Useful publications

Toddlers and very early learning

Useful contacts
Family Information Service (FIS) – your local FIS will be able to let you know of services dealing with this subject, whether provided through Sure Start, a children’s centre, family centre or other organisation. For details of how to contact your FIS, visit ChildcareLink: www.childcarelink.gov.uk
Fathers Direct offers support, especially to dads: www.fathersdirect.com
National Family and Parenting Institute has a parents’ section on their website: www.nfpi.org.uk
Parentline Plus – a support organisation for all families: helpline 0808 800 2222; website www.parentlineplus.org.uk

Learning together series
The Learning together series of leaflets aims to help parents and other caring adults understand children’s development, play an active part in their learning and enjoy the children they spend time with. The leaflets cover a wide range of topics, including life with babies and toddlers, children’s behaviour, being outdoors, drawing and writing, reading, maths, ICT and equality – and more. The leaflets are available free of cost or can be downloaded from the Early Education website. For more details, or to order leaflets, contact Early Education.

Series editor Pat Gordon Smith

Toddlers and very early learning

Jennie Lindon is a child psychologist, with 30 years’ experience of working with early years services for children and their families. She has written many books and magazine articles for parents and early years practitioners.

Learning together series
Early Education
Early Education promotes the right of all children to education of the highest quality. It provides support, advice and information in best practice for everyone concerned with the education and care of young children from birth to eight.

Jennie Lindon

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How to help children learn

- **Try to see things from their point of view.** Understanding how children see the world will help you to help them as they learn.
- **Let children be children.** A skilled five year old grows from a busy four year old, a curious three year old, a cuddled two year old, an adventurous one year old and a communicative baby.
- **Be a playful companion.** You can enjoy childhood with the children as well.
- **Feelings matter** – both the children’s emotions and your own are part of any situation with young children. It is very helpful to be aware of your own moods as well as the children’s when enjoying yourself with them and during difficult moments.
- **Don’t expect to be perfect.** Everyone does something they don’t mean sometimes. Children can be forgiving as long as we are thoughtful most of the time and are ready to say sorry when we should.

**Toddlers** are very busy people. They are keen to learn about the world around them and ready to be fascinated by things that seem ordinary to you. They can spend part of a morning thrilled to run around the park – getting better at starting, stopping, going forwards then backwards, and at making quick right turns. Then they might stay still for ages, turning over stones and twigs. If all is going well, toddlers change completely in their second year of life. They are able to move around independently. They talk in their own words and understand more of what you say.

**Good toys for learning**

- **Toddlers** love playing around with interesting materials. They need a good store of things to play with, but they don’t all need to be bought toys. Before you spend your money, look carefully at a toy. Can toddlers use it in different ways? Will it add to what they enjoy already? A lot of shop-bought toys are advertised as being good for ‘early learning’. But toddlers learn by having lots of different experiences, not by playing with just a few plastic toys. If a toy has limited interest, toddlers will soon abandon it for the more interesting box that it came in. Spend your money on play materials that you cannot make or gather together. Here are some good ideas for toys either to buy or to gather together from what you already have.
  - A **solid wheeled trolley** has a long play life. It provides balance for young toddlers who still wobble when they walk. But soon the same trolley is just right to carry around teddies or a toddler’s collection of fir cones.
  - **Toddlers** need a generous supply of basic wooden blocks and plastic brick shapes. First they build simple towers or like to knock down your building. Toddlers develop their first ideas about space and shape by putting bricks in and out of containers, again and again. Later in early childhood, they and their friends will build anything that fires their imagination – a garage for the cars, a cage for their dinosaurs.
  - **Toddlers** are keen on piling, filing and sorting. You can buy a simple shape sorter toy, but they learn just as well with a range of different size containers and a home-made ‘posting box’.
  - **Large cardboard boxes** are useful because they can be sat in, pushed along and decorated. Soon they will become a bus to sit in, a cave to hid in and the table in a pretend café.
  - **Toddlers** love dressing up, but they do not need specially bought outfits. They like hats, bags and clothes that are easy to put on, like a fancy scarf or a waistcoat. As their imagination grows, an attractive piece of material can be a cloak, a wraparound skirt or the way to become a butterfly.
  - **Collect a big bag or basket** of safe household materials that otherwise go in the recycling or the bin. Young scientists have fun exploring cardboard tubes, wide-neck plastic bottles, corks and cotton reels, tins (empty and cleaned), supermarket packaging, old-fashioned dolly pegs. Check that anything is safe to be sucked, because younger toddlers will put some things in their mouth. Avoid polystyrene packaging and, obviously, anything with sharp edges. Toddlers learn through having time and space to practise. They repeat actions, often with slight variations. In this way they get to understand how things work. They become confident about what causes what, and what will fit or not. Try hard to look beyond the apparent mess to what toddlers are exploring and what they have learned. Of course, it is sensible for you to make some ground rules like ‘Paint or play dough stays on this table on the plastic cloth’. Make it easier for toddlers to be part of tidying up by giving time for the finding, wiping and putting back into containers or baskets.

**Learning through daily life**

- **Toddlers** do not only learn through what adults think of as play. They learn a great deal when you get out with them into the neighbourhood. An ordinary local circuit interests toddlers and very young children. On a local walk or trip to the market, allow enough time for them to stop and stare. Toddlers say and show that they remember a familiar corner as well as point out the newly arrived crane on the building site. Toddler general knowledge is built through ordinary experiences such as posting letters, buying some bread and watching a big black beetle cross the pavement.
  - **Once toddlers** are mobile, they are keen to be your apprentice in ordinary domestic routines. Give them some extra time, then toddlers feel helpful.

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**Toys from natural materials**

- **Toddlers** like the feel of water and use simple items to pour, fill and empty. In a family home, let them have water in the sink and organise a safe set of steps if necessary. Sand, or other dry ingredients like rice or pasta, can be in a washing-up bowl or deep seed tray.
  - **Toddlers** are ready for simple cooking, as well as helping with routines like laying the table. They start to grasp basic counting in situations that make sense like, ‘We need one more spoonful’ or ‘We need two cups’ (hold up your fingers for a visual clue). It will be a long haul before toddlers can take care of themselves completely. They cannot practise feeding themselves or putting on a jumper if you are usually tempted to do it, to save on mess and time. Quicker is not always better, once you home in on chances for toddlers to learn in the longer term. As well as the physical skills, they learn about cause and effect: what follows what and simple forward planning.

**The power of toddler thinking**

Really early literacy matters, and the best way to encourage it is by enjoying books with toddlers. Notice when they have favourites and be ready to read those many times. They enjoy dramatic pauses and repeating phrases that they can say as well. Some toddlers start to tell themselves the story and show that they already understand how books work – by turning the pages the right way, or perhaps saying ‘The end’ when the story is finished. Toddlers need to find out that pictures stand for real objects. Be excited when they link what they see outside – a big
An important part of learning to read and spell is learning about how the letters in written words reflect the sounds in spoken words. Children often begin to show this knowledge around 5 or 6 years of age when they produce spellings such as BO or BLO for "blow." We tend to think that learning to spell doesn't really begin until children start inventing spellings that reflect the sounds in spoken words -- spellings like C or KI for "climb." These early invented spellings may not represent all of the sounds in a word, but children are clearly listening to the word and trying to reflect it. Even the earlier generation learnt nursery rhymes in their native languages, and nearly all English medium schools employ their usage in the earlier classes. But what exactly are nursery rhymes and why have they been so popular over the years? Let's find out. What are Nursery Rhymes? Action rhymes for preschoolers are meant for a very specific reason, and that is movement. By using hands, feet, and faces to express the various aspects of the poem, children start associating the words and tonalities, with their actual meanings and non-verbal cues. This, indirectly, helps in their eye-to-limb coordination and enhance fine motor movement in a better way. Early learning proponents believe that you can teach a very tiny child virtually anything by using methods that are appropriate for very young children. What are those methods? 1. Exposure versus teaching. Adults have categorized anything that is "academic" as "boring" and "difficult." But babies aren't born with this bias, and toddlers and preschoolers almost never have it. They find learning country flags just as interesting as learning zoo animals. They find singing about presidents just as exciting as singing about "Little Bo Peep."