

Social-Emotional Development: 24 to 36 Months

Loving relationships give young children a sense of comfort, safety, confidence, and encouragement. They teach toddlers how to form friendships, communicate emotions, and to deal with challenges. Strong, positive relationships also help children develop trust, empathy, compassion, and a sense of right and wrong.

Two-Year-Olds and Social-Emotional Development

This year children really begin to play interactively with their peers. You will also see a real explosion in pretend play, a critical aspect of children's development. Pretend play builds language, thinking, and social skills when children take on roles and develop their own ideas and stories.

Two-year-olds are also capable of empathy—understanding the feelings of others. You might see a child comfort a peer who is hurt or even cry when he sees another child who is upset. At the same time, toddlers still love to say “No!” and struggle with resolving conflicts with friends. Children develop more advanced social play skills, such as sharing and turn-taking, over time as they near age 3 and beyond. Here is what you might see happening among peers now as they play out a pretend story:

Josie, a 2 ½ year old, carefully laid the blocks out in a circle. “Anybody want some pizza?” she called out. Tomas, who was almost 3, said he wanted a big piece. “Does this have pepperoni? I don’t like pepperoni.” Josie said it was plain pizza and carefully scooped a block up with a toy spatula and put it on a plate. She tapped a few keys on the toy cash register and said, “That will be \$20.” Tomas touched her hand, pretending to give her money. “Thank you very much,” said Josie.

What You Can Do:

Help your toddler understand her feelings. Now that toddlers have a firmer grasp of themselves as individuals, they experience more complex feelings like embarrassment and shame. Help your child make sense of her feelings by using words to describe emotions: *You are feeling sad and jealous that Carly got the cupcake with the butterfly on it. I know that’s hard, but now you can choose the blue cupcake or the green one.* Teaching children the words for emotions is important because, over time, it gives children the ability to talk about their feelings instead of acting them out.

- **Explore the idea of feelings through play.** Use puppets to create a story about your child's typical frustrations or fears, like having to share toys with a playmate, adjusting to a new baby, or separating from you when a babysitter comes. Suggest that your child draw a sad picture when he is down, or make angry shapes from play-dough when he is mad.

Read books about feelings and talk about the pictures: *Which child looks mad? Which looks afraid?*

- **Be a careful observer.** Watch to see what your child is “telling” you as she plays. For example, if your toddler dresses up in mommy clothes and acts out saying good-bye to her Teddy, she may be struggling with feelings about separations. You can help her work through these big ideas and feelings by playing along and reminding her that, while Teddy misses his mama, he knows his mama always comes back.
- **Help your child express his feelings in age-appropriate ways.** Give your child acceptable ways to share strong feelings. For example, toddlers can rip paper, stomp their feet or throw a foam ball when they are very mad. Help your little one understand there are many healthy, non-hurtful ways of expressing feelings.

Encourage early friendships. Children need practice to learn to share, take turns, resolve conflicts, and experience the joy of friendship. Playing together helps children develop all of these important skills. When you provide fun choices for activities, a safe, supportive environment for play, and provide the needed guidance to help children share and resolve conflicts, they will discover the pleasure of early friendships.

- **Offer some play activities that don’t require sharing.** Art projects, making music (where each child has an instrument), sand or water play are all options that can keep conflicts to a minimum.
- **Ask children to imagine how their behavior might affect others:** *I see that you told Greta that she can’t play ball with you. Look at her face now. How do you think she is feeling?*
- **Make a “friend book.”** Take photos of each of your child’s friends. Glue each photo to the top of a page and then list that child’s favorite toy, book, food, game, stuffed animal, etc. Staple together or tie the pages by punching a hole in each page, threading with yarn, and knotting. Read the book to your child so she can delight in hearing about herself and all the children she knows.
- **Help your toddler to see others’ points of view,** which encourages empathy: *Casey is feeling sad because his daddy just said good-bye. Let’s see if he wants to read a book with us.*

Let your child take the lead in deciding what to play. Look for ways to help him continue to explore his interests. For example, if your toddler is into trains, line up several kitchen chairs to make a pretend train, read books about trains, and plan a visit your local train station if possible.

- **Comment on or describe what your child is doing.** *You are using so many beautiful colors to make that drawing. Or You are pretending to be the doctor and you’re taking care of the sick doggie.*
- **Get involved in your child’s play by following her lead.** If she is making a pretend picnic, you can help prepare and pack the “food” in a basket. This helps your child learn about the pleasure of interactive play.

It also is a chance for you to build on your child's activities to help her learn. For example, you might ask: *What weather is good weather for a picnic?* When you are involved in your child's play, she feels loved, important, and competent.

Support older toddlers' developing skills.

Toddlers learn best when you let them play, explore, and follow their interests. They develop new skills when you give them *just enough* help so that they can master a challenge without becoming overly frustrated. For example, if you see your 30-month-old trying to build a block tower which keeps falling, you may suggest he build on the hard floor instead of the carpet. You might also suggest that he build a strong base, and help guide his hand to set the blocks once the tower gets tall. Here are some steps to helping toddlers become good problem-solvers:

- **Empathize with your child's frustration.** *You are working so hard to get your mittens on! It takes time to figure it out.*
- **Ask your child if she knows what may be causing the problem.**
- **Offer your observations**--for example, has she forgotten to poke her thumb into the thumb space of the mitten?
- **Ask if she has any ideas** about how to get it on correctly.
- **Ask if she wants suggestions**—*How about putting your thumb in first and then your hand?*
- **Provide the support she needs to be successful**—for example, helping her position her fingers to get them in correctly.
- **Praise the process, not just the result:** *You are really trying to figure this out and sticking with it. That's great!* This helps children learn persistence and lets them know that trying hard is just as important as succeeding.

Help your child learn to resolve conflict in healthy, appropriate ways.

At this age it is very typical for toddlers to still struggle with sharing, turn-taking, and following rules. This is because they have not yet mastered self-control. You help them learn these important new skills when you calmly take them through the process of resolving a conflict. You will probably have to go through these steps many, many times before they are able to do it themselves.

- **Keep it simple.** Explain what happened in as few words as possible. Talk in a calm, not-angry voice.
- **Go over what happened** to make sure your child understands: *You pushed Justin because you wanted the broom back.*
- **Point out the consequences of the child's behavior:** *After you pushed Justin, he started to cry. It hurt. He felt sad and mad.*
- **Brainstorm better choice(s) your child can make next time.** Older 2-year-olds may be able to offer some ideas on their own. Others will need suggestions, like using their words or asking for help from an adult. Most toddlers will need help to carry out these strategies.

Use language to describe feelings and experiences. While you often hear adults asking toddlers to “use your words”, toddlers often they lack the words they need to describe their feelings. By helping your child name her feelings and practice ways to manage their emotions, she learns over time how to do it herself.

- **Put your child’s feelings into words.** *When your brother took your paintbrush, you felt really angry.* Share your own feelings as well: *I am so frustrated that I can’t find my keys.*
- **Read books about feelings.** Ask your local librarian for suggestions for children’s books that talk about feelings. Some ideas include: *My Many-Colored Days* by Dr. Seuss, *Lots of Feelings* by Shelly Rotner, and *The Feelings Book* by Todd Parr.

Explain your reasons for limits and requests. As toddlers approach age three, most use and understand language well enough to handle simple explanations. Point out how rules benefit your child: “When you help me by putting your lunch plate on the counter, I finish cleaning up quicker and then we can read an extra story.” “When you share toys, it means that everybody gets a chance to play.”

- **Talk about rules and limits in language that your child can understand.** *You may not hit. Hitting hurts. When you are mad, you can jump up and down or stamp your feet or come to me for a hug.*
- **Show your child the benefits involved in cooperating.** Natural consequences help children understand the cause and effect involved in a rule, request or limit. For example, the natural consequence of throwing a toy truck is having it put away for a little while. But natural consequences can be positive too! Remind your child, “If you cooperate with getting your jackets on, then we’ll have more time at the park.” Strategies like this help children learn the rules and to make good choices over time.

Look for ways to make your home culture part of your child’s everyday routines. A child’s culture is an important part of who he is. The connection he has to his culture shapes his identity and self-esteem in healthy and positive ways.

- **Teach your child’s caregivers** the words your family uses for important people (mother, father, grandparents) and things (bottle, blanket, pacifier, etc.).
- **Choose books and music that reflect your home culture.** These are often available at your public library for no charge and will quickly become a beloved part of your child’s daily routines—bedtime, bath-time, or just driving in the car.

Social-Emotional Development: Birth to 12 Months

Loving relationships give young children a sense of comfort, safety, confidence, and encouragement. They teach young children how to form friendships, communicate emotions, and to deal with challenges. Strong, positive relationships also help children develop trust, empathy, compassion, and a sense of right and wrong.

Starting from birth, babies are learning who they are by how they are treated. Through everyday interactions, parents, relatives and caregivers send babies messages like: *You're clever. You're good at figuring things out. You're loved. You make me laugh. I enjoy being with you.* These messages shape a baby's self-esteem.

A 6-month-old laughs and laughs as his mother holds a napkin over his face, and then drops it to say, "Peek-a-boo!" Whenever his mother tries to put the napkin back on the table, the baby says, "eh, eh, eh" and kicks his arms and legs to let her know that he wants her to play the game again. She follows his lead and keeps playing until he gets bored. This baby is discovering that relationships with others are satisfying and pleasurable, that he is a good communicator, and that his needs and desires are important.

What You Can Do:

Provide babies with responsive care. Responsive care means matching your caregiving to what your baby needs. For example, your 10-month-old might start kicking, babbling, and grabbing at mealtime to show you he really wants to hold his own spoon. You know that he's not yet able to feed himself, so you give him a baby spoon to hold in his hands while you continue feeding him with another. This is *responsive care* because you took the time to think about what the baby's behavior meant and figured out a way to support him.

- **Get to know your baby.** What are his likes and dislikes? Which toys are his favorites? What daily schedule works for him?
- **Build open and collaborative relationship with your child's caregiver(s).** Talk to your child's caregivers about your baby—her personality, what she likes to do, what calms her, what upsets her. Share your baby's usual daily schedule and typical activities. Learning more about your baby (and your family) helps caregivers meet your child's needs. Collaborating with caregivers helps to ensure that each of you feels respected and supported.

Support babies' developing skills.

Babies learn best when you let them play, explore, and follow their interests. They develop new skills when you give them *just enough* help so that they can

master a challenge without becoming overly frustrated. For example, if you see a five-month-old trying to roll over, you may hold a toy to his side so that he reaches over with his body to grab it.

- **Delight in your baby's discoveries.** *You found me! You pulled away the scarf hiding my face and here I am!*
- **Build on the skills your baby already has.** For example, if your baby is trying to build with blocks and has stacked two, put a third one on top and hand her a fourth block for her tower.

Be affectionate and nurturing.

Touching, holding, comforting, rocking, singing and talking to your baby all send the message that he is special and loved. While it's easy to be affectionate when babies are cute and cuddly, it's also important to nurture babies when they are difficult, fussy, crying a lot or colicky. When you can be there for your baby during the tough times, children learn that they are loved for who they are—no matter what.

In your work:

- **Give hugs and kisses.** Let your baby know how loved she is.
- **Be patient during the tough times.** Colic, crying and fussiness are part of babyhood. When you can support babies even at their most difficult, you are letting them know they can trust and rely on you. This makes them feel safe and makes it more likely they will learn to calm themselves as they grow.

Help your child feel safe and secure.

You help your baby feel safe and secure when you respond to her cries and other communications—for example, picking your baby up when she lifts her arms in the air as if to say, "Up!" Babies also feel secure when they get lots of affection from you and when their days are predictable. It is the love and trust you share that helps your child learn that you will always be there for her. This trust gives her confidence.

In your work:

- **Be a safe "home base" for your baby.** Watch how your child crawls away, then comes back to check-in with you. He wants to be sure you are still there and may be looking for some encouragement to explore some more.
- **Establish routines for your baby.** Knowing what to expect helps babies feel safe, confident, and in control of their world. Try to keep daily routines in the same order and at the same time each day. For example, there may be a morning walk, then diaper change, then bottle, then stories.

Look for ways to make your home culture part of your child's everyday routines. A child's culture is an important part of who he is. The connection he

has to his culture shapes his identity and self-esteem in healthy and positive ways.

- **Teach your child's caregivers** the words your family uses for important people (mother, father, grandparents) and things (bottle, blanket, pacifier, etc.).
- **Choose books and music that reflect your home culture.** These are often available at your public library for no charge and will quickly become a beloved part of your child's daily routines—bedtime, bath-time, or just driving in the car.

Social-Emotional Development: 12 to 24 Months

Loving relationships give young children a sense of comfort, safety, confidence, and encouragement. Nurturing connections teach toddlers how to form friendships, how to communicate emotions, and how to deal with challenges. Supportive relationships with parents, adults, and friends also help children develop trust, empathy, compassion, and a sense of right and wrong (a conscience).

Young Toddlers and Social-Emotional Development

Young toddlers are starting to develop a sense of self-awareness—that they are separate and independent from others. This new knowledge helps them understand that other people have thoughts and feelings that may be different from their own. Realizing this helps children begin to develop empathy—the ability to put one’s self in another person’s shoes and imagine what he is feeling. Young toddlers are also becoming more and more interested in their peers, though at this age they usually don’t play *with* other children, but next to or nearby. Children will begin to play more interactively with peers as they near age 3 and beyond. Here is what peer play looks like now:

Zachary, 18 months, notices an older toddler, Patrick, playing on the beach. He walks over with his shovel and carefully watches Patrick playing. Patrick’s mother asks, “Would you like to play too?” Zachary, with his mother’s prompting, starts digging a hole next to his new “friend.” He continues to watch the older child carefully and sometimes seems to imitate what he is doing. The two boys play side-by-side for a little while before the Zachary toddles away to check out the seagulls.

What You Can Do:

Support young toddlers’ developing skills.

Toddlers learn best when you let them play, explore, and follow their interests. They develop new skills when you give them *just enough* help so that they can master a challenge without becoming overly frustrated. For example, if you see your 20-month-old trying to get the square block in the round hole of her shape-sorter, you may guide her hand over the various holes to show her how to solve the problem and let her drop it in the correct hole when she finds it.

- **Help your toddler become a confident problem-solver.** Give your child some time to try to figure a problem out on his own—like how to get his rain boots on. When you see him start to get frustrated, give him the help he needs to master the challenge. For example, you may line up the boots with the correct feet, and then suggest the child lean on a chair while he slides a foot in.

- **Praise the process, not just the result.** The goal is to help children feel good about their efforts, not just the outcome. When you notice your child's efforts (*you are working so hard on that puzzle, really thinking through where each piece fits*), it lets her know how important it is to be persistent and keep trying.

Help children learn to resolve conflict in healthy, appropriate ways.

You have probably noticed that toddlers want what they want when they want it. They have little self-control, which means they are not very good at waiting and also have a hard time stopping themselves from acting on their desires. This means that, developmentally, young children struggle with following rules—especially those around sharing.

- **Provide lots of support to young toddlers playing in a group.** Show them how to share. You might set a kitchen timer to give them a visual reminder of how long they have to wait for their turn. Comfort children who have trouble coping with waiting. Help them get involved in something else in the meantime.
- **Play turn-taking games.** Try taking turns hitting a foam ball off a tee, passing balls around a circle, or playing together in water or sand. Activities like these help children “practice” the art of sharing.
- **Distract your child** (*Let's look out the window at the garbage truck*) **or redirect their attention** (*I'm going to take out the play-dough now. Would anyone like to play?*) to reduce or avoid conflicts. Young toddlers are not yet able to resolve conflicts through discussion.

Help your child feel safe and secure. The world can feel scary and unpredictable to young toddlers. Now that they are walking, they can find themselves in a “strange” or unknown place (even within your house or backyard) without meaning to. They can reach things they couldn't before (which can get them into new kinds of trouble). They might also find themselves falling more often as they master the balance and coordination needed for walking. You help your toddler feel safe when you encourage him to explore safely, and provide the support and reassurance he needs. You also help him feel secure when you have routines and transitions that take him through the day in a predictable and orderly way.

- **Be a safe “home base” for your toddler.** Watch how your toddler will move away from you, look back at you as if to “check in,” and then continue on their adventure. When they feel they've gone too far or have encountered something “scary” (like the sound of a lawnmower next door), they toddle back to you for reassurance. When you can be a supportive partner for your curious toddler, you help her learn, grow, and develop confidence in her abilities.

- **Establish routines and transitions.** Knowing what to expect helps toddlers feel safe, confident, and in control of their world. Try to keep daily routines in the same order and at approximately the same time each day, and give them notice when a transition is coming. This helps your child anticipate, prepare, and cope with the many changes they have to make each day. For example, you might tell your child, *After lunch, we will take sit in the rocking chair and read a story. Then I will put on the soft music and you will take a nap in your crib.*

Look for ways to make your home culture part of your child's everyday routines. A child's culture is an important part of who he is. The connection he has to his culture shapes his identity and self-esteem in healthy and positive ways.

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