



IN SICKNESS & HEALTH

Mental Health of Toddlers in Childcare

Happy toddlers are curious and exuberant in nearly everything they do. Toddlers begin to develop social-emotional wellness, the ability to form satisfying relationships with others, to play, communicate, learn, and experience the full spectrum of human emotions.

Toddlerhood also is the age of autonomy and many children will test boundaries. Proper caregiving and a supportive childcare environment will help allow autonomy to develop within the boundaries of safety--physical as well as social and emotional.

Security Comforts

Caregivers and parents should be aware of children's needs, and help them feel secure and loved. Meeting children's immediate needs, including security issues, is essential to good mental health.

For toddlers, feeding usually is associated with comfort; it is a special time for bonding and cuddling. As the child gets older, the caregiver wants the child to feed himself, but the child may not understand this shift. Help children through this process slowly, making sure each child gets enough attention during meals. Sit with the child, talk to the child, touch the child, and most importantly praise the child for self-feeding efforts.

Another comfort measure for many toddlers is using a pacifier or thumb sucking. Other children have favorite blankets or toys. These are important for children. Be patient and realize that the children are using these transitional objects to feel safe. When they are ready, the toddlers will abandon the security items. Try to have duplicates of the objects available for the children for occasions (i.e., when favorite blanket needs to be washed). Remember, to the child, it is all about feeling safe and using methods for self-soothing.

Some toddlers show an increased level of separation anxiety. They may cry when their primary caregiver leaves. Some children enroll in childcare for the first time as a toddler; they may not have experienced previous separation from their parent/guardian.

Building Social Skills

The toddler stage is where children begin to develop the social skills necessary to form friendships. These early social skills are important for children because if a child has few social skills, their peers may not play with them.

Shy toddlers may experience similar rejection because they tend to withdraw socially. As a result, other children do not involve them in play, often resulting in these toddlers feeling rejected. Caregivers can help toddlers begin to develop social skills and build friendships in a variety of ways, such as the following:

- Teach children how to get into the "game" or activity. Some children do not ask, "Can I play?" Instead, they just barge in where they see a gap. They look at an activity, and in their own minds, they process where they fit in.
- Teach children to treat other children as friends. The "Golden Rule" applies throughout life--"Treat others as you want to be treated." Reinforce this concept daily.

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- Teach toddlers how to say “no” in acceptable ways. A toddler’s response to an invitation to play by another child may be a definite “No,” but it can mean several things. It might mean “not now,” or “I don’t want to do that activity,” or any number of things. It is not necessarily a rejection of the inviting child. But the other child may think it is rejection. Toddlers can learn to say “not now” or “later” or “I don’t like that.” These phrases are more easily accepted by other children.

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Setting Limits

Accepting the limits set by adults is one of the challenges for toddlers. While setting limits with your toddler, be clear and consistent.

- Keep rules simple. Two basic rules are: do not hurt yourself, and do not hurt others or property.
- Make simple statements about behaviors. Toddlers are just beginning to talk and they will not be able to understand long explanations.
- Make it clear to the child that even though you do not like a particular behavior, you still love him or her!

Temper tantrums are common at this age, and the best way to deal with them is to prevent them. Try to avoid situations that may frustrate and overwhelm the child. Try to soothe the child before situations explode. Offer help as much as possible, but do not try to complete tasks for the toddler because this may produce resistance and tantrums.

If tantrums occur, do not worry; this is a type of psychological release for a child’s frustration. You can either let the child alone (if there is no risk of injury), or you may hold the child and provide comfort and verbal reassurances.

Fear

In the toddler stage, children develop many fears, such as fear of thunder or loud noises, darkness, animals, etc. Living in homes or neighborhoods affected by alcohol or drug addiction or violence can cause fear. Also, young children may feel fear of terrorism or disasters. If a child is afraid of something that is real, such as thunder or loud noises, you can help calm the child by explaining what is happening.

Children also may have fears of real people but for imaginary reasons. These fears come from their environment. A child may fear police officers because he has witnessed a frightening encounter with police such as an arrest, a violent situation, or even a routine traffic stop that left his mother frightened, too.

It is important to acknowledge children’s fears. However, children need to trust people who can help them. Help children learn about community health and safety helpers and how they provide help when needed.

Fear of imaginary items or situations also is very real for toddlers. These fears also come from the child’s environment. For example, a child may fear ghosts because of a television show or movie, fairy tale, or story told by older children. If the child has an irrational fear (such as a fear of ghosts), then give her a rational solution, such as a magic wand. Children are concrete thinkers. They need something that they can see and believe in. Also, children need creative means for protection.

Development of social skills, autonomy, and the ability to express emotions is

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progressive and developmental. Communication skills are important in expressing motions appropriately. Encourage toddlers to state how they feel and to use appropriate words.

Anarella Cellitti, PhD., University of Alabama Birmingham

Internet Resources

Better Baby Care, www.betterbabycare.org/pubs_and_resources.html

Children's Advocate, Mental Health for Children,
www.4children.org/news/799mheal.htm

Connect for Kids, Early Childhood (0-5 years) Mental Health and Development Toolkit,
www.connectforkids.org/node/3003

Tulane Institute of Infant & Early Childhood Mental Health, 10 Things You Should Know About Infant Mental Health, www.infant institute.org/tenth.htm

What is Infant Mental Health and What Does It Mean for My Program? Zero to Three; www.zerotothree.org/cpe/tip_2002_08.html

Resources

Zero to Three, National Center for Infants, Toddlers and Families, 2000 M St., NW, Ste. 200, Washington, DC 20036; 202-638-1144; www.zerotothree.org

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