child development
2-3 years

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Children between 2 and 3 years really want to find out about themselves – what they want and don't want. Because they are beginning to talk in sentences, and sometimes say things in a big confident voice, it’s easy to think that your toddler is more grown up than she really is. The most important thing to remember is that your toddler, even at this age, is still a baby. She can wait a little while, but not for long. She can hold strong feelings inside her for a little bit, but these feelings can easily burst out in a rush of excitement, fear or frustration. It can be very frightening when she loses control of such big feelings – you need to be there to hold and reassure her that she is loved.

Social and emotional
Your 2 year old is learning about relationships.
- He can sometimes imagine how other people feel, but most of the time, his own feelings are so strong that he doesn’t have room to think about other people’s feelings.
- He’s also starting to try and keep his feelings inside and can feel very bad if he thinks he’s done something wrong. Two year olds can often play together for short periods but easily get upset and cross with each other.
- Your 2 year old is still learning to see himself as a separate person.
- He knows what he wants and can seem bossy. He can be cross when you don’t let him do something or he can’t do it himself. He hasn’t learned to manage his feelings yet. This is why temper tantrums are common at this age.
- A 2 to 3 year old may play with other children for a while but he won’t share. He does what he wants, and may grab and push.
- He finds it hard to wait or make a choice.
- He can’t understand reason or control his impulses yet. Even if he knows what you want him to do, he can’t yet make himself do it if he wants to do something else.
- Your child loves to copy what adults do and the way you look, such as dressing up or digging in the garden.

Developing understanding
The world is a big and complicated place – your toddler is trying to understand the ‘rules’ and how it all makes sense.
- Because she can only see a little bit of how it works, she fills in the rest with her imagination, so her understanding of the world is a mixture of ‘real’ and imagined.
- You can help her with simple explanations of things, particularly when she asks questions.
- Be careful with your adult talk around her – she understands words better than she understands the world. She can easily misunderstand adult conversations about relationships, herself, or people she knows, which can be very worrying for her. It’s important to introduce the world to her in small bits, in ways that she can deal with.

- A 2 year old does not know that her mind is separate from those of other people. She thinks that you know what she is thinking.
- A 2 year old doesn’t yet understand what is real and what is not real, including what she sees on TV. She might blame the path if she falls over, or believe a cup fell because it wanted to.
Your child does not understand the difference between things that are alive and can think, and things that are not. For example, she may think of the sun, moon and wind in the same way that she thinks about people and pets.

Toddlers think in ‘black and white’, with nothing between. Your child might think she’s either good or bad, not that she’s good in some ways, and that this changes.

She can’t see things from another person’s point of view. This is not selfishness – she still thinks that everyone thinks and feels the same way that she does.

Physical skills

Your child is much more confident now with his physical abilities, but he doesn’t always know when to stop.

Some toddlers are shy and careful, but many will test the limits. They love to run (often away from you), swing and climb, and ride on toys. Bumps and minor falls are common too.

Don’t let your toddler run too far or climb too high without bringing him back. Your child can’t understand safety yet, so you need to keep him safe.

Provide lots of chances to play on safe equipment in sandpits and parks.

Helping your 2 to 3 year old develop his physical skills can be hard work, but is really important!

- He’s starting to learn to climb up and down stairs, kick a ball (but not usually in the right direction), and to jump off a step.
- He’s starting to undress himself and is even able to put on some clothes.

Language

Your toddler’s language will develop very quickly between 2 and 3.

- You’ll start to get an idea of what’s going on inside her head. Both of you are beginning to communicate through conversation and this can be very exciting.
- Her words or sentences might not always make sense to you, but the more she succeeds in getting her message across, the more she will want to communicate with you.

Remember to watch your own language, especially negative words like ‘no’ and ‘don’t’, as it will affect how she sees herself and the world.

- Paint a picture of a world where lots of things are possible – not where things aren’t allowed.
- Try to suggest alternatives and explain dangers as simply as you can. The way she uses positive or negative words will come from what she’s heard from you.

By 2, your toddler will be naming lots of things – dog, ball, drink.

By 3, she’ll be saying short sentences – ‘look mummy dog’.

Around 2, she can follow instructions like ‘bring your shoes here’.

By 3, more complex instructions – ‘get your shoes from your bedroom and bring them here’.

She’ll still get ‘you’ and ‘me’ mixed up sometimes.

At this age, most toddlers can’t say all their words clearly– some sounds are hard to say. If you can understand, try repeating what she just said, then answer her.

She needs to hear her words clearly, but she will get cross if you try to make her say things clearly.
Activities
Encourage your 2 to 3 year old in his attempts to explore the world, while keeping a eye on safety.
Remember that he’s only little – offer alternatives, talk about feelings, and give him some individual attention every day.

Be positive
To help him believe that the world is a positive place, help him succeed. Focus on his achievements, however small, rather than his mistakes.

Books and reading
At this age, toddlers love simple picture books with familiar things and simple stories.
Read aloud and talk about the pictures. He’ll probably want the same book over and over. This helps him to learn that some things stay the same.
Talk with your child and ask questions about what he is doing. Answer his questions. Show a real interest in what he is doing and saying – this helps him to be confident about talking.

Play
- Play is important for development as he learns to experiment, create new things, and gain skills such as sharing and waiting.
- Your toddler will enjoy copying household jobs like using the phone, sweeping, ‘playing house’ and digging in the garden.
- Provide toys for stacking, things for pulling apart, blocks, simple jigsaws, toy cars, animals and dolls.
- He’ll begin to enjoy playground equipment like slides, sand pits and paddle pools.
- Always supervise children around water.
- Encourage him to dress, feed and wash himself.
- A little bit of TV is OK at this age – programs for his own age group. He might even start to sing and dance along, especially if you join in too.
- Music can help your child with rhythm and sounds.
- Don’t expect him to do everything you ask, especially while he’s doing something he enjoys.
- Warn him a few minutes before he needs to stop doing something he likes.
- For example, he may cry and shout when he has to leave a playground.
- This might upset you, but remember that he was having fun there, so don’t stay away from playgrounds. They are fun, and good places to learn skills such as climbing and running.
- In time, he’ll learn that even though he has to leave, he will come back for another play.
- Sometimes it helps to offer something else interesting, like ‘we’re going home to see daddy’.

ALERT
By 3, children can usually:
- run fast and stop without falling over
- name many objects and show they understand the words (either with words or by making sounds or using signs)
- say many words that you can understand even if the words are not clear
- have fewer tantrums and be able to accept that they can’t have everything they want
- play imagination games, such as pushing cars around, giving you a ‘drink’, playing with dolls or getting dressed up to be ‘mum’ or ‘dad’.
- If your child cannot do these things yet, check with your family doctor or child health nurse.
Toilet training

It is usually at this age that your child shows you that she’s ready to use the toilet and finish with nappies, but some children will still prefer their nappies. If you have another baby, your child may even want to go back to using nappies.

- Let her set her own pace and do whatever she feels comfortable doing. For instance, if she wants to use her nappy to do a poo, she might be happy to help you put it in the toilet afterwards.
- Children who are fussy about getting things right are sometimes anxious about using the toilet in case it all ‘goes wrong’.
- If you’re not getting anywhere, stop and wait a while until she is a bit older, then try again. Although you’re probably looking forward to no more nappies, don’t rush – let it happen in its own time.
- If you feel angry or there is tension between you and your toddler over using the toilet, talk to your child health nurse or doctor.

Being tense, anxious or cross makes it harder to let wee or poo go into the potty or toilet.

If you are worried at all about toilet training, please talk to your child health nurse or doctor, or check out some of the resources on the back of this booklet.

Summary

Social and emotional

By 2½ years, your child will probably be:

- trying hard to be independent, saying ‘no’ or ‘me do’ a lot – but he’s still very dependent on you
- unable to control his feelings – tantrums are common especially when he’s tired or frustrated
- unable to share with others
- starting to play imagination games – putting teddy to bed or driving a car around the floor.

Talk with your doctor or child health nurse if your child is:

- often has tantrums
- doesn’t play with adults or older children.

By 3 years, your child will probably be:

- trying to copy adults and can sometimes help, like putting toys away
- playing lots of imagination games and starting to join in with other children’s play.

Talk with your doctor or child health nurse if your child is:

- cannot run smoothly, especially if he has a limp
- is not able to safely climb stairs or onto low furniture.

SAFETY

Safety is a big issue as toddlers are curious and very mobile, but still too young to understand danger.

- Make sure all dangerous items, including medicines, are locked away up high.
- Secure furniture, including bookshelves and TVs, to a wall.
- Check that the hot water is set to 50 degrees or less.
- Always supervise children around water.

Motor development

By 2½ years, your child will be able to:

- climb on and off furniture
- climb up stairs
- run smoothly, and climb on some play equipment
- kick a large ball gently but not usually in the ‘right’ direction.
- throw a ball in roughly the right direction.

Talk with your doctor or child health nurse if your child is:

- mostly in his own world rather than interacting with others.
By 3 years, your child will be able to:
- push or pull large toys around to where he wants them
- walk alone up and down stairs
- use the pedals on a pedal toy
- stand and walk on tiptoe
- kick a ball forcefully
- throw a ball and catch one with extended arms.

Talk with your doctor or child health nurse if your child:
- is not able to run as smoothly as other children of the same age
- is not climbing skilfully.

Daily activities

By 2½ years, your child will probably be:
- able to feed himself with a spoon and cup
- able to help to dress and undress himself
- very active, resisting attempts to stop him doing things
- have no idea about danger – even if he can say that something is dangerous
- ready for toilet training – though this varies

Talk with your doctor or child health nurse if your child:
- is much more – or much less – active than other children of the same age
- can’t feed himself most of the time.

By 3 years, your child will probably be:
- able to undress and put on some easy-to-use clothes
- able to eat with a spoon and fork
- ready for toilet training – though some children won’t manage this until they are nearly 4 years old.

Speech and language

By 2½ years your child will probably:
- use well over 100 recognisable words – they may not be clear as he still can’t say all the sounds in the words
- put the words into short sentences
- follow simple instructions
- talk during play with more understandable words
- let people know what he wants using words.

By 3 years, your child will probably:
- talk clearly enough for strangers to understand some of what he’s saying
- use words such as ‘me’ and ‘you’ correctly
- ask lots of questions starting with ‘what’, ‘where’, ‘why’
- listen to stories, asking for favourite ones over and over again
- make up long stories while playing.

Talk with your doctor or child health nurse if your child:
- is not using short sentences to let others know what he wants
- is sometimes not talking clearly enough for you to know what he wants
- seems to be in a ‘world of his own’ – not responding when other people talk to him.

Your child is unique

Every child is different and may develop at different rates. So, if your child does not do some of these things, he may be ‘working’ on a different area of learning and development. However, children usually follow the same pattern of development, and it’s good to feel that your child is developing normally, in their own unique way.

If you are worried about your child’s development, or if your child is very different from other children, talk with a your doctor or child health nurse. If there is a problem, it’s better to get help early.
For more information contact

- **HealthyWA**
  www.healthywa.wa.gov.au
- **Local child health nurse**
- **Local family doctor**
- **Ngala Helpline** (8am–8pm everyday)
  (08) 9368 9368 (Outside metro 1800 111 546)
  www.ngala.com.au
- **Raising Children Network**
  www.raisingchildren.net.au
- **Kidsafe WA** (8.30am–5pm weekdays)
  (08) 6244 4880 (Outside metro 1800 802 244)
  www.kidsafewa.com.au
- **Red Nose** (Sids and Kids)
  rednose.com.au

We’ve used ‘he’ and ‘she’ in turn - please change to suit your child.

This document can be made available in alternative formats on request for a person with a disability.