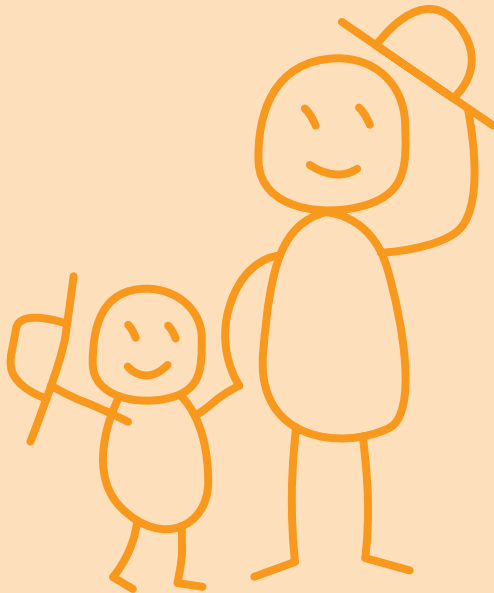


# child development 2-3 years



Toddlers between two and three really want to find out about themselves and what they want and don't want. Because they are beginning to talk in sentences, and sometimes say things in a big and definite voice, we can be tricked into thinking that our toddlers are more grown up than they really are. The most important thing to remember about your children at this age is that they are still babies. 'The Terrible Two's' is a well known phrase that is often used because of their ability to sometimes do a good imitation of a grown up bully.

They can wait a little while but not for long. They can hold their strong feelings inside a little bit, but their feelings can easily burst out in a rush of excitement, fear and frustration. Losing control of such big feelings can be very frightening for them and they need lots of physical contact and reassurance that they are lovable.

## Social and emotional development

Your two year old is learning about relationships. They are sometimes able to imagine how other people feel, but most of the time their own feelings of jealousy and loving passion for the people in their family are so strong that they don't have room for imagining other people's feelings. They are starting to try and keep their feelings inside and can feel very bad if they think they have done a wrong thing.

They can often play together for short periods but easily get upset and cross with each other.

- A two year old is still learning to see himself as a separate person and therefore often wants to say 'No'. He knows what he wants and may appear quite bossy and become cross when he cannot do something or is stopped from doing something, because he hasn't really learned to manage feelings yet. As a result temper tantrums are quite common in this age group.
- A two to three year old may play with other children for a short while but he cannot share. He acts in response to what he wants and may grab and push.
- A two to three year old finds it hard to wait or make a choice.

- A two to three year old cannot yet understand reason or control his impulses - he may know what you want him to do but 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, e.g. making houses out of boxes and rugs, dressing up, digging in the garden.

## Developing understanding

The world is a big and complicated place, and between two and three children are trying to understand the 'rules' and how it all makes sense. Because they are only in a position to see a little bit of how it works they fill in the rest with their imagination, so their understanding of the world around them is a mixture of 'real' and imagined. They will be greatly helped by simple explanations of things, often in response to their questions why.

Be careful about your adult talk around your toddler. Their understanding of words is beyond their understanding of the world and overhearing adult conversations about relationships, themselves or people they know can be easily misunderstood and can be very worrying for them. It is important to introduce the world to them in bits that they can cope with.

- A two year old does not know that her mind is separate from those of other people. She thinks that her parents know what she is thinking. At three years of age she will have more of an understanding of herself as a separate person.
- Two year olds have difficulty with reality and may blame the path if they fall over, or believe a vase 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, e.g. she may think of the sun and the moon and the wind in the same way that she thinks about people and pets.
- Two year olds don't yet understand that all of their body belongs to them, so may be frightened of losing part of themselves when they see broken bodies, e.g. on TV.

- A two year old has little understanding of what is real and what is not real, e.g. on TV programs.
- Before two or three, children think in ‘black and white’ e.g. they think of themselves as good or bad, not as a child who is sometimes good in some ways and sometimes bad in others.
- Three year olds have difficulty in seeing a situation from others’ point of view - this is not selfishness, it is because they still think that everyone thinks and feels the same as they do.
- Your child will enjoy some make believe play and be able to play out little stories e.g. bath the doll, then feed it and put it to bed.
- Three year olds can usually do some scribbling, lots of lines, dots and circles, but not yet a picture.

## Physical skills

Your child is much more confident now with his physical abilities but he doesn’t have a very good idea about ‘when to stop’. Some toddlers are shy and careful but it is common for them at this age to test the limits. They love to run (often in the opposite direction from you!), swing and climb and ride on toys they can push with their feet (they cannot manage pedals yet), but they can easily get it wrong and bumps and minor falls are common. Don’t let them run too far or climb too high without bringing them back. They need to know that you know the limits of what is safe even if they don’t! They cannot keep themselves safe even if they can say what they can, or cannot do.

You can help them develop their skill by providing chances for them to play on safe equipment, in sandpits and parks. As they can’t be left to play unsupervised but have lots of energy it can be very demanding and tiring helping your two to three year old develop his physical skills.

### **Between two to three years:**

- children will learn how to climb up stairs, and down them, learn to kick a ball (but not usually in the ‘right’ direction), start to be able to jump off a step.
- they can start being able to get undressed and can often start to be able to get some clothes back on.

## Language development

Your toddler's language is probably developing very quickly between two and three. You start to get some idea of what is going on in your child's world inside her head. You are two separate people who are beginning to communicate through a conversation and this can be very exciting. Often her words or sentences don't make sense to you, but clearly the more she is successful in getting her message across the more she will want to communicate with you.

Try to watch your own use of language, particularly the use of negative words like 'no' and 'don't', as it will have a powerful effect on your toddler's view of herself and the world. You don't want to paint a picture of a world where nothing is allowed but rather a positive picture where many things are possible. So, in guiding behaviour, try to suggest alternatives and explain dangers as simply as you can. You will know the words you use most to them and whether those are positive or negative words because those are the words you will hear most often when they are speaking to you!

- By two many children are naming lots of things such as dog, ball, drink, and by the end of this year most are saying short sentences (e.g. 'look mummy dog').
- Around two many children are able to follow an instruction such as 'bring your shoes here' and by three most children can follow more complex instructions such as 'go and get your shoes from your bedroom and bring them here'.
- They will still get 'you' and 'me' mixed up sometimes.
- Most children of this age will not be able to say all of their words clearly. Some sounds are much harder to say than others (See the topic '**Learning to talk**' for more about talking).
- If you are able to understand her, repeat what she said clearly, then answer her. She needs to hear her words clearly, but she will get cross if you try to make her say things clearly.

## What you can do

Encourage your two to three year old in his attempts to explore the world while keeping a firm eye on what is safe for him. Remember that they are only little, offer them alternatives, talk about feelings and give them individual attention for some time every day. If we want them to believe that the world is a positive place to live in and they can live in it successfully, we need to create small opportunities for their success and notice when they achieve - no matter how small these achievements might be.

Two to three year olds love simple picture books with familiar things and simple stories. Read aloud to them and talk about the pictures. They usually want the same book over and over. This helps them 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 and in this way you will help him to be confident about talking.
- Play is important for your child's development as he learns to experiment, create new things and gain skills such as sharing and waiting.
- Your child will enjoy copying household tasks, e.g. using the telephone, sweeping, 'playing house' and digging in the garden.
- Provide toys for stacking, things for pulling apart, blocks, simple jigsaws, toy cars, animals, dolls etc.
- He will begin to enjoy playground equipment, e.g. slippery dip, sand pit, paddle pools (under supervision).
- Encourage his skills in dressing, eating and washing himself.
- Your child may enjoy watching a suitable television program for his own age group and during this year may start to sing along with the presenters, especially if you sing along too.
- Music can help your child with rhythm and sounds.
- Don't expect him to do all of the things you ask him to do, especially if he is doing something he enjoys.

- He will need to have a warning that he will need to stop something he likes soon, but he will usually protest. Many children cry and shout when they have to leave a playground for example. This is normal for a child, and distressing for parents. Try to remember that he was having fun doing things with you, so don't stay away from playgrounds. They are fun and good places to learn skills such as climbing and running. Sometimes it helps to entice with something else interesting, e.g. we are going home to see daddy.

## What to watch out for

Children by three usually can:

- 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
- be having less tantrums and being able to accept that they cannot have everything that 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 yet do these things check with your family doctor or child health nurse.

## Toileting

It is usually in this year that your child shows you that she is ready to use the toilet and finish using nappies. However this is not always the case and some toddlers will still be clinging to their nappies at the end of this year or they may want to return to their nappies if a new baby has come into the family.

Try to walk with them at their own pace and encourage them to take responsibility for whatever they feel comfortable doing. For instance

if they want to use their nappy to do a poo they might be happy to help you put it in the toilet, which is where it will always go one day. Children who are ‘fussy’ and like to have things perfect are sometimes anxious about using the toilet in case it all ‘goes wrong’.

If you do not make progress with helping your child to learn about using the potty or toilet, stop for a while until she is a bit older and try again. She may just not be old enough to manage. If you start to feel angry that she can’t do what you want her to do and there is tension between you and your toddler over using the toilet, get help from a health professional because being tense, anxious or cross makes it harder to let wee or poo go into the potty or toilet. Although it is a great relief to be finished with nappies, and for some of us that day can’t come soon enough, we can promise you that it will definitely happen in its own time. See the topic ‘**Toilet training**’ for more ideas.

## Summary

### **Social and emotional development**

By two and a half years, children are usually:

- trying hard to be independent, saying ‘no’ a lot, or ‘me do’ (but they are still very dependent on their parents)
- unable to control their feelings, tantrums are common especially when tired or frustrated
- unable to share with others
- starting to play imagination games, such as putting a doll to bed or driving a car around on the floor.

**There may be a problem if the child:**

- is having tantrums very often
- does not play with adults or older children.

By three years, children are usually:

- trying to copy adults, and may be able to be helpful (e.g. help with putting toys away)



- playing lots of imagination games and starting to join in with other children's play.

**There may be a problem if the child:**

- is not playing imagination games (using toys the way they are 'meant' to be used, e.g. pushing a car along a 'road' rather than mostly focusing on the wheels)
- is mostly 'in his own world' rather than interacting with others.

## **Motor development**

By two and a half years, children are usually able to:

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

**There may be a problem if the child cannot:**

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

By three years children are usually able to:

- push or pull large toys around to where they want 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 on extended arms.

**There may be a problem if the child:**

- is not able to run as smoothly as other children of the same age
- is not climbing skilfully.

## Daily activities

By two and a half years, children are usually:

- able to feed themselves with a spoon and cup
- able to help to dress and undress
- very active, resisting attempts to stop them doing things and have no idea about danger (even if they can say that something is dangerous)
- many, but not all, develop to the stage that they can manage toilet training.

**There may be a problem if the child:**

- is far more active or less active than other children of the same age
- is not yet managing to feed himself most of the time.

By three years, children are usually:

- able to undress and put on some easy-to-use clothes
- able to eat with a spoon and fork
- most, but not all, have reached the stage where they can manage toilet training. Some children will not manage this until they are nearly four years old.

## Speech and language

By two and a half years children are usually able to:

- use well over 100 recognisable words, but many of the words will be unclear as they cannot say all of the sounds in the words
- put the words into short sentences
- follow simple instructions
- talk during play with more of the words understandable
- let people know what they want using words.

### **There may be a problem if the child:**

- is not using words to let others know what they want
- is not talking clearly enough for the primary caregiver to know what they want some of the time
- seems to be in a 'world of his own', not responding to the talk of others.

By three years, children are usually able to:

- talk clearly enough that strangers are able to understand at least some of what they are saying
- using words such as 'me' and 'you' correctly
- ask many questions starting with 'what', 'where', 'why'
- listen to stories, demanding favourite stories repeatedly
- making up long stories while playing.

### **There may be a problem if the child:**

- is not using words to let others know what he wants
- is not talking clearly enough for the primary caregiver to know what he wants most of the time
- seems to be in a 'world of his own', not responding to the talk of others.

## For more information contact:

- Local Community Child Health Nurse
- Local Family Doctor
- Ngala Family Resource Centre Helpline  
8.00 a.m. - 8.00 p.m. 7 days a week  
Telephone (08) 9368 9368  
Outside metro area - Freecall 1800 111 546  
[www.ngala.com.au](http://www.ngala.com.au)
- Parent Help Centre/Parenting Line  
Telephone (08) 9272 1466 (24hr service)  
Outside metro area - Freecall 1800 654 432

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