

Development From 24 to 36 Months Old: New Skills Develop Through Play, Routines, and Relationships

This is a year of amazing leaps and bounds in development, as children's ability to express themselves with words, use their imagination, problem-solve, and build friendships grows dramatically. Their new physical skills support this learning and development as older toddlers are walking, running, and climbing, which helps them explore the world in more adventurous ways.

Older toddlers can also require a lot of patience from their loved ones. Their growing imaginations can lead to the development of fears. They need help differentiating between what is real and what is fantasy. They are also in the early stages of learning self-control and still struggle to manage their strong feelings. Toddlers need their important caregivers to be calm and present, to help them learn to name and manage their feelings, and to recover when they fall apart.

WHAT YOU CAN DO:

- **Talk with your toddler.** Ask lots of questions to spark her thinking and to let her know you are interested in her ideas.
- **Read together.** Make it interactive. Ask your child about the pictures and what will happen next.
- **Build your child's problem-solving skills.** When he's struggling with a puzzle, for example, encourage him to try different spaces versus figuring it out for him.
- **Ask open-ended versus yes-or-no questions.** "What do you think the squirrel will do with that nut?"
- **Encourage curiosity.** When your child asks all those "Why" questions, ask for his ideas first before you provide the answer.
- **Acknowledge feelings while setting limits:** "I know the doll stroller is your favorite toy, but it's not okay to grab it from a friend who is playing with it. Do you want to give it back to him or should I?"
- **Don't fear the tantrum.** Tantrums are common during this stage of development as children are still learning to manage disappointment, anger, and frustration. The less you react, the more quickly toddlers recover. Take deep breaths, count to 10, or whatever helps you to *not react*. Let your child know you see she is having a hard time and that when she is calm again, you can move on to do something else together.
- **Label your child's feelings.** This helps him develop self-awareness and is the first step in helping him learn to manage his feelings in effective ways. "You are very sad that Grandma is leaving. It's OK to feel sad—you love Grandma and it's hard to say good-bye." After you validate, move to coping strategies: "Let's wave to her at the window, and then you can draw a picture for her that we can send to her in the mail."
- **Use pretend play to help your child handle challenging situations.** You might act out a story together about meeting a new babysitter.
- **Let your child lead the play.** Ask him, "Who should I be? What will happen next? What would you like to play?"

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- **Respond sensitively to your child's fears.** Fears are common during this year, as children's imaginations are developing and they don't yet have an ability to distinguish between reality and fantasy. You can help by first acknowledging the fear, and then guiding your child to think it through: "I know that clown looks scary; let's watch how he plays with the other kids to see if he's really a good guy." This builds your child's trust in you.
- **Give your child regular chances to play with children his age.** This helps build strong social skills.
- **Help your child with conflicts around sharing and turn-taking.** Let her know you understand that sharing is hard. Help her find another toy to play with until it's her turn. Use a kitchen timer to help her learn to wait.
- **Build early writing skills** by encouraging your child to scribble with markers and crayons.
- **Give your child chances to practice more advanced physical skills** like pedaling and climbing.
- **Child-proof again** so that your child's new ability to open caps and doorknobs doesn't lead to danger.
- **Introduce new words to build your child's vocabulary.** "Is your snack scrumptious?"
- **At dinnertime or before bed, talk with your child about his day.** This builds memory and language skills.
- **Encourage your child to use logic in everyday situations.** "It's raining. What do we need in order to stay dry?"