

A Dad's guide to the Toddler years



In partnership with
the
fathering
project

A short guide for fathers and father figures on connecting and supporting children through the toddler years.

The toddler years can be a lot of fun, but they can also be challenging for parents. A huge amount of learning and development takes place between the ages of 1 and 3 years, and toddlers are constantly absorbing information about the world around them through relationships with their parents, family and other children.

Dads play an important role during this time, and those who show warmth, love and sensitive communication will support the best outcomes for their toddlers as they grow and develop. Being an active and engaged father or father figure will help your child develop academically, emotionally and socially, and these benefits will last into their adult life. Put simply, fathers really matter.

Read on to learn more about what you can do to support the development and wellbeing of your special toddler.



Emotional development

Most toddlers are still learning how to recognise and manage their feelings and emotions. It's normal for them to struggle with intense emotions such as fear, anger or frustration and sometimes this can result in some epic tantrums where they will cry or lash out. Fathers play an important role in helping their toddlers learn how to regulate their feelings and manage their behaviour. Read on to learn how you can support your toddler to develop healthy emotions.



Reading their signals

Learning to recognise when your child is struggling emotionally because they are overtired, not feeling well, frustrated, scared or overwhelmed will help you to better understand their needs and behaviours.



Top tips for reading their signals

- **Learn to recognise your child's energy limits.** Don't let them keep pushing on when they are overtired and need a rest.
- **Look for signs of fear or uncertainty.** Especially when they're doing something new or challenging, so you know when to step in for support, or when to stop.
- **Teach them to recognise when they've had enough.** Learn the signs your toddler shows when they've had enough or are feeling uncomfortable, and encourage them to communicate this with you.
- **Help your toddler to learn how to calm down.** Model how to calm down after an exciting or stimulating activity and encourage your child to join you.

Activity ideas

- **Take turns to play stop/go.** Stand about 10m away from your child. Turn your back and tell them to creep up slowly behind you. Every few seconds, turn around and say 'stop', and when you do this they have to stand still like a statue until you turn around again. The aim is for them to touch you without you seeing them move. Swap over so they get to say 'stop' and 'go'.
- **Role play facial expressions together.** Use a mirror as well as looking at each other. Make angry faces, make scared faces, or worried faces so they can see your face and how to communicate with expressions.



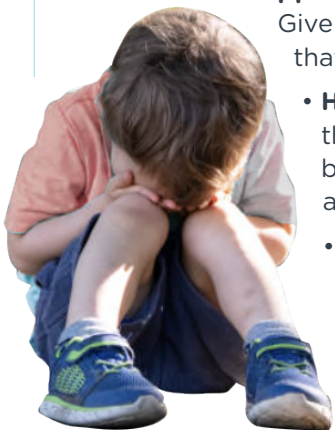
'Big emotions' for little kids

Experiencing big emotions such as anger, sadness or even happiness can be overwhelming for toddlers. You can help your children develop the words and techniques they need to communicate their feelings by recognising the triggers, supporting them through it, and helping them calm down afterwards.



Top tips for dealing with 'Big Emotions'

- **Acknowledge their 'big' emotions.** This might be saying, "It can be upsetting when someone takes our toy." or "I can see you are feeling angry."
- **Support your child through a big emotion or tantrum.** Give them a hug if they want it and let them know that you're there for them and the feelings will pass.
- **Help them to find ways to feel better.** Work with them to find something that can make them feel better such as reading their favourite book, having a snack or doing something fun.
- **Help your child to calm down after a big emotion.** Get them to breathe slowly with you and show them they can distract themselves and reduce their heightened emotions by doing something fun or active.



Activity ideas

- **Read stories with characters showing emotions.** Point out the emotions e.g. "Spot is sad, he is crying, can you see his tears? Poor Spot."
- **Practise calming activities together.** Show your child how they can wind down by doing things like hugging a favourite toy or reading a special book.
- **Try using colours to identify emotions.** Ask your toddler to colour facial expressions with a colour that they identify with that feeling. When they are feeling frustrated, direct them to think of the colour they associate with happy or calm.





Helping with tantrums

Some kids have tantrums often and others have them rarely. Tantrums are a normal part of child development. They're how young children show that they're upset or frustrated. It is important to try and remain calm when outbursts occur and understand that these tantrums are part of your child's development.



Top tips for tantrums

- **Try to stay calm yourself.** Use a calm voice, and just let them know you are there for them.
- **Try not to give in.** Explain in a calm voice "I know this doesn't feel nice, but you can't have the toy." It's important they learn that there are better ways to communicate needs or frustration for not getting their way.
- **Waiting it out.** This may be maintaining that safe space for them, taking deep breaths with them, or just letting them know it will all be okay while they calm down.
- **Acknowledge the big emotion and praise them when they calm down.** "Great job, I know that didn't feel great, but you did a good job of calming down that big feeling."





Bonding with your toddler

A huge amount of learning and brain development takes place in the first few years of life. Toddlers absorb information through their relationships with the people around them, and fathers and father figures play a particularly important role. Being present and active in your toddler's life will improve your family relationships and their future.

Connecting with your toddler

Family relationships are the biggest influence on your child's development. From the moment they're born, children need to feel they are loved unconditionally and that their world is safe and secure. When this happens, children are more confident to explore, helping them to develop socially and emotionally.



Top tips for nurturing your toddler

- **Tell them you love them and tell them often.** This will help them feel comfortable that your love for them won't change.
- **Get physical with hugs and cuddles.** Children learn about healthy relationships from you, so provide them with affection and attention when you're together.
- **Be firm, but warm and positive.** Children don't need to be indulged or spoilt. They will feel happy, safe and loved when they have firm boundaries expressed in a positive and loving way.



Activity ideas

- **Set a goal to say 'I love you' at least once per day.** Perhaps when you leave for work or at bedtime.
- **Get physically close in fun ways.** Give them a ride on the back of your shoulders or let them climb over you.
- **Tickle them or blow raspberries on their belly.** Let them try to do it to you.
- **Crawl around the house chasing them** and when you catch them give them a big hug.



Everyday Moments

Children who have a close relationship with their father are less likely to develop emotional and behavioural problems. Using everyday moments to create a caring and supportive bond with your toddler will help them to grow into healthy and confident adults and may even boost their academic potential.



Top tips for everyday moments

- **Have one on one time.** Set aside some time to provide your undivided attention to each of your children every day that you are with them.
- **Tune in and engage with your toddler.** Focus on the moment by putting away the phone, TV remote and other distractions.
- **Make eye contact.** Young children rely on facial recognition for bonding. Get down to their level to help them see your face and eyes.



Activity ideas

- **Everyday moments for connecting**
 - Bath time.
 - Reading a bedtime story together.
 - Playtime when you get home after work.
 - Do chores together.
- **Quick play time ideas**
 - Get down on the floor with them and create a game with their toys.
 - Roll or kick a ball back and forth.
 - Walk the dog together or visit a local playground.





Dad and Toddler dates

Spend one on one time with your toddler by actively planning special Dad and Toddler dates. Studies have shown that these have the most impact when the child feels they have their dad's undivided attention, without interruptions or other people involved.



Top tips for Dad and Toddler dates

- **Actively create time for a date.** Write plans in your diary so you're unlikely to forget or double book.
- **They don't have to be elaborate.** Just going for a walk can create meaningful one on one time.
- **Talk to your children and ask them questions.** Even if they are too young to have a conversation, you can model the idea of talking together.
- **Take pictures so you can revisit those memories.** Snap some selfies during your date so you can look at them afterwards and talk about how special it was.

Activity ideas

- **Take a picnic to the park or playground.** Grab an ice cream or special treat to enjoy after your visit.
- **Make a cubby house.** Or grab some big cardboard boxes to make a rocket, train or car to pull them around in.
- **Wash the car together.** Let them use a bucket of warm water with washing up liquid and a big sponge.
- **Go backyard camping during the day.** Use an old sheet for a tent if you don't have an actual tent.
- **Make a vegetable garden together** so they can plant, water and watch the plants grow with you each day.
- **Go for a beach walk and make a sandcastle together.**





Playing and learning

At The Fathering Project we say 'play is a game changer' because the way you play with your kids can have significant benefits to their development. As a father, you can encourage your children to discover things for themselves and challenge themselves to explore and learn. Your involvement in the early years of play learning will impact their school readiness. Read on to learn how you can instil a love of play and learning in your child.

Play is a game changer

Fathers tend to play in an active way that encourages children to explore, discover, try new things, and problem-solve. Children who engage in fun but safe, rough and tumble play with their fathers, have been shown to be more confident and better at coping with challenges or problems. It can teach children self-control, encourages them to take safe risks and supports the development of crucial fundamental movement skills.



Top tips for playing together

- **Engage in gentle but physically active play.** Opt for activities such as cuddling, playful tickling, rolling or running.
- **Let your toddler choose activities.** This will help them learn to explore and be creative. (If you're dressed up like a princess at a teddy bears tea party, you are doing something right!)
- **Give your child your full attention.** Get down to their level and let them guide you to be involved.
- **Join in by asking questions about what they are doing** "What are you and Teddy doing, can I come too?"

Activity ideas

- **Allow for some messy play.** Children need to explore their surroundings so playing with water, sand, mud and grass are all part of the fun.
- **Engage in nature play.** Helping them with safe challenges e.g. Balancing on logs or small walls, collecting sticks and putting them in a line to step over.
- **Make a cubby house out of pillows and blankets.** Involve your child in the design and testing.
- **Make binoculars out of toilet rolls** and use them to see what they can find on a bush walk.



Language development

Children with supportive and actively involved fathers have better language development outcomes. In fact, studies show that when fathers used more words with their toddlers during play, these children had more advanced language skills a year later than those children who missed out on this.



Top tips for encouraging language development

- **Role model using language every day.**
- **Verbally describe what's happening.** Like a sports commentator, describe what's going on around you. For example "I'm putting the food out for breakfast. We're having apple juice because I know you like juice." Or "You're putting all the blocks into the holes. When you finish, we'll put your coat on because it is cold outside today."
- **Ask questions and pause.** Ask your child questions and give him or her time to respond. Try not to finish their sentences for them.
- **Gradually expand on the words they know, explain them and practise using them.**
- **Encourage your child to use their words and learn new words.** Gently encourage toddlers to use words like yes, no or more please instead of body language like nodding or grabbing.

Activity ideas

Role play! Use props and encourage your child to take on different roles. Some ideas for role play are:

- shop keeper
- bus driver
- doctor
- caring for a toy baby



Reading

Reading with your child is special, as not only are you creating lasting bonds together, sharing books with your child builds their reading and language skills, encourages a lifelong love of reading and supports their understanding of the world.



Top tips for encouraging reading

- **Read with your child from an early age** and encourage a positive attitude to reading.
- **Read a bedtime story together.** It's a great way for dads to spend time with their children, so make it a habit.

Activity ideas

- **Visit the library.** Let your toddler pick out some books and sit and read them together.
- **Enjoy stories and books together.** Read to them often. Use books with rhyme or repetition and let them make the sound effects. Let them repeat the pieces of the story they know off by heart or make up their story from looking at the pictures. Get them to look for things in the pictures e.g. can you find the dog?



Early maths

Your toddlers are already beginning to develop early mathematical skills. Children love numbers and shapes and these lead on to most other mathematical skills. Dads can start including these skills in everyday activities and play.



Top tips for maths fun

- **Role model counting whenever you can.** You'd be surprised how many times you can talk about counting, and it's a good opportunity to keep them engaged in the car or at the park e.g. "I can see 4 trees 1, 2, 3, 4.", "How many frogs can you see in this book?"
- **Make maths fun.** You can support early maths skills in lots of active, loud and messy ways. Do what your toddler enjoys best e.g. counting steps or jumps, making up a song or filling containers with water or sand.



Activity ideas for maths with your toddler

- **Compare things of different sizes and shapes.** "This is a big round ball." "This is a small round ball." "That is a very tall tree." "That is a tiny bird."
- **Get building.** Use building blocks to measure length and height. Build towers then knock them down.
- **Talk about pieces and parts of a whole.** For example "Let's cut this apple into pieces. How many pieces of this apple would you like?"
- **Sing songs or play games about numbers.** For example "What's the time Mr Wolf?"



The last word...

As they grow older, your toddlers may not remember every activity that you did with them. But they will recall the feelings they had and feel confident about what you have taught them. Importantly, they will continue to enjoy the special relationship that you have created. Don't stop creating memorable moments with your kids or helping navigate the ups and downs of life.

**Remember -
You don't have to
be perfect, you
just have to know
that what they
really need is
... you!**

For more information or support

The Fathering Project www.thefatheringproject.org

Raising Children www.raisingchildren.net.au

PANDA www.panda.org.au

Brighter Beginnings www.nsw.gov.au/initiative/brighter-beginnings

If you need to talk to someone about stress, anxiety, depression or parenting issues, please call – Mental Health Line 1800 041 61

This resource is an initiative of the Sutherland and St George Child and Family Interagency in collaboration with The Fathering Project.



www.thefatheringproject.org