

# Parenting

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*Toddlers*  
*- 1 to 3 years*

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In this stage children need to start learning to think and solve problems, and how to appropriately express and handle feelings. They are developing a sense of themselves, and learning empathy and how to cooperate with others. How you interact with them and the others around you will influence how they develop these skills and abilities

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## Typical behaviours and how you can help

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### **Wanting to play with other children, but also protective of their own space and toys**

Encourage social contact, show them how to share, and teach respect for other people's special possessions and space by respecting theirs. Allow a special toy that they don't have to share, though this may have to be put away when others are around.

### **Conflict when playing with others**

Model positive interactions in your own relationships. Play with your child and show them how to take turns and to use words to express needs, wants, and feelings. Talk about feelings and how to recognise and cope with them. Teach empathy by, for example, talking about why the baby might be crying and what she might need to make her happy again.

### **May resort to hitting, biting, or hair-pulling when frustrated or angry with others**

Remove them from the situation and calm them down. These behaviours are often a

result of children not knowing how to express themselves – their language skills are still developing. When they are calm, talk to them about their feelings and appropriate ways of expressing them. Have a consequence for such behaviour – confiscation of a toy or privilege – but allow the child to earn it back earlier with good behaviour. See TIME IN for more information about these strategies.

### **Wanting to do things themselves, and having their own ideas of what they want**

Encourage independence by allowing them to make simple decisions such as whether to walk or go in the stroller, wear a blue or a green top, etc. Be patient and allow the extra time needed for them to do these things. Help them cope with frustration if they can't do something, and don't worry if it takes a while to master things like buttons – their fine motor skills are still developing and different children learn these skills at different rates.

### **Testing boundaries, showing defiance – “no!” “you can't make me” etc.**

Use “yes” more than “no”, even if it is followed by “after...” eg. “Yes, we can go to

the park, after we've tidied up the building blocks”. Help them with tasks such as tidying – “you put those away and I'll put these away” – and praise and encourage compliance. Allow them some choice – “will you pick up the dress-ups or the dolls, and what would you like me to do?” Work with their desire to be independent wherever possible, but be consistent about which behaviours are acceptable and which are not.

### **Developing a sense of humour, responding to the absurd**

Encourage humour and use it to help your child through emotional difficulties. Use humour to teach processes – do something in a ridiculous way and allow the child to show you how it should be done. Read and enjoy funny stories and pictures with them. Be exuberant, and enjoy their humour.

### **Starting to play ‘pretend’ and role-play games**

Let them dress up. Provide toys or objects such as plastic plates, cups, and bottles, boxes, blankets, dolls etc. Use different voices for different characters when you read to them.

## **Keen to climb, run, and explore, and to experiment with crafts and drawing**

Provide lots of opportunities for safe physical play. Recognise that undesirable behaviours such as jumping on the furniture can be caused by boredom or the need to let off some energy, and take them to the park to run around. Provide paper and chunky crayons, and keep some playdough in the fridge for them. Drawing and modelling develop their fine motor skills, and this will help them later on when they are learning important skills like writing.

## **Starting to follow simple instructions, starting to understand cause-and-effect**

Be consistent so that they know what to expect. Give very simple, clear directions – they do not yet have the ability to understand more. Help them if they need it. Encourage play with cause-and-effect, such as building blocks and pouring water between vessels. Talk with them about what is happening and what effect their actions are having. Read to them and talk about the stories. Talk about how things work – “the wheels go around and the car goes forward when you push it”, for example.

## **Learning about time, space, shapes, relative size etc**

Read to them, and talk about the stories.

Encourage them to tell their own stories – “and then...”. Talk about what you’ve done today, what you did yesterday and what you’re going to do now/later. Look forward to tomorrow. Provide toys such as shape games, stacking cups, building blocks etc. Allow them to work out what fits where, and what sequence of actions is needed to carry out a particular task. Talk about colours and shapes, and the different ways things can be grouped together.

## **Fussy and messy eating**

Keep providing a range of different foods, even if they have rejected them before. Cutting things into different shapes and letting them help you prepare and present food can also make them more likely to try something. Let them feed themselves and expect mess – they still do not have the coordination to do this tidily.

## **Starting to develop bowel and bladder control, interested in toilet behaviours**

Praise dry nappies and offer the potty/toilet in later stages. Ask if they need to ‘go’ when you see the ‘signs’, and encourage both trying and their interest in toilet rituals – washing hands, flushing etc.

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## General parenting strategies

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- Provide lots of opportunity for play and exploration, and recognise that ‘bad’ behaviour can be caused by a range of things including boredom, hunger, over-tiredness, and high energy. Address the cause of the behaviour, and remember that your child is not yet capable of controlling their emotions or of logical reasoning.
- Give the child words to name their emotions, and help them to express their feelings – both positive and negative – in appropriate ways. Model empathy.
- Set clear and reasonable limits, and enforce them consistently. Remain calm and don’t give in to angry outbursts. Help them deal with disappointment through soothing and calming.
- Use humour whenever possible, but always laughing with, not at. Follow your child’s lead, and encourage their imagination.
- Use “yes” more than “no”, even if it is “yes, after...”
- Keep directions clear and simple – they do not yet have the ability to understand more.
- Encourage understanding of cause-and-effect. Allow the child to safely experience these, remembering that they need to “fall over” occasionally to learn.
- Encourage independence in dressing, eating etc, and allow time for the child to do these. Offer simple choices, and praise their efforts.
- Start to provide reasons and information, and answer the “how” and “why” questions. Often children will ask the same question over and over again, but be patient – this is learning. Ask them to explain things to you – encourage them to think and talk about how things work.
- Have routines, especially around mornings and meal and bedtimes. Children feel safe with predictability.

- Encourage appropriate behaviours with positive responses, and be specific so that the child knows what they've done well. Discourage negative ones with calm, firm, consistent responses. Explain and model the appropriate behaviour.
- Cuddle them, have fun with them, and make sure they know they are loved even when you disapprove of their behaviour.

## Strategies for normal but negative behaviour

- Avoid conflict over eating. Children will eat adequately as long as food is offered. Make sure there is a variety of **healthy** food available when they are hungry, and remember that it can take many re-presentations of a food before a child will accept it. This is normal.
- Tantrums are a normal behaviour for this age group, because children are not yet able to regulate their emotions. Disappointments that seem small to an adult can be overwhelming for a child. Stay calm, don't try and reason with them, and don't give in.
- Use TIME IN rather than Time Out as a method of calming a child down, and not as punishment. Help the child to self-soothe. Enforce consequences for problem behaviour after the child has calmed down and is able to understand what is happening and why.
- Use consequences as both punishment and reward. Remove a privilege or a favourite toy (but **never** the toy they go to for soothing) as a consequence for negative behaviour, but for a short time only. Remember that time is only just starting to have meaning at this age.

Enable the child to earn their treasured item or privilege back earlier through good behaviour that is related to the behaviour you are trying to change. If the consequence is for hitting their sibling while playing, for example, they can earn it back earlier by playing nicely, not hitting or otherwise hurting, and seeking help from you if they feel they are getting angry again.

## Parent Helpline

If you have found this information useful and would like to talk with one of our trained telephone support workers, give our free Nationwide Parent Helpline a call on **0800 568 856**.

**Parent Help is a non-profit organisation supporting parents to build strong and resilient families/whānau free from abuse and neglect.**