

TODDLERS

The toddler years begin when the child begins to walk, sometime between 10-15 months of age, 12 months being the most common. However, before the child will walk, he/she will usually engage in cruising. Cruising is the term used for walking along the edge of furniture, using the furniture as support. Cruising helps the child gain large motor control and a sense of balance and the confidence needed to stand and walk unaided. If you observe a child cruising, you will probably see moments when the child will stand alone for a few seconds or try to walk from one piece of furniture to another and then realize what he/she is doing and quickly grasp for the edge of the closest piece of furniture he/she can find.

The term toddler came from the appearance of children when taking their first steps--they toddle back and forth. This toddling is caused from the head still begin oversized or out of proportion to the child's body. This causes the child to have to balance using the entire body, or in other words, toddle! Their posture is also naturally poor. Parents should not be concerned or try to make the child stand up and walk with a straight posture--it is impossible for them at this point. You may imagine yourself balancing on a balance beam and notice how you use your arms, your head, and your upper body to help you keep from falling over. This is how a toddler appears and probably feels. Gradually, the child learns to balance and have greater large muscle coordination and will walk more than toddle and will have improved posture. Show the transparency of toddling.

Bring in several different types (or pictures) of infant/toddler shoes for the class to examine while you explain about toddlers and shoes.

When children begin to show interest in walking or begin cruising, most parents become concerned about what type of shoes are best and what to look for when purchasing a pair of shoes. Researchers say that shoes are used for protection, regardless of the wearer's age. If a child is taking his/her first steps on a surface free from hazards, he/she does not need shoes at all. Walking barefoot will help build arches and strengthen foot and ankle muscles. You should remove all objects that a toddler may trip over or bump into. Walking outdoors is harder because hazards are not clearly visible. Therefore, shoes should probably be used outside.

The first rule of buying shoes is to take your child (and his/her socks) with you to the store. The child's shoes should be comfortable. It should have about half an inch between the baby's big toe and the end of the shoe with room to fit your pinkie in the back of the shoe. Test the fit while your child is standing with both shoes on.

Select a shoe with a flexible sole that will bend with the child's foot, but it should be firm behind the heel for support. Leather, cloth, and canvas are good materials that allow the baby's skin to breathe. Nonskid bottoms are a good feature. Be careful, however; babies grow out of shoes (and socks) quickly. Don't be surprised if you are back at the store in three months for another pair of shoes.

When a toddler is beginning to walk, it is helpful to provide the toddler with toys that help encourage him/her to walk.

PUSHING TOYS: These toys are greatly enjoyed by the new walker. They add a bit more stability and, therefore, confidence. Cart-like toys with low compartments with toddler-height handles are great for this. Other types include toy versions of adult equipment, like a toy lawn mower or shopping cart.

PULL TOYS: Pull toys that toddlers can string around behind them are also a favorite. Ducks, dogs, and other animals that move, pop, and/or make noise or music are big hits. However, the strings can be dangerous if the toddler should become entangled. Supervised play is a must with pull toys for this reason!

RIDING TOYS: Riding toys are popular items for the new walking toddler. Don't be surprised if the toddler pushes and rides backwards on the riding toy for the first little while. The coordination to move forward comes with time. Make sure that whatever style or type of ride-on toy you purchase has a low center of gravity, making the toy very stable and less likely to capsize or roll over.

WALKING GAMES: There are many games to play with a toddler who is learning to walk:

1. When the toddler is cruising, set up rows of furniture or chairs to make cruising easier.
2. Have two people sit on the floor and encourage the toddler to walk back and forth between the two of them.
3. Let the toddler "chase" you, making sure you let him/her "catch" you.
4. Take the toddler places where he/she can walk--the zoo, mall, or park.
5. Have the toddler collect or get things for you.
6. Give the toddler a bucket in which to collect items while you are at home or away.