

## TODDLER SOCIAL/EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Erikson's stage for the toddler is autonomy versus shame and doubt. Autonomy is having self-control. Autonomy leads to pride in oneself and is achieved, or the child feels shameful and doubtful in himself/herself and/or the world.

There are many ways to encourage the feeling of autonomy in a child: praise the toddler, allow the child to make mistakes without criticizing him/her, make a safe learning environment for the child to play, allow the child to make decisions as often as possible.

The term egocentric means self-centered. Toddlers are egocentric and become fairly selfish. However, often toddlers are caring and thoughtful in an egocentric way. For example, if a Band-Aid helps them feel better when they are sick, they may give a Band-Aid to a parent if they say they are sick or have a headache. They may give a person their special blanket, doll, or stuffed animal if someone is sad or crying. They see their world only through their experiences and in an egocentric way.

A parent can encourage socialization in toddlers in many ways. An important way is by encouraging social interaction with other adults. The parents should leave the child with a trusted adult, like a grandparent, a close friend, or neighbor, once in a while. Allow the child to play with other children. If the child does not have siblings, let him/her go to a child care provider or become involved in a play group in which children near the same ages get together once or more times a week to play.

Toddlers usually express their emotions spontaneously and often show a wide range of emotions in just a few minutes. Toddlers also begin to sense others' emotions and usually imitate them. If a parent acts fearful, the toddler is most likely to act fearful as well. Toddlers have a difficult time differentiating fact from fantasy and may show a great deal of fear at new and different objects and people.

Fears and anxieties are commonly seen in toddlers. Toddlers fear monsters, witches, goblins, ghosts, etc., that they imagine in their mind. It is easier to understand this when you realize how adults encourage toddlers to believe in Santa, the Easter Bunny, the Tooth Fairy, etc., but not to believe in the other, more frightening make-believe characters. They are usually afraid of the dark as well as some animals. They are afraid of getting hurt, of loud noises made to frighten them, and nightmares. "Bad people" are also frightening to toddlers. "Bad people" meaning those with characteristics of or clothing like those portrayed in books and television.

It is important that parents/caregivers help toddlers overcome their fears and anxieties. Fears and anxieties should be handled in a matter-of-fact manner. The toddler's fears should not be made fun of nor should they be pushed into a situation they are afraid of. Adults should never say "There's nothing to be afraid of" and push the child's fears aside. Instead, toddlers should be encouraged to talk about what is frightening them and the adults should listen and help them overcome the fear. Remembering back to childhood, most people can remember their fears, like how the house settling and the heat kicking on sounded just like a monster or ghost coming in the room. Discussing the heat or the house settling and showing children what makes the sound can help them overcome their fear.

Toddlers may express affection in hugs, kisses, and giving toys or flowers (usually dandelions) to the person a toddler wishes to show affection to.

A security object (such as a blanket or a bear) is important in helping a child learn to comfort her/himself. If the object is a blanket, it can be cut in half so you can wash one half while the other half is being used. If it is a toy, make sure to select one that will survive being taken everywhere with the child. A security object becomes critical at bedtime. Parents may feel uncertain about security objects, especially when they become raggy looking, but the parent is usually worried about what other adults will think rather than the happiness and security of the child.

Imaginary friends are usually more important to a first or only child. Most three- and four-year-olds have imaginary friends. These are signs of a developing imagination. They give a child a safe way to find out who he/she wants to be. They help the child identify with people who are overwhelming to him/her. A child's life is usually enhanced by imaginary friends. They are a sign of healthy emotional and cognitive development. Parents should not be concerned unless the child likes to be isolated. Children use these friends to explore parts of their personalities that they could never learn about otherwise. They find out what their parents will allow by having their friends try things out for them. They are usually kept very private because when they are shared, they become ridiculed, and they lose their magic. The value of an imaginary friend is that it enriches a child's world and helps him/her work out real problems.

Anger is a common emotion seen in toddlers. It is usually caused by their under-developed motor and language skills, and their struggle for independence. When the child is angry, allow him/her an appropriate outlet for his/her anger, like running, hammering, playing kick ball, or punching a large bean bag.