

# *I am a Toddler*



*I am 2, I am not terrible... I am frustrated. I am nervous, stressed out, overwhelmed, and confused. I need a hug.*



## How does my toddler learn?

Your child's brain growth and development has been advancing rapidly from the very moment that he/she was conceived. They have been collecting incredible amounts of information, creating brain connections called synapses. They are crucial because they transmit brain impulses that control body functions, thinking, feeling, learning, memory, and language. Thousands of these are created daily through experiences. Synapses that are used frequently will strengthen and remain. Hugging or reading to your child are examples of activities that help encourage the growth and strengthening of these connections.

One important aspect of early development involves increasing the connections to the front of the brain, specifically the prefrontal cortex. This is commonly known as the area of "executive functions" because it is involved in much goal-directed behaviour such as organizing activities, planning, problem-solving, and evaluation of our own behaviours.

Your toddler develops his physical skills and cognitive abilities in parallel. Cognitive growth doesn't happen all at once, and some forms occur earlier and some later. Keep in mind that there is a wide range in typical toddler development and that all children reach milestones at different times. Physical development at this stage is centred on walking, while cognitive focuses on processing newly-acquired knowledge so that it makes sense and discovering a sense of self (his own body and name, "I," "me," and "mine", which usually occurs between 18 and 24 months).

## Developmental Areas

**Cognitive** : Includes skills pertaining to learning and thinking. (i.e. Attention regulation, problem solving, memory, sorting).

**Social and Emotional** : Refers to your child's ability to make and maintain relationships. Includes developing conflict resolution skills and self-control. (i.e. Sense of self, developing empathy, expressing emotion, interest in being social, turn taking).

**Speech and Language** : The ability to use and understand language. (i.e. Non-verbal communication, developing vocabulary, following instruction).

**Fine Motor** : Your child's ability to use small muscles, specifically in their hands and fingers. (i.e. Using a spoon, holding a pencil/crayon, stringing beads).

**Gross Motor** : Child's ability to use large muscles. (i.e. Walking, Running, jumping).

### I AM TWO.

I was not built to sit still,  
keep my hands to myself,  
take turns,  
stand in line,  
or keep quiet all of the time.

I need:  
motion,  
novelty,  
adventure,  
and to engage  
the world  
with my whole body.

Let me play.  
(I'm learning all the time!)

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## 7 Things you toddler wishes you knew



**1. Please tell me again:** *When you say, “How many times do I have to tell you?” it seems you are annoyed with me. But I really do need you to tell me lots and lots of times.*

**Why/what to do:** We, as adults, have learned the ability to focus our attention, remember instructions, and control our impulses. Our toddlers don't yet have that skill. For a toddler brain to learn, they need that repetition. So keep reminding and comforting and guiding your toddler because every single experience is building your toddlers ability to control their impulse.

**2. I don't know how to say what I need to say:** *I'm feeling big, scary feelings, and I don't have the words to tell you how it feels. When the bad feelings overwhelm me, I cant think straight.*

**Why/What to do:** Toddlers feel negative emotions just like adults do– they may feel angry, frustrated, sad, scared, anxious, confused, and so on. The part of the brain that is capable of stopping, thinking and deciding how to react isn't fully developed in toddlers yet. Your toddler needs your help to put words to their feelings. Labeling an emotion is one of the best ways to help them feel heard so they can calm down and move forward.

**3. I can't hear you right now:** *I can tell you're trying to help me feel better, but these big emotions are too much for me. I can't understand what you're trying to tell me.*

**Why/What to do:** when a toddler gets into a tantrum their brains are essentially hijacked by the emotions and stress hormones. Leaving them incapable of controlling their body or emotions, and of using their higher-order thinking skills. In the middle of a tantrum, don't ask questions, don't use logic, and don't tell your toddler “that's not important”. Focus on validating your child's emotion first. Then when everyone is calm you can tell the story of what happened and build those brain connections for the future.

**4. I'm not trying to be difficult:** *You seem frustrated with me right now, but I'm not trying to make you frustrated. I'm just trying to learn.*

**Why/What to do:** In order for our toddlers to learn they need to make mistakes. Pick your battles, if your toddler eats 3 peas instead of 20 or wants to leave the house wearing polka dots and plaid, it may not be worth it to turn it into a fight.

**5. I need you to be kind and firm at the same time:** *I like doing things myself, but I need you to keep me safe.*

**Why/What to do:** When your child enters toddlerhood, they learn that they are their own person, separate from you. This is when they discover they have the power to act on their own separate ideas, opinions and preferences. Your toddler needs you to set limits when something is important. To avoid overreacting, first try to connect with your toddler on why they made that decision. That way, you can let them know that there's nothing wrong with how they felt, then you can set the limit.

**6. I'm not ignoring you:** *I'm just not sure what you want me to do.*

**Why/What to do:** Suppose your toddler is running through the house and you say "don't run". What sticks in your child's mind is simply "run". When you say "stop", or "don't", your child has to double-process your request. First, they have to understand what you don't want them to do. Then, they have to translate that into what you do want them to do. Which can be confusing. Erase don't and stop from your vocabulary with your toddler because they're setting you both up for frustration. Reframe your statements to communicate what you do want them to do.

**7. When I feel loved, I do better:** *I'm happiest when we get some special time together every day. Then I want to do everything I can to make you happy with me.*

**Why/What to do:** Toddler's need time for connection. Science shows that in happy relationships, you need a ratio of five positive interactions to every one negative interaction. If you have too few positive interactions to balance out the negative ones, you'll end up with an unhappy, unhealthy relationship.

To get **more** cooperation from your toddler, aim for five positive interactions to balance out every negative experience.