

The Toddler Years -Cognitive Development

By Mike Witzky

Language and reasoning are in full swing during the toddler years. An eighteen month old may have a vocabulary of between three and fifty words. By age 2, the toddler knows 50 words and their vocabulary doubles every six months up to age 4. Toddlers understand more words than they speak and will pick up words that may not even be deliberately taught. This is always fun when they come home spouting profanity.

Toddler's minds seem to grow as fast as their bodies. Their minds are still not ready to handle complex thoughts or ideas. Toddlers are very literal and believe they are the center of all that goes on around them. This differs when compared to the child just a few years older. There is a classic test to show the difference between the cognitive development between a 4 year old and a 6 year old. Sit them down one at a time. Have two glasses – a tall glass and a short glass. Take a pitcher of water and pour the small glass full. Then take the small glass and pour it into the tall glass. Ask the 4 year old which glass has the most water. They will always say the tall glass. If you do the same thing with most 6 year olds, they will say that both glasses have the same amount of water.

The toddler's ideas about the world are limited to their own narrow point of view. They are developing their sense of self, and usually, are receiving so much attention that it is natural they would feel that it is all about them. From the time that they were babies everything is done for them. A three year old may see mommy cry and bring her their teddy bear. This is a great demonstration of sharing, but is based on the assumption that mommy is consoled by the same things they are.

While this is an interesting observation, what relevance does this have to us as parents? The limitations of this way of thinking are that children at this age often blame themselves for death, illness and divorce. A four year old may think that mommy and daddy are separating because he got dirt on the carpet. He may be told that mommy and daddy are getting a divorce because they don't love each other anymore and so may wonder if the parents will fall out of love with him. Toddlers may not be able to verbalize these ideas but if we have an understanding of how their little minds operate, we can understand certain behaviors. It them may be helpful to rephrase the concern to them to see if that describes how they are feeling. Then they can be reassured that they were not the cause of the action they are worrying about.

Understanding how a child of this age is thinking is also important in terms of discipline. Washing a 3 year old's mouth out with soap when they replace an "f" for the "t" in truck (a very common mistake at this age) is totally missing the point. There was no intentional use of inappropriate language. Similarly, when a 4 year old comes home and does use profanity they, most likely are using a phrase they heard from someone and have no real understanding of it's meaning. It is much better to be very clear with the child that their use of that work is not okay. It is also a good rule of thumb to begin to practice what you preach. As an adult, you may want to limit your language around your children when they are young.

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In other articles I have discussed the social development and get into ways to discipline children that can have wonderful results.

If you think your child may benefit from professional assistance, please go to the “*Find a Service Provider*” section of the BHG Web site <http://www.bhg.org> to locate a behavioral healthcare agency in your county.

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