



by Karen Stephens

Good Child Care: Tips for Toddlers and Twos

Toddlerhood (when kids start to get around on their own) usually begins around 12 months of age. On its heels comes the terrific twos. (Okay, some days the tender, testy twos.) Along with their newfound motor skills, toddlers and twos develop a greater command of language. Twos' desperate need to express desires (demands!) skyrockets. Autonomy and independence become their over-riding goals.

These developmental changes mean caregivers have to treat toddlers and twos much differently than infants. Infants adore being catered to and pampered. Toddlers and twos march to a new anthem: "No! Me do it! . . . Now!" To adjust, caregivers must develop greater patience and new skills.

It also means there are new things parents should look for in good child care. Typical items apply, such as staff with child development training, provisions for individualized care, and diligent health and safety practices. Following are specific child care features parents should require for their toddlers and twos:

Child-Adult Interactions

- Staff and children share lots of eye contact and genuine smiles.
- There is regular, appropriate physical contact such as spontaneous hugging, cuddling in a rocker while reading a story, or sitting in a porch swing watching neighborhood happenings.
- Staff are flexible and respond to children's individual preferences and tempo. Children are fed when hungry, allowed to rest, and go to the toilet when needed, and are given plenty of time for self-initiated play based on their own interests.
- Caregiver attachment is encouraged. Group size and adult-to-child ratios are small to allow plenty of individual interaction. (Smaller than minimum legal requirements are recommended. It costs more and is worth it.)
- Staff turnover rate is low so attachment bonds aren't frequently broken.

Identity and Self Esteem

- Children are frequently called by name as well as endearments.
- Daily rituals include routines that reinforce strong family bonds, such as being held up to wave bye-bye to parents each morning from a window.
- Children of both genders, varying abilities, religions, and ethnicities are equally cherished.
- Play materials including dolls, puzzles, books, and posters are diverse.
- Unbreakable mirrors are at children's eye level. Photos of children at play are posted.
- Children are gradually introduced to their neighborhood and community helpers. This may be through short outings or by inviting special visitors into the classroom.
- Families are encouraged to participate in special events as well as daily activities.

Language Development

- Staff encourages language through simple give and take conversations with children.

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- Staff model increasingly complex language skills, from naming everyday objects to expanding on children's communications. When the child says, "Bear, me," caregiver casually responds, "I see, Toni wants the brown teddy bear."
- Caregivers never make fun of how children speak.

Respecting Autonomy

- Children are coached carefully to master basic self-help skills, such as using a napkin and throwing it into the garbage.
- Children are encouraged to develop increasing responsibility, such as using a spoon, picking up toys, or putting on a sock. Harder jobs are broken into steps so children can help according to their ability, "I'll start your zipper, then you can pull it up."
- Gentle assistance is offered when children become frustrated with new tasks.
- Encouragement and praise are used liberally to build self-confidence and pride.
- Children are frequently given the chance to make simple, age-appropriate decisions: "Do you want to draw on pink paper or white?"
- Finger foods are offered at each meal. Foods likely to cause choking, such as peanuts, and unskinned hot dogs and grapes, are avoided.

Learning Through Play

- Staff sit on the floor and interact in children's play. Small group play, including solitary play is the norm. Children aren't forced to sit as a group for long periods with no chance to participate. Children get plenty of chances for one-to-one interactions with staff.
- Imaginary play is encouraged. Play items that foster creative play are offered, with plenty of materials for each child. Such items may include dolls, pretend foods and dishes, and puppets.
- Children's love of repetition is indulged by reading or playing games over and over.
- Duplicates of toys help prevent conflict as children gradually learn to share.
- Exploration is encouraged through materials including large crayons, water-based markers, washable paints, play dough, musical instruments and records, sturdy books, puzzles, blocks, nesting bowls, poppers, pull-toys, play telephones, sand and water play.
- Children are given a variety of physical experiences through appropriately scaled climbers, riding toys, slides, swings, and wagons.

Guidance and Discipline

- Staff focus on what children can do, rather than on what they can't do. Staff design the classroom so children experience success in daily routines and activities.
- Staff clearly inform children of limits. In simple language, they explain reasons for limits and consistently enforce them.
- Staff intervene and assist when physical or verbal fights flare up. Children are prompted to use words to express differences and frustrations. Children too young to share are distracted to a different toy, or are enticed to separate play area to regain self-control.
- Children are given words to express emotions. Staff help children resolve conflict: "Denise, tell Maria it hurts when she pulls your arm." "Maria, look at Denise's face; her tears tell you she's hurt. Be more gentle. Next time, use Maria's name to get her attention."
- Children are quickly responded to and calmed when stressed.
- Caregivers are prepared for toddler-twins cry of: "NO!" They motivate children's cooperation without engaging in endless power struggles or bribes of food or toys.
- Children are never punished by withholding food. They are never threatened, spanked, isolated, and left alone (or locked!) in a room. They are never demeaned, belittled, teased, or scared into compliance.

Parent-Staff Relations

- There is daily communication about the child's day. Parents are informed of children's physical and emotional well-being. Challenges are discussed privately and respectfully.
- Parents are encouraged to ask questions and to drop in for visits often.
- Developmental milestones, such as walking, self-feeding, and toilet training are discussed so home and child care practices and expectations are consistent.

About the Author — Karen Stephens is director of Illinois State University Child Care Center and instructor in child development for the ISU Family and Consumer Sciences Department. For nine years she wrote a weekly parenting column in her local newspaper. Karen has authored early care and education books and is a frequent contributor to *Exchange*.

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