlers are happiest when able to move at their own pace. Most of the time, if there is no danger or harm, it's best not to interrupt them when they are in the middle of an activity. (Most have an attention span that only lasts a few minutes.) Sometimes caregivers can extend children's attention by showing them a new way to play with a toy. For example, if the child is moving a car back and forth, the adult might suggest moving the car around some blocks. However, once children lose interest in a particular activity, let them move on to something else.

Individual Interests – Like adults, toddlers have different interests. Not all toddlers enjoy playing with dolls, moving trains along the track, sliding down slides or building with blocks. An important goal for caregivers is to support toddlers' curiosity. At the same time, it is important to stimulate their imagination and expose them to new activities. However, at least half the time, follow their lead and let them pursue their own interests.

Skills of Daily Living – Depending on individual development of muscle and communication skills, toddlers learn to dress and feed themselves at different times. Serve small portions, adding more as needed, to help toddlers eat on their own. Work with parents on teaching the self-care skills they would like their child to learn.

Care for the Group – Like mothers with lots of children, caregivers need to address the needs of many toddlers. The needs of one child often clash with the needs of others, forcing caregivers to respond to several cries of distress at the same time. One way to comfort several upset children is to sit on the floor, letting a couple of toddlers pile on your lap at once. This is a trick that parents of twins and triplets quickly learn to do. While talking and making eye contact with one child, stroke the hair or back of the second child. Give extra time to a needy or quiet child when the others have just started a favorite activity that will keep them happy and busy for a few minutes.

Protect People and Property – Some toddlers, especially emotionally intense children with high energy, are likely to hit and bite when upset. Shy and quiet children are more likely to get hit or bitten. Providers need to stop the aggressors firmly but gently. Better yet, try to prevent trouble by watching and redirecting the action early on. Potential victims also need encouragement to stand up for themselves by shouting "No!" or "Don't hit!" Testing limits is normal for this age so child-proofing is essential. Children learn faster when we emphasize what they *may* do, rather than what they *may not* do: "Drop the blocks or throw them into this basket." (Don't throw them at people.) "Pet the kitty gently like this." (Don't pull the kitty's tail.) "Food belongs in your mouth or on the plate." (Not on the floor.) If you want to jump, jump here on the mattress." (Not on the sofa.) Distraction, gentle but firm restraint (as when one child is about to hit another) and removal from a trouble spot are appropriate ways to discipline at this age.

Caring for Adults – Be sensitive to parents' needs and cultural background. Many parents find it stressful to separate from a clingy child in the morning while rushing to get to work on time. Ease children's separation fear by distracting or holding them, whatever works best. Realize that cultural beliefs also influence parents' expectations: in mainstream U.S. culture, toddlers are encouraged to feed themselves because independence is important. In some cultures, however, food is sacred and fed carefully to toddlers to prevent waste. Foster strong parent-child relationships by helping parents understand this stage of child development. Tell them something fun or interesting about their youngster each day. Make sure to take care of yourself: eat nutritious food, bend your knees, not your back, when picking up children. Spend time with other adults and caregivers. Congratulate yourself for the important role you play in the lives of others. Last but not least, don't forget to enjoy your own family!

Suggestions for Activities

The Environment – Toddlers need outdoor and indoor space to play actively. Some need a quiet place, somewhat away from the action, where they can relax and watch. Many sleep more easily when in a separate, quiet space, so provide a calm place to sleep. The goal is a balance between an environment that is interesting, but not overwhelming. (Some children get more easily overwhelmed than others by too much color or sound.) Pictures of toddlers and their families help youngsters remember that their parents will indeed return.

How to Play – Toddlers learn from active involvement with any material. But they learn much more when adults often talk and play *with* them, rather than just watch them play. Adults can gradually build the attention span of older toddlers (age 2 or 2 1/2) by pointing out new and interesting things to do with the same object. Adults can alternate between showing new possibilities (“If you turn the box over, you’ll see how it opens.”) and praising youngsters for doing something new (“You opened the box!”). Caregivers can demonstrate imaginative play, such as rocking a baby doll to sleep or saying “varoom varoom” while moving a car.

Skills	Activities
<p>Language</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Encourage children to talk, sing, imitate sounds of animals, birds and trucks. • Discuss books with easy-to-turn pages: toddlers learn more when they can point, name pictures and answer questions, such as "Where is the pony?" (Finishing the book is less important than stimulating discussion.) • Encourage conversations with finger plays, felt boards and puppets. • Take walks around the block and talk about everything you see.
<p>Small Muscle</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide large crayons, washable markers, tempera paint – toddlers love to see the designs that appear after their hands dance across the paper. • Encourage water play with plastic cups, ladles, funnels, sieves, pumps and sponges in a sink or bucket. • Let toddlers play in sand with toys for digging, pouring, sifting and building. • Provide playdough for mashing and rolling. • Provide a hammer and "peg bench," building blocks and little cars that are easy to hold, wind-up toys for manipulation, wooden trains and tracks.
<p>Large Muscle</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Let toddlers dance, play drums, chase or play hide-and-seek or "wrestle" with a gentle adult. • Provide toys to pull (a string tied to a box), to push and ride on (without pedals). • Provide safe places to climb – a sofa, small slide or climbing structure. • Provide things to crawl through, such as a blanket over a low table. • Take children on a walk around the block or to a nearby toddler playground or library.

Related BANANAS Resources:

BANANAS has many handouts – available by mail, at our office or from our website – and videos for child care providers and parents. For a complete listing, see our publication and video lists.

Handouts:

- BANANAS Baby Briefs (from birth to age 2 years)
- Choosing Child Care for a Child With Special Needs
- Choosing Infant and Toddler Care
- Employing a Limited-English Speaking In-Home Caregiver
- Exploring the Senses with Infants and Toddlers
- Ideas for Gross Motor Activities
- No Bites!
- Safety Factors to Check for in a Family Child Care Program
- Sample Agreement for Parents and In-Home Caregivers
- Separating from Infants and Toddlers
- What is Parent-Created Child Care?
- Where/How to Look for a Caregiver to Work in Your Home

Videos:

- Supporting Children’s Active Learning
- Terrific Two’s
- Toddler Takes: Toddlers at Play
- Together in Care: Meeting the Intimacy Needs of Infants & Toddlers

Books in our Reference Library:

- Lieberman, Alicia. The Emotional Life of the Toddler. The Free Press, 1995.
- Nelsen, Jane; Erwin, Cheryl. Positive Discipline for Child Care Providers. Prima Publishing, 2002.
- Silberg, Jackie. Games to Play with Two Year Olds. Gryphon House, 1993.
- Wilmes, Liz & Dick. 2’s Sensory Play Experience. Building Blocks, 1996.