

# especially for parents

## Understanding babies and toddlers

For a long time behavioral scientists have been observing how babies grow and learn. They agree it's a slow series of achievements that are remarkably similar among all children. While parents are in charge of childrearing and promoting this process, three factors make each child different from all others: *hereditary temperament* dictates how children react to living; *environment* is the culture or places where children live; and *experiences* they have daily. All contribute to the formation of personality, attitudes, and behavior.

Ideas about baby rearing have changed but the needs of babies remain the same. Most parents are well equipped to love their children but soon discover love isn't enough. In a survey of young parents 90 percent desired "help to make the job of parenting easier." Research has provided information that increases parent's knowledge about how babies develop. That makes it possible to provide childhood experiences leading to successful achievement and to patiently accept the trials and errors that are natural in childhood learning.

### Bonding and attachment

A remarkable relationship is developed between parents and infants during the early months of life. No one is exactly sure about the mysteries of bonding, but in the hours after birth mothers, fathers, and newborns start falling madly in love with one another. Some hospitals place newborns in mother's arms, next to her skin, breasts, and the sound of her beating heart. Fathers hold and caress their newborn.

Although baby's attachment to mother does not instantly occur, observers report some infants show

preferences for mother's voice as early as the third day. It is believed that the soothing effects of mother's handling, feeding, and care of baby promotes attachment to her.

Infant attachment increases during the first year. By six months infants begin to recognize that some faces do not belong to their mother or father. They may show shyness, but it will disappear. By one year they can be extremely upset when left with strangers unless they have a warm-up time and gradually learn that when you leave, you do come back. If mother works outside the home, find a caregiver who will continue the warm, attentive care you wish for your infant.

Attachment is a special relationship between a child and adult that endures through time. They need a continuously responsive adult who meets their need for positive interactions and responds to distresses of hunger and discomfort. Infants need to be constantly reassured that the world is a good place in which to live.

How do parents build attachments and trust?

- respond promptly to baby's cries
- talk to babies and tell them what you're doing
- hold babies securely while bathing as you let them feel the warm water around them
- play with baby's toes, fingers, hair, cheeks, legs
- cuddle baby closely while feeding and relaxing together
- concentrate on smiling at baby's face when dressing or diapering

Will all this attention spoil infants? No. Catering to infants in the first year usually results in a happier, more alert one-year-old. Infants act to satisfy their needs of the moment. The more adequately needs are met, the more satisfied they become. Crying is

normal, waking at night is normal, and curiosity is natural and desirable. A great-grandmother who seemed to know what scientists are just discovering said, "The first year baby is boss, after that parents take over." Infants have a hard time if parents expect them to understand directions and obey rules before they are able. Lots of child abuse occurs to children under two. Parents become angered when infants do not remember or behave according to adult expectations that are beyond baby's capability.

The skills of mothering and fathering do not require special knowledge or social graces. They do require awareness and a decision on the part of parents to give a child the best start they can. Smiles, gentle pats, kisses, and hugs give baby a different message than frowns, impatient handling, and little touching. Your manner of attention tells the infants how worthwhile they are. Infants' responses are limited at first. But sometime in the second month, don't be surprised if baby stops in the middle of feeding to look lovingly at you. In later months, you will notice that your infant, who has had steady, gentle attention to cries and is picked up and handled frequently, will fuss less and be more alert than those who haven't had this advantage.

### Baby's temperament

You may think all this information is fine but what should you do if your child has been screaming and kicking since birth? It's even worse if the neighbor's child is charming and cuddly and sleeps through the night.

Two psychiatrists and a pediatrician became interested in the personalities of infants in their hospital nursery. They watched some babies until their adolescence to determine what aspects

of temperament, if any, are present at birth. Their conclusions show that individuals are born with a basic behavior style or temperament. The qualities that are inborn include: activity level, regularity in sleeping, eating and eliminating patterns, readiness to accept new people and situations, adaptability to change, sensitivity to light and noise, general mood of cheerfulness or unhappiness, intensity of responses, and persistence.

Infants show a mix of characteristics and combinations of traits make some babies more demanding of parental tolerance and patience than others. Because parents have an image of the "perfect baby," infants who enter the world with predominantly intense reactions such as high activity level, a general mood of unhappiness, and longer periods of wakefulness are most likely to be misunderstood. If your infant is like this you'll need all the imagination you can muster to be the consistent, loving playmate baby needs.

Knowing about the characteristics infants are born with keeps parents from blaming themselves or feeling guilty about baby's behavior. If your baby is a poor sleeper, poor eater, a constant cryer, and stiffens in your arms when you're trying your best, it's just the way the baby is. Much of the spark of this infant's temperament will remain but by the end of the first year or by midchildhood many of the characteristics will have modified. Like any other infant, adjustments to life depend on your loving attention to bring about a transformation in baby's less convenient behaviors.

### Patterns of growth

Development and behavior in the first three years of a child's life has a fairly predictable pattern and shape. A study of behavior patterns of babies for over 30 years repeatedly notes that learning and physical growth occurs in predictable stages.

At some ages children are said to be in better balance with themselves and others. Parents find them easier to get

along with and they seem more content. It's possible that better moods occur after major learnings are accomplished. You'll notice the frustrations of learning to grasp, sit up, walk, or talk. Babies are notably more content at six months, 24 months, and 36 months. They tend to be more cross, unhappy, and confused with themselves at three months, 15 months, 18 months, and 30 months. A child's temperament affects how vigorously they react during their changing cycles. It's comforting to know that ups and downs are normal and "worse" behavior soon becomes "better" behavior. The extremes of behavior are an important part of development.

Even though behavior patterns are predictable and considered temporary they don't always vanish by themselves. A two and one-half year old having frequent tantrums needs parental help in resolving anger or frustration in order to progress. Without guidance children may perpetuate childish behaviors such as tantrums, rudeness, whining, or aggression.

Knowing what to expect as natural prevents parents from being too surprised or discouraged when infants or toddlers behave in ways that are inconvenient and unattractive to them.

The first 12 months of baby's life represent the most astounding physical growth period while the first three years represent the most rapid social and intellectual development period. Within 60 months of birth babies start kindergarten where they'll be expected to:

- use hundreds of words
- have ideas about time, size, color, numbers, and safety
- live by social rules regulating toileting, eating, and aggression
- cooperate in work and play relationships
- be physically competent

The following brief descriptions present some ideas about what you will enjoy and worry about as a parent. For more information read *Child Behavior*, a paperback book by Francis L. Ilg and Louise Bates Ames.

### Birth to one year

Infants are born with only enough physical competence to keep their bodies functioning. There's muscular control to regulate heartbeat, to suck, to swallow, to exhale and inhale, and to eliminate body wastes.

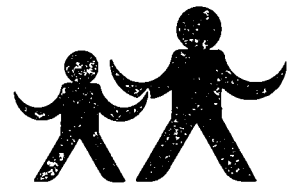
Muscular development follows an orderly pattern of learning to shift the head in the first few months. Between two and five months baby will be able to hold the head erect and be propped up for short times. By six months they can roll themselves over so they can no longer be depended on to stay where you put them. Sometime before 12 months babies are experimenting with pulling themselves to a standing position and creeping.

At three months baby begins to focus on moving objects and people. By six months the gradual cooperation of muscles and thought allow them to grasp an object and bring it into their range of sight and to the mouth.

By the end of the first year baby's hands and eyes work well together but not as accurately as yours. Don't expect the first birthday cake to be eaten daintily. But they do well at taking objects out of a can and putting them back, squeezing a doll to make it squawk, or shaking a bell to make it ring.

It may seem infants are preoccupied with eating and sleeping but they are listening to you. In about a week they are alert 30 hours a week and begin to make noises during their awake times. Cooing, chuckling, or crying are all languages you will learn to understand. When infants cry you'll know whether they are telling you they are bored and want to be held, talked to, and cuddled; whether they hurt and need relief; or are just plain hungry.

Babies need an audience to talk to them. They delight in the sound of their parents voices. In spite of what many parents fear, picking up a crying baby does not spoil them. Parents who respond quickly to baby's cries discover that between three and six months crying almost disappears. Babies who do not get needed attention



will continue crying and clinging to parents to get the satisfying contact they seek. Also, babies who receive more verbal stimulation are more alert and aware than those left in cribs to cry it out.

By the end of the first year babies are responding to words like “bye-bye,” their name, and some family names. Since language development depends on baby’s ability to hear, consider a hearing check-up at six months.

Pleasurable experiences with parents bring baby’s first smile around three months. At six months infants initiate contact with other people or objects by reaching, crying, making noises, or laughing aloud. Social games like peek-a-boo are high-level entertainment.

---

## One to two years

---

Now baby has become a “toddler.” Some researchers claim they have never seen a “spoiled” baby but many “spoiled” toddlers. Babies are absorbed in their physical and emotional growth and meeting self-centered needs as they adjust to the world. They understand and remember little beyond how to get attention for hunger, warmth, soiled pants, pain, or social contact. Toddlers enter a new stage of development as their curiosity and mobility brings change in family participation and territory to explore.

Keep in mind that parents are teachers. There is no school room but in your home you’re conducting short, simple lessons about everything. You provide safe and entertaining materials and space for an exploring child, and you enthusiastically share toddler’s interests by helping and showing how things are done. Then you let them try their way. As a disciplinarian you follow a few rules and routines that help toddlers learn. You have the final say in disagreements. It’s essential to set patterns of guidance for now and later years. For example, if toddlers are not to climb on the coffee table, that means all the time, not just when it’s convenient for you to distract them or move them to where climbing is appropriate.

Firmness will not make your toddler love you less. They are better able to deal with the family and the world if you set and enforce realistic boundaries.

Physical development in the second year is marked by a new awareness of ways to use the body more efficiently. They achieve a clumsy walking style, climb stairs by hazardous methods, and seem to be always jumping over, around, and under objects.

There’s a wide variation in the age at which talking begins. Whether they talk or not they are understanding more of your conversation than you think. Their first one or two word sentences usually stems from wants such as “me milk,” pointing to the milk carton, or “me do it.” You can expand their vocabulary by making a game of naming objects or animals. First the real thing, then pictures in a book. In the second year there is a fascination with hinges so expect turning pages to be more interesting than the pictures.

Independence is not always easy for parents to deal with. Toddlers now recognize they can win your attention through various actions—good or bad. They are increasingly assertive about doing things themselves. They take great pride in accomplishment but have a new negative attitude toward what you want them to do. They’ll say “No” to many of your suggestions. It’s best handled by patience, distraction, or ignoring whenever possible. It’s important that they develop self-confidence so you may have to think of new ways to convince them to do things.

Around age two toddlers develop into delightful companions with good social relationships. They are fantastic helpers. Capitalize on their friendly attitude by teaching words, colors, shapes, names of objects, and how to follow directions. Set the table, put away toys, sort clothes, or clean the living room together. Reward them with encouraging words and praise.

---

## Two to three years

---

Dramatic changes take place as toddlers approach their third year. Their original interest in parents,

exploring the world, and practicing motor skills continues but the use of their time is more directed toward accomplishing goals.

Greater physical strength and muscular control produces graceful sitting and standing postures. Arms and legs move together more efficiently for the usual running and jumping while walking on tiptoes and galloping are added skills. With all parts working together toddler pedals a tricycle expertly and throws and kicks balls purposively. Large pencils or crayons are controlled enough to produce drawings. A big achievement is their control of urination. Strengthened muscles allow children this age to wait to urinate. However, heavy sleep, cold, or excitement may result in temporary loss of bladder control.

The changes in thinking and problem-solving skills are both interesting and challenging for parents. An important part of being two is learning what can be done with increased attention and memory spans. As older toddlers explore objects they want to know how it works and what can be done with it. The 30-month-old will repeat an activity over and over to master it.

Between two and three toddlers are eager to engage in conversations. Their words and sentences are more complete and they want to exchange ideas with adults. They use more action words and show interest in descriptive words such as “huge,” “shiny,” “rough,” or “fuzzy.” Help them experience descriptive words with explorations of textures, sizes, sounds, or activities.

More activity outside the home now lessens toddler’s focus on the family, especially on mother. Although the use of “No” has faded, it is still used frequently as toddler attempts to make choices. They want to attract and hold your attention, not in the same “clingy” fashion of babies but as individuals.

Greater emotional control is noticeable as they begin to express normal feelings of affection and annoyance with adults or other children. When your toddler wants to show affection relax and enjoy it. If they express displeasure with you or others pause to consider if the feeling is justified. It’s

hard for parents to handle feelings of dislike such as "I hate you" but deal with it as a grown-up. Sometimes neither friends nor parents are pleasing.

A thinking, reasoning toddler sets a new tone for your relationship. By age three toddlers begin to size up situa-

tions and think them through before taking action. For example, younger children will try to lift an impossibly heavy log; a toddler will ask for help. Sometimes parents mistakenly take the request for help as a returning dependency. It's actually a new level of

more mature reasoning and is an opportunity for you to teach decision-making. Plan together how to lift the log, arrange their room, or prepare a picnic. Planning helps children learn the important basics of problem-solving skills.

---

This publication was prepared by Marcelle Straatman, Extension human development specialist, and Shelley Lindgren, Ph.D.

---

Published and distributed in furtherance of the Acts of Congress of May 8 and June 30, 1914, by the Oregon State University Extension Service, O. E. Smith, director; Washington State University Cooperative Extension, J. O. Young, director; the University of Idaho Cooperative Extension Service, H. R. Guenther, director; and the U.S. Department of Agriculture cooperating.

The three participating Extension Services offer educational programs, activities, and materials without regard to race, color, national origin, sex, or disability as required by Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972, and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973. The Oregon State University Extension Service, Washington State University Cooperative Extension, and the University of Idaho Cooperative Extension Service are Equal Opportunity Employers. 25/25/25

---