Getting Ready for School Begins at Birth
How to Help Your Child Learn in the Early Years

12–24 Months

Language & Literacy

In the second year, toddlers become more effective communicators. They use a combination of their gestures and sounds to let you know what they are thinking and feeling. They may take your hand and walk you to the sink as if to say, "Please get me a drink.” Most children are learning and saying many new words, and at around 18 months they start putting a few together, such as "More milk." By 24 months, most children can say approximately 200 words.

Talk together. Point out and name the things you see together. Ask what it is, then wait a few seconds until you offer the answer. This gives your child a chance to respond and show you what he knows. Research shows that the more parents talk with their children, the bigger the children's vocabularies.

Share books together. Let him hold the book. Point to the pictures as you read together. Ask him to point to the baby, house, or dog. You can start to read stories that introduce ideas such as: up/down or big/little, colors, and numbers. Most children are also just beginning to learn to sing. Share books that can be sung, such as "Wheels on the Bus." Soon he’ll be “reading”—telling you the story as he turns the pages.

Thinking Skills

Toddlers are like little scientists. They are eager to figure out how everything works. For example, they might throw a ball to the ground and see that it bounces, then throw a doll to see what it will do. They also learn to use objects as tools—for example, using a stick to try to get an out-of-reach toy. Their growing memory is also an important tool in helping them learn. For example, they imitate what they see others do. Although your toddler may not repeat what you show her immediately, she may do it at a later time.

Follow your child’s lead. Toddlers can learn almost any concept through their everyday activities. If your child loves to be active, she will learn about fast and slow, up and down, and over and under as she plays on the playground. If she prefers to explore with her hands, she will learn the same concepts and skills as she builds with blocks.

One more time! Toddlers like to repeat actions over and over again. This strengthens the connections in the brain that help children master new skills. Provide interesting and challenging objects and activities that encourage her to
figure something out—such as blocks, puzzles, water, and sand.

Self-Control

Toddlers have minds of their own and strong feelings that they express with gusto. “No!” becomes a favorite word and a powerful way to assert their independence. At the same time, toddlers can become easily frustrated because there are still many things that they want to do but cannot. Routines are especially helpful now since they make children feel secure at a time when they can feel very out of control.

Teach your child limits. Setting consistent limits makes children feel safe because the limits help them know what to expect. A child who has her crayons taken away when she writes on the wall learns that she either writes on paper or she can’t use crayons.

Label and validate your child’s feelings. Letting children know that their feelings are understood helps them calm down and regain control. This doesn’t mean you give in to their demand. “I know you are mad that we had to leave the park, but hitting me is not okay. You can hit this pillow instead.” Giving a child choices is also important for helping her feel in control—that she has some say in the matter. Let her make decisions about what to wear or what to eat, within reasonable limits.

Self-Confidence

Most toddlers are eager to establish their independence. But they still need to know that their loved ones are always there for them as a “safe base.” This knowledge enables them to explore and learn. Accomplishing tasks “All by myself!” is also an important way children build self-confidence and are successful in school.

Let your child be the problem-solver. Be your child’s coach. Give her the support she needs to solve a problem but don’t solve it for her. Suggest she try other holes where the triangle shape might fit instead of putting it in for her. This makes her feel confident to take on challenges and learn new things.

Provide challenges. Watch to see what skills your child has learned and then help her take the next step. If she can easily push the buttons on the pop-up toy, offer her a new one that has more complicated ways to make the toys appear. If she is building towers with blocks, suggest that the blocks can also be a house for her stuffed animals. This helps her learn about pretend play.