

How to help children learn

- **Try to see things from their point of view.** Understanding how children see the world will help you to help them as they learn.
- **Let children be children.** A skilled five year old grows from a busy four year old, a curious three year old, a cuddled two year old, an adventurous one year old and a communicative baby.
- **Be a playful companion.** You can enjoy childhood with the children as well.
- **Feelings matter** – both the children's emotions and your own are part of any situation with young children. It is very helpful to be aware of your own moods as well as the children's when enjoying yourself with them and during difficult moments.
- **Don't expect to be perfect.** Everyone does something they don't mean sometimes. Children can be forgiving as long as we are thoughtful most of the time and are ready to say sorry when we should.



Toddlers and very early learning

Jennie Lindon

Toddlers are very busy people. They are keen to learn about the world around them and ready to be fascinated by things that seem ordinary to you. They can spend part of a morning thrilled to run around the park – getting better at starting, stopping, going forwards then backwards, and at making quick right turns. Then they might stay still for ages, turning over stones and twigs. If all is going well, toddlers change completely in their second year of life. They are able to move around independently. They talk in their own words and understand more of what you say.

Good toys for learning

Toddlers love playing around with interesting materials. They need a good store of things to play with, but they don't all need to be bought toys. Before you spend your money, look carefully at a toy. Can toddlers use it in different ways? Will it add to what they enjoy already? A lot of shop-bought toys are advertised as being good for 'early learning'. But toddlers learn by having lots of different experiences, not by playing with just a few plastic toys. If a toy has limited interest, toddlers will soon abandon it for the more interesting box that it came in. Spend your money on play materials that you cannot make or gather together. Here are some good ideas for toys either to buy or to gather together from what you already have.

- A solid wheeled trolley has a long play life. It provides balance for young toddlers who still wobble when they walk. But soon the same trolley is just right to carry around teddies or a toddler's collection of fir cones.
- Toddlers need a generous supply of basic wooden blocks and plastic brick shapes. First they build simple towers or like to knock down your building. Toddlers develop their first ideas about space and shape by putting bricks in and out of containers, again and again. Later

in early childhood, they and their friends will build anything that fires their imagination – a garage for the cars, a cage for their dinosaurs.

- Toddlers are keen on piling, filing and sorting. You can buy a simple shape sorter toy, but they learn just as well with a range of different size containers and a home-made 'posting box'.
- Large cardboard boxes are useful because they can be sat in, pushed along and decorated. Soon they will become a bus to sit in, a cave to hide in and the table in a pretend café.
- Toddlers love dressing up, but they do not need specially bought outfits. They like hats, bags and clothes that are easy to put on, like a fancy scarf or a waistcoat. As their imagination grows, an attractive piece of material can be a cloak, a wraparound skirt or the way to become a butterfly.
- Collect a big bag or basket of safe household materials that otherwise go in the recycling or the bin. Young scientists have fun exploring cardboard tubes, wide-neck plastic bottles, corks and cotton reels, tins (empty and cleaned), supermarket packaging, old-fashioned dolly pegs. Check that anything is safe to be sucked, because younger toddlers will put some things in their mouth. Avoid polystyrene packaging and, obviously, anything with sharp edges.

Toddlers learn through having time and space to practise. They repeat actions, often with slight variations. In this way they get to understand how things work. They become confident about what causes what, and what will fit or not. Try hard to look beyond the apparent mess to what toddlers are exploring and what they have learned. Of course, it is sensible for you to make some ground rules like 'Paint or play dough stays on this table on the plastic cloth'.

Make it easier for toddlers to be part of tidying up by giving time for the finding, wiping and putting back into containers or baskets.

Learning through daily life

Toddlers do not only learn through what adults think of as play. They learn a great deal when you get out with them into the neighbourhood. An ordinary local circuit interests toddlers and very young children. On a local walk or trip to the market, allow enough time for them to stop and stare. Toddlers say and show that they remember a familiar corner as well as point out the newly arrived crane on the building site. Toddler general knowledge is built through ordinary experiences such as posting letters, buying some bread and watching a big black beetle cross the pavement.

Once toddlers are mobile, they are keen to be your apprentice in ordinary domestic routines. Give them some extra time, then toddlers feel helpful.

- You will see real concentration as they use a dustpan and brush or water the garden.
- When they help with tidying up, toddlers understand that the animals go back with the farm and the jigsaws go on that shelf.
- On a shopping trip, let them spot the milk and make some choices about fruit and vegetables. They feel involved and learn many more words.
- Toddlers are ready for simple cooking, as well as helping with routines like laying the table. They start to grasp basic counting in situations that make sense like, 'We need one more spoonful' or 'We need two cups' (hold up your fingers for a visual clue).

It will be a long haul before toddlers can take care of themselves completely. They cannot practise feeding themselves or putting on a

jumper if you are usually tempted to do it, to save on mess and time. Quicker is not always better, once you home in on chances for toddlers to learn in the longer term. As well as the physical skills, they learn about cause and effect: what follows what and simple forward planning.

The power of toddler thinking

Really early literacy matters, and the best way to encourage it is by enjoying books with toddlers. Notice when they have favourites and be ready to read those many times. They enjoy dramatic pauses and repeating phrases that they can say as well. Some toddlers start to tell themselves the story and show that they already understand how books work – by turning the pages the right way, or perhaps saying ‘The end’ when the story is finished. Toddlers need to find out that pictures stand for real objects. Be excited when they link what they see outside – a big sunflower or a fire engine – to the picture in their book.

Nursery rhymes help children understand sound patterns in a way that will help them to read and write later on. They also help children learn the detail of the many sounds that make up language.

Between their first and second birthdays, toddlers learn enough about how their world works to start imagining things and playing ‘pretend’. The first pretend actions are often short – a toddler might pretend to feed using an empty spoon. But soon they will pretend by putting Teddy to bed or moving their cars along a ‘road’. Toddlers start to make look-and-say jokes, like pretending a bowl is their hat or calling somebody by the wrong name on purpose. Their grin says, ‘You know that I know that you know that this is all just pretend’.

There’s a lot going on inside a toddler’s head. But it can be hard for adults to understand the way they think. There is a temptation to rush them on to ideas like colour or shape. These ideas seem obvious to us, but there is no good reason to act as if colour and shape are more important than any of the other ideas that toddlers are beginning to grasp.

It is really useful to understand how language unfolds. First of all, toddlers learn words that are the names of familiar people and objects. Then they learn words that stand for actions. Only then do they start to have the words that describe their world, that are about ideas. This development is usually in the second part of the second year of life. Listen to older toddlers and you may hear ‘big’, ‘high’, ‘tasty’, ‘hot’, ‘smelly’ and other words for ideas. Such words cannot make sense until toddlers have plenty of words for naming and actions, because the words need to link together. ‘Big’, ‘high’ and ‘hot’ are ideas words that cannot stand alone. You cannot have a big – a bus is big.

You can help toddlers make the exciting move into ideas when you watch and listen to what makes sense so far. There is no rush to get them to learn. Instead, drop the words into conversation at a sensible opportunity. For example, ‘Would you like your blue trousers today?’ or ‘Gosh that was a loud sneeze!’ Notice and be excited about any words that include ideas. Colour and shape will come in good time.

Toys from natural materials

- Toddlers like the feel of water and use simple items to pour, fill and empty. In a family home, let them have water in the sink and organise a safe set of steps if necessary. Sand, or other dry ingredients like rice or pasta, can be in a washing-up bowl or deep seed tray.
- Toddlers are ready for simple art and crafts. Hands and fingers are the best first art tools. But soon they will manage thick paint brushes, wedges of sponge, wax crayons and chunky chalks. Let them spread out with their paper and find ways to take it all outside in warmer weather. Let them enjoy the doing and avoid rushing them to make something in particular.
- Toddlers enjoy play dough because they can get hands and fingers on it for poking, rolling and shaping. It is worth buying a little rolling pin. Pastry cutters and shapes can come from your cupboard or the household section of a supermarket.

Toddlers and very early learning

Useful publications

Ros Bayley (2006) *More than happy and sad: young children and emotions*, London: Early Education.

Sally Featherstone & Clare Beswick (2003) *Little baby books series*, London: A&C Black (+44 (0) 20 7758 0200).

Anita Hughes (2006) *Developing play for the under 3s*, London: David Fulton.

Jennie Lindon (2006) *Care and caring matter – young children learning through care*, London: Early Education.

Jennie Lindon (2008) *What does it mean to be two?* London: Practical Pre-School Books

Jennie Lindon, Kevin Kelman & Alice Sharp (2008) *Play and learning in the early years: practical activities and games for under 3s*, London: Step forward publishing.

Anni McTavish (2007) *Feelings and behaviour: a creative approach*, London: Early Education.

Useful contacts

Family Information Service (FIS) – your local FIS will be able to let you know of services dealing with this subject, whether provided through Sure Start, a children’s centre, family centre or other organisation. For details of how to contact your FIS, visit ChildcareLink: www.childcarelink.gov.uk

Fathers Direct: www.fathersdirect.com

National Family and Parenting Institute: www.nfpi.org.uk

Parentline Plus: helpline 0808 800 2222; www.parentlineplus.org.uk

Jennie Lindon is a chartered psychologist, with over 30 years’ experience of working with early years services for children and their families. She has written many books and magazine articles for parents and early years practitioners.

Early Education

The British Association for Early Childhood Education

Early Education

136 Cavell Street, London E1 2JA

tel 020 7539 5400

www.early-education.org.uk

British Association for Early Childhood Education (Early Education)

Learning together series

The Learning together series of leaflets aims to help parents and other caring adults understand children’s development, play an active part in their learning and enjoy the children they spend time with. The leaflets cover a wide range of topics, including life with babies and toddlers, children’s behaviour, being outdoors, drawing and writing, reading, maths, ICT and equality – and more. The leaflets can be downloaded from the Early Education website www.early-education.org.uk

Early Education promotes the right of all children to education of the highest quality. It provides support, advice and information on best practice for everyone concerned with the education and care of young children from birth to eight.

