

The Toddler Years - Physical Development

By Witzky

This series of articles will be looking at the developmental stages of the toddler. I will look at three aspects of development; physical development, cognitive development, where I will discuss how thinking and reasoning develop, and the social development of toddlers.

The toddler years are between ages two and five, just before children begin school. By the time many children reach kindergartener they have been in nursery school and Pre School, which created a social environment for interactions and experimentation. These “play years” should be full of social experiences and are sometimes called the “rough and tumble” years. You will often see toddlers running and jumping, pulling and tugging at each other while they play. In the beginning of the toddler years (at about the age of two) play between children is called parallel play because, they are playing along side of and not necessarily with other children. At this age the children are beginning to learn the social interactions that will be used in a year or two to play interactively with others.

No matter how loving, attentive, understanding and patient parents are, there are some problems of early childhood that cannot be avoided. As part of the process of developing social skills, children do and say things that worry their parents. They seem too ready to strike out at others, or they insist that imaginary friends are real and refuse to play with anyone. Are these serious problems or are they part of the process some children go through?

When children first start playing with other children, they are rarely deliberately aggressive. They may pull a toy away from someone or push another child over but it is more to remove an obstacle or to get an object than it is to hurt. As a child grows older, the frequency of deliberate physical aggression increases, reaching a peak sometime during the preschool years and then declines. While physical aggression of a young child is normal, it should not be encouraged. Children need to develop an awareness of the needs and rights of others. A three year old needs to be stopped from hitting another even though such a show of force may be a normal response to a provocation. The important thing to remember is that the goal of parenting is instruction. Separating a child for hitting and explaining why it is not okay will be repeated over and over again during this age.

Family and neighborhood influences, as well as age and sex, affect how aggressive a child will be. Children whose parents who use physical punishment and who watch violence on TV are more likely to be more physically aggressive. In the toddler years there isn't a big difference between boys and girls in this area. The differences that we may see are usually more about how boys and girls are socialized in our society than it is about any physical differences.

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Some children will create an imaginary playmate that serves as a companion for games and sometimes as a scapegoat for mischief or accidents. This is found more often with children who have few real playmates. Preschoolers who create these imaginary friends are neither liars nor disturbed. They are just showing a normal range of imagination for their age. Children usually take their imaginary friends quite seriously and anyone who denies their existence will be confronted by an angry child. It may be better to accept the imaginary friend than to challenge its existence or feel that your child has a serious problem. You may want to find your child more playmates, realizing that this will not always take away the imaginary friend but will provide a range of social interactions that are important to early childhood development.

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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