



# Explorations of Independence: 2-3 Yr Olds

by Jill Kelsey

Babies seem cute as a button until they reach the "Terrible Two" or the lesser-known "Tyrannical Three" stages. While they are indeed still cute at two and three, with angry, red-faced outbursts and daring stares aside, they merely express appropriate neural development during these outbursts. The degree of difficulty during this age involves quite a few factors.

Let me begin with the newborn for a moment. Everything is new and exciting to the newborn and readily absorbed, including gravity! All of this occurs during and between the stages of sleep, eating, learning to poop, and more eating. They are content with this pattern...until they aren't. As your child becomes mobile and aware of the world around them, they develop preferences. While your toddler may go on a food strike for no apparent reason one day and can't get enough pickles or olives the next day, they are exhibiting this newfound thing called choice based on preferences.

The more comfortable your toddler becomes with making choices, they begin to try to voice their opinions with confidence and protest options to the contrary. By 3, they know what they think they want and begin to find creative ways to get it. It is a recognition of cause and effect. When the toddler drops the spoon and watches you pick it up for them, they learn a new game. Some would call this game "fetch." But they are more slick than this. They soon learn to take their ponderings to the next level and wonder things like, "If I scream, will my parent give in?" or, "If I climb the refrigerator, will I get that chocolate?"

My 2-year-old son actually did that when he very swiftly learned to climb up the refrigerator to reach the chocolate not so well hidden on the closed shelf above it. There is no telling what toddlers and preschoolers might attempt with determination.

Two and three-year-olds are known for being temperamental and stressful for caregivers unless the following tips are employed. I have found these to work successfully, and perhaps they will help you to enjoy your busy toddler even more during this stage of willfulness.

## Tips for Interacting With 2 & 3 Year Olds

**Offer pre-approved choices.** Independent toddlers love to have a choice. Allow them to choose between two options that you are already okay with. "Do you want to eat the carrots first or the pickle?" If they still refuse, add some fun. "Do you want to eat the snowman nose first or the ogre's nose?" or "Do you want to have a snack first or play with your dinosaurs?" or "Do you want to bring your stuffy or your toy car on our car ride?"

**Distraction is an art form.** Distraction is a great tool for wrangling a temperamental toddler. We have some great articles on this topic, but the gist is that it presents a different "fun" option to children seeking a less desirable activity. This technique works with short attention spans of this age. Distraction can be as simple as offering an alternative activity at a playground, a sudden appearance of a favorite toy, or offering a snack. Any of these can direct your toddler's attention.

**Meet their biological needs.** Like any human, small children have biological needs, too. It is important to watch for cues that your toddler has a biological need for sleep, nutrition, hydration, or connection. While your toddler may be resistant to a nap when they are especially worked up over something or overly tired, you can encourage sleep with quiet activities (e.g., play a game of caterpillar and cocoon. Once they are in the cocoon blanket, they must count to a number, and then they can emerge as a butterfly. If they emerge too soon, say, "Oops! You only have one wing! You better do it again!" Repeat the process and increase the count number. Some tots will konk out then and there.

## Tips for Interacting With 2 & 3 Year Olds (cont.)

This age group is physically and mentally growing at such a fast rate that constant snacking is almost a given. Additionally, keep healthy snacks handy, keep diapers clean, rotate fun and engaging toys (to keep things interesting and organized), and offer regular opportunities for eye contact and hugs. When their basic needs are met, toddlers are more secure in their environment, curious, and adventurous.

**Co-regulate their nervous system with your own.** Your child will naturally co-regulate their nervous system with yours, but if you are in fight-or-flight, what good is that? You now have two or more humans in fight-or-flight. One of the most helpful tips we can offer parents is this. When the parent understands that their child is going through different and appropriate developmental stages, they can more easily remain calm when the toddler is acting out. Generally, a child's nervous system will co-regulate or match the caregivers, and a calm parent can help lower the intensity of the toddler's undesirable behavior. The opposite is true as well. For example, if a parent overreacts to a minor injury from playing, the child will also learn to react in an elevated emotional manner. Teach them to assess the situation as you remain calm. They will learn resilience and be in a better place to learn from their mistake. "Oh no! I bet that doesn't feel very good. Did you trip on your shoelace? Yes? I guess we need to make sure your shoes are tied well before you run across the yard." Kiss the boo-boo, look for other obvious signs of distress quickly, and if all is well, distract them by retying the shoe and trying the same activity again, together.

When you remain calm, you open the door to compassion and relational problem-solving, which are highly desirable parenting qualities.

**Create Sensory Adventures.** Two and three-year-olds are suckers for adventure. If you can engage all of their senses during play, you will keep them and their rapidly changing brain in peak performance and mental state.

Provide safe and controlled environments that allow your child to explore activities like water or sand play, imaginative play with stuffies or puppets, and interactive play with other children, family, and extended family members. You can also create play sessions that focus on a particular one of the five senses. Below are a few examples.

**Smell/Taste:** Line up several different spices. Don't show them where you got them; they will likely get them out later without supervision! Allow your child to smell and taste each one. Offer different flavors like sweet, savory, salty, or pungent. Ask them which ones they like best. And, if they do not like one in particular, be sure to point out that their tongue may not like it now, but it may like that spice when they are a little bit older, and you can try again then.

**Sound:** Listen to different instruments or play "Guess The sound" with their eyes closed.

**Vision:** Observe nature and describe every detail you can see. Watch where their eyes look for clues as to what they are looking at or are interested in.

Combining an interesting activity with a rested and fed toddler will bring out the best in your child and allow their natural dreamy state to thrive.

## The Toddlers' State of Mind

Pay attention to your patterns and triggers. Do you find that most problems with your toddler happen when you are overly tired, stressed, or rushed?

**One key thing to know and understand as a parent is that your toddler is operating in a different brain wavelength than you are. When there is a substantial mismatch in the moment, problems can arise.**

A toddler exists primarily in a dream state, like a deep sleep state or (theta), while the adult operates more in the higher-frequency wavelengths during the waking state. Imagine being awakened from a deep sleep and being required to make a presentation at work on the spot. Your toddler may feel the same pressure that you are experiencing in a state of sleep inertia while you rush them to put their shoes on when you are running late. Better planning and creative drills or games involving leaving the house can be helpful in this situation.

## The Toddlers' State of Mind (cont.)

The primary idea is that it is mostly up to you as the parent to make sure the child's basic needs are met, that you learn their patterns of behavior, and that you plan in advance as much as possible for these patterns.

Providing your child with choices and active guidance keeps them in creative motion, learning, making memories, being silly, and living a life that is less emotionally explosive.

One thing to note is the potential for underlying medical conditions. If you are troubled by certain behaviors, note these patterns and bring them up with the pediatrician. Sometimes, behaviors can be a sign of physical, developmental, or mental conditions, or they may simply be a result of a pattern in their daily activity or schedule where a need is consistently not being met.

**Parting Toddler Tip:** To move your child seamlessly from one space to another, turn on a light in the next room and dim the light in the current room. It works for houseflies, too!

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