Toddler Behavior Overview

Hi, welcome to season two of the Baby Manual podcast for parents of toddlers. This season will help you feel confident as you navigate the difficulties of toddlerhood, from tantrums to sleep schedules to potty training.

I'm your host, a pediatrician and mom, Dr. Carol Keim. Hello and welcome to this week's episode of the Baby Manual Podcast. This is the eighth episode in the second season.

It is all about toddler behavior and I'm going to go through their development and tell you why they're doing what they are doing at various ages and what you can do about it so you don't go crazy as a parent because I know how hard it is to have a toddler.

So starting with one-year-olds, usually I don't hear a lot of behavior concerns from the one year old parents, but babies at this age, they're just starting to do things for themselves.

So they are not fully capable. They do make a mess when they try to stuff and they take longer than adults do to get things done. When you're letting them help you with stuff, it can get kind of frustrating because it takes longer and it just doesn't come out as well as if you just did it yourself.

And I know it's very easy to just fall into the trap of doing everything for them. But at age one, kids are wanting to start to get a little bit of independence.

And so what you can do is something called scaffolding, where you are supporting their development as it goes along. There's a lot of steps in between a child being fully independent at something and you doing it completely for them.

One-Year-Old Independence and Safety

So, for example, let's say putting on shirts. It's a tricky skill to be able to put your shirt over your head and get your arms through it. But they can start to help at this age.

So you can put it kind of over their head, and then guide their hand to where it goes, then let them push it the rest of the way through. And that's one way to support them as they're learning how to do it by themselves.

Scaffolding is something you could also look up. You can do in any type of situation. There are so many examples on the internet. Another milestone at this age is they're starting to walk.

And so what this means is that they can get farther than they used to and they start to get into things. So this is the time to start childproofing and think about having a yes space in your house.

A yes place is a place where your child can be by themselves and if you needed to turn around or leave them for a few seconds, they would be totally safe in that area.

So it's a space that they will not be able to get out of. Sometimes it is a playpen, sometimes it a room, but it would an entirely child-proofed area where anything that can get to is safe for them to go to.

They also start talking at a year. Typically, they can only say mama, dada, and one other word like hi, but they are starting to pick up a lot more words and they learn a lots.

They can understand just about everything you say to them by a years of age, But they express almost nothing. So they do get really frustrated. And when they want something, usually their wants are all needs at this time and you can usually anticipate what they need.

Like, you know, it looks like they're hungry or they have to potty or whatever. If they aren't able to express themselves, they can get pretty frustrated and they use nonverbal communication at this age like fighting or kicking or hitting when they cannot express.

One way to help with this and to avoid those types of behaviors is to offer them choices throughout the day as often as possible. Start with things that really don't matter to you at all.

Whenever you're offering choices to a child, make sure it's two suitable choices, meaning it doesn't matter which one they pick. You're still OK with it.

So you are still controlling the environment a bit of as you know, in terms of what they get to choose between. But if you offer them choices like even, you don't close.

Do you want this shirt or this short or do you? Want this cup to drink out of this? Cup or the spoon or spoon? Or do want to play with this toy or toy?

Any time that you're about to give them something, see if you can make it into a choice between two different things. And even though they won't necessarily be able to tell you, they might look at one longer or gesture towards one or smile looking at on.

So they can let you know what their preference is already at a year of age. Offering them choices throughout the day just helps them feel more in control and helps him feel like they're expressing themselves a little bit so they don't get quite so frustrated.

You should also be talking to them all day long, just narrate your day, what you're doing. They're going to pick up all kinds of vocabulary that way. And then things that they point at or show to you, make sure you name them.

Use the actual words for things. You don't need to use baby words. If you use the word, they're gonna try to say it and they'll come up with their own way to it, but keep using the real names for stuff.

They also have stranger anxiety at age one to one and a half. So that can make it hard to leave them with other adults, like babysitters or daycare relatives, things like that.

And they also might not want to hug relatives or give them kisses or approach people that they don't know yet.

One-and-a-Half to Two-Year-Olds: Mobility and Boundaries

So what you can do at this age is really just have some empathy and advocate for them a bit. It is normal to have stranger anxiety. it's nothing personal. It doesn't mean that they dislike other adults.it doesn' mean they're never going to like your relatives.

Its really a phase that their going through and its totally normal. So just advocate for them. Let them know which adults are safe for him to be around.

Then also just let the adults know, like if they don't want to hug you or if are hiding behind me, let them, you know. You don' need to go after them and call them out and force them to interact with other adults.

So overall at one to one and a half, they're still fairly dependent on their parents. They don't have a whole lot of opinions yet. So this is a great time for you as a couple to take a parenting class together.

For you and the other parents or caregivers to Because not a lot has come up yet that's really pushing your buttons. And this is the age where you start to see some parenting differences come out, especially in terms of discipline.

I don't love the word discipline because I know it has the connotation of being very negative. But we're going to talk

through discipline is really just a method, a teaching a child of what is right and wrong, but it does not have to involve hurting your child or emotionally harming your children or anything.

It can be very positive. So parenting classes are great at telling you, you know, what sort of things to navigate and how best to do it, but also just to help you think about what sorts of thing might come up that you didn't even think you might have differences with your spouse of an opinion.

So like what's okay for a child to or what what okay them to eat or do they need to use utensils? Do they have to sit at the table the whole time? Like all those little kind of cultural things start coming up right around this age.

Great time to take a class. My favorite parenting classes are love and logic and there's one called bringing baby home and those are both really great to get the conversation started and definitely take them together.

It's almost completely useless if one parent takes a parenting class because the other one you know you need to be on the same page and There's so much that they'll teach you in the class that you can't just pass it along to your partner.

You really should take it together Alright, so going on to the one and a half to two year olds, somewhere around one-and-a-half, there's a little bit more of a developmental shift where they can now walk pretty well.

They start climbing onto stuff, and so they start getting themselves into really dangerous situations. They can climb on the couch and fall and hit their head on a coffee table.

They climb a bookshelf and tip it over. Pull out drawers and climb those and over dressers. Definitely the time to start anchoring furniture. Make sure your house is child proofed as much as possible and have that yes space that I talked about.

And just a reminder, childproofing, nothing is ever fully child proof. So children are kind of like little burglars. They can and will get into anything given enough time and motivation.

The point of child-proof is to buy you time. It might only buy seconds. three seconds, 10 seconds. You know, those outlet covers come out pretty quickly, but it takes a couple seconds to get them out.

So they're really just all ways for you to catch what your child is doing and then intervene and stop them from hurting themselves. Remember, nothing's fully childproof and you should never leave your children alone at this age.

Toddlers need direct supervision. All right, so also they are starting to talk a lot more around the one and a half to two year mark. They start just picking up tons and tons of words.

But they still can't fully express coherent thoughts. And so they get super frustrated. Again, just like before, they do things like kick or bite or hit or yell.

You just want to keep having empathy, offer them choices throughout the day, point to things and name them, try to use correct pronunciation when you repeat things back to them and just keep on supporting their language development.

One of my favorite milestones, I don't know why this is, but the Stoop and Recover is around age one and a half where they can actually like they're walking and they bend down and pick things up.

And this important because they start getting into things like, they open cabinets and pull things out. They can start opening bottles and jars. are trying to find things that they haven't experienced yet and experience them in some way.

So this is when they're really going after all the dangerous stuff and things like knives or glass things or things

they've been told in the past, no, you can't touch it.

They're like, well, I'm going to try again because I've never touched it, and I don't know what it feels like. Make sure everything that is within their reach is safe for them to grab and play with.

If there's anything they cannot have or You absolutely should not get into things like poisons or medicines, things that keep them out of reach and out-of-sight from them.

Also, they do a lot of mimicking at this age, which is great in a lotta ways because you can take advantage in terms of things, like housework. They love to do things such as wipe and sweep and help clean up and put things away.

but also they will mimic things like taking medicines. So if you take any pills, even over the counter or prescriptions, anything, try not to do it in front of your toddler at this age because they're gonna see everything you do and then they learn you're supposed to open those types of bottles and put those things in your mouth and swallow them.

And so there are a lot of accidental overdoses that happen in kids this because of that, because there just mimicking what their parents do. Just be extra careful with that.

They also start to repeat things, and sometimes they repeat, things we wish they wouldn't. And so this is where a lot of parents will start sensor their language around this age, because you'll notice your child will repeat whatever words they hear.

A lot times, swear words are spoken with some extra emphasis and emotion, so they tend to stick even better than just regular words. So kids will definitely start repeating things that they here at this stage.

Just be mindful of that. Other things you can do to sort of take advantage of the mimicking at this age, so let them help with other housework like food prep.

They can be very, very mild, like rinsing vegetables off, for example. they can help us setting the table with the silverware or the spoons at least, things that are not breakable.

Then you help clearing the tables, they help sweeping, putting socks into a pile. When you're folding laundry, you separate the socks out and just stack them up.

You can pick up their toys and put them away, those types of things. There's lots of ways to have your one and a half to two year old help you around the house and then they start to really enjoy it.

And then housework is much less of a struggle later down the road. They're also a little bit more independent at one and a half, and so they're starting to try things for themselves.

And they might not listen when we say things like, that's hot, don't touch it. They also sometimes will walk away from us in crowded places. So these can be sort of scary, dangerous times in that sense.

Just remember, it's okay to allow them to have small fails. It's OK to touch something that is a bit hot. it is not OK touch that something is boiling.

It's okay to let them learn, like, you know, when something is uncomfortable. If they're absolutely refusing to put a coat on, it's OK to walk out with a shirt and feel how cold it is without a code.

And then they can choose if they want to come back in and put it on or not. But, if you never experienced that, then, they don't understand why we do the things that we and they are going to start to fight you on that sort of stuff.

Because they just want do it their own way and to feel what those consequences are. So, yeah, allow for a little bit of that. And they're also just starting to learn how to use the word no at age one and a half to two.

So if you limit your own use of the world, no is a great way to avoid this in the first place. And instead of saying no, tell children what they can do.

Let's use gentle hands. So just redirecting instead of using the word no as much as possible, like in your own language will definitely help with this.

And then also just giving them choices, offering two suitable choices rather than telling them you have to do this one thing and, you know, setting that up that they could say no, for example, Uh, it's time to get in the car.

Do you want to walk out there by yourself or have me carry you? So something like that where you, you know, just not even allowing the note to come into play.

So yeah, still most of their wants are actually needs at this age, but they are starting to have some opinions and preferences.

Two-Year-Olds: Tantrums, Attention, and Transitions

so expect a little bit of tantrums and outbursts already by age one and a half to two, and just keep offering those choices and be empathetic and realize where they're coming from.

And that should help prevent some of those. By age two, so we call it the terrible twos. I don't love this, as I've said before in my other podcasts. It's just really because they're becoming more independent and they are not doing everything you tell them anymore.

So two-year-olds can start to run and this is important because, they can run away and especially in crowded places, this can be really dangerous. They can also run towards staircases but don t know how to navigate stairs yet and so they fall down the stairs at age 2. They can jump well and so they jump off of furniture and often don't know how to land very well.

And so, they can hurt themselves, hit their heads. We see lots of accidental injuries in two-year-olds and a lot of them are just covered in bruises on their legs.

That's a normal thing because they're just really clumsy. They're running around. So, to help with this at home, you can keep the doors locked while you're at keep locks up high where they can't reach them if you have a child that likes to unlock the doors and run out.

And then just be really extra mindful in public and keep the home child proofed as we've talked about already. They are also saying no pretty consistently at age two.

And also, the no that they use at this age is really just them setting a boundary. It's not them trying to be defiant, it's really them having trouble with transitions basically and just wanting to keep doing whatever they're doing and not do something different.

So just like before, limit your use of the word no, say what they can do instead and keep offering suitable choices throughout the day and also in a situation where you might anticipate a no.

By the way, if they try to pick option C, which they might at this age, you know, we offer two choices and they tried to take a choice that wasn't there, then you can say, oh, I would love to choose for you this time.

Let me help you out. And then next time you could choose yourself. Like, sorry, that was one of the choices, but. let's choose this choice, and then just stick with it, go with, it don't let them backtrack and pick another choice because that will become a power struggle.

So when you are choosing for them, you just pick one, Go with It, no emotion with. Don't get angry at them. Sometimes it's hard to pick stuff. And sometimes they just don t want to do whatever.

They just want do what ever they want in that moment, but don' t know how to tell you about it. just have some more empathy with them at this age. They also crave attention at age two, and what's hard about it is that they don't seem to care whether it's positive attention or negative attention, so they will act out just to get your attention.

And a lot of children learn pretty quickly that if they do something that their not supposed to do, they're going to immediately get attention in a So one way to avoid this to, avoid them just, you know, intentionally doing things that they're not supposed to for your attention is to spend 10 minutes a day.

Just 10 Minutes has been shown to be enough in child directed play. So that means for 10minutes, You can set a timer if you want on your phone and then set your Phone across the room.

Be fully engaged with your child for that time. Do whatever they want to do. Let them totally be in charge of how you play it. probably gonna be a little bit boring, it might not be what you would have wanted to do, but this is a great chance for them to be in control and to just have fun and get that full-on attention so that they're not acting out at other points in the day later to get it.

They also don't have any sense of time at age two but they can understand sequence a bit. Usually a two, maybe a three step sequence. So if when you're telling them things like, you know, if you say, hey, we're leaving in five minutes or, two minute warning to get off the playground, they have absolutely no sense of what that means.

They just know that you are going to remind them again and you going ask them to leave again. And they're just going get frustrated with that. If there's some sort of a visual cue, you can do that, or maybe an activity cue.

So when you're, say you are leaving a preferred activity like a playground, and you say something like, okay, we need to leave soon, so you choose one more thing to do, two more things to, whatever, pick a number.

And then after that thing is done, were gonna go. Or you need to leave the house, for example, and they might need do a couple of things before you go.

So when your coat is on, then we can walk outside. Or when you've picked out your shoes, I can help you put them on. If you use these when-then statements, they can start to anticipate the sequence and then also start anticipate consequences down the road.

And they do want to experience things for themselves at this age. So sometimes they will just refuse to do whatever you want them to because they don't understand why they have to it.

Like I had said, putting on coats before, or maybe it's shoes. Maybe they refuse put on their shoes and they want go outside. So let them go outside without shoes.

Let them feel what it's like. You know, maybe they'll stub their toe or step on something sharp or maybe it'll be fine. But they will learn, you know that it is different without having shoes on and will probably prefer to have shoes in the future.

So letting them have these small fails, these natural consequences that happen are totally okay at this age. Just make sure that whatever natural consequence you're allowing are things that are not actually dangerous.

All right, and then by age three. So now three-year-olds have a lot of really big feelings. And I can't even tell you how many times I've heard from three year old parents, wow, I thought two was bad, but three is so hard.

What's really hard at three, is really the emotions. They have big, big feeling and a lotta times it's over things that seem really little to us. Like my kid's cracker was broken in half and they had a complete meltdown.

Or I cut the sandwich into triangles instead of squares. You know, the little things like that that seem like no big deal to adults are actually a big deals to kids because they just don't have a lot of control in their life.

And so when there's things that they can have choice over and we don' t give them a choice, they get pretty angry and frustrated. So ways that we can help them with their big feelings at this age, first we could name the feelings that their having and you know tell them what they might be feeling in there body with it so we say things It looks like you're feeling angry.

I think that your heart must be beating really hard. It look like your breathing heavy. And I imagine that you feelings are very strong right now. Would you like to tell me how you are feeling?

Would like talk about it? How can I help you? You know, being empathetic about and really coming at it. Like you would with a friend, you know that's having a really a hard day.

Just talk to them like would you with the friend. That can be really helpful. Then modeling for them what to do when you feel frustrated and angry You don't need to hide your feelings, and you should not hide them in front of your children at this age.

If you need cry, you cry. You know, if you want to shout, shout. But you show them how to handle big feelings in a way that's actually safe and okay to do.

And there's something called the anger wheel of choice. We can look it up. It's great for kids to look at and have this visual reminder of things that it's okay do when they're not feeling good, when you're feeling frustrated.

Maybe they can grab a pillow and scream into it. Or maybe they throw something soft like a ping pong ball across the house. Maybe stamp their feet or squish play-doh.

There's lots of different choices. Having those kind of options for children can be really helpful at this age as they learn how to channel those big, big feelings.

They have very active imaginations at age three, and they tend to tell stories that aren't true.

Three-Year-Olds: Big Feelings and Testing Limits

Now, this is not the same as lying. Lying, like intentionally lying happens later when children realize that you don't have all the information that they have.

But at the age of three they don' t realize it yet, they still think that everything that their aware of is also stuff that your aware. And so they just make up stories.

And one way to kind of keep the, you know, let them have their active imaginations, but do it in a way that's not going to, say, get them in trouble at school or preschool is just to encourage a lot of fantasy play at home.

You know let, them dress up as characters, that them pretend to be animals if they want to. They love that at this age. Let them play with toys and you know, however they want to play with their toys.

And then also play them. Do that 10 minutes of child directed play as well. You know to just have that fantasy time with them and that pretend time. Then they're not going to feel the need to apply that to their actual real lives.

They also are very egocentric at age three. They don't understand that other people really have feelings. they don' have full empathy, but they do have a little bit of compassion and they may seem to act in ways that are compassionate at times and mean at other times.

But just keep in mind they're not doing it on purpose, they're not trying to hurt someone's feelings or they are not even trying specifically to make someone feel better.

It's really just they trying connect with people and understand how people work and then learn how their actions impact what other people do. And so you can point out to them how they actions have impacted a look on

somebody's face and what that look might mean that that person is feeling and that, you know, feelings are things that can be impacted by other people's behavior, but also nobody's fully in charge of anyone else's feelings.

You're only in You can talk to them a little bit about that, about feelings, empathy. You could also work on games that involve taking turns and sharing, because that's a really important skill.

They don't get why they need to do it at this age, but it's something that they can learn that just need do. So this is a great time to start playing really simple board games, like shoots and ladders, or things that you just roll a dice and move a thing, and counting, taking turn.

They tend to ask why repeatedly at age three and it can be so annoying and I know it's really hard to just keep answering the why questions. Keep in mind that asking why repeatedly is really just an attempt of your child to connect with you.

They don't always want to know why. Sometimes they do. But sometimes they just realize it's a word that will get you to keep talking. And so you can answer them back with questions.

You can engage them more in conversation. Don't just lecture to them when they ask you why, don' just answer the questions, make it a conversation, you know?

Why do you want know about that? What do mean when you ask that. Or you can even change the subject, like go off on a tangent about what you were just talking about before that or repeat what had said earlier.

Like you don't have to answer all of the why questions in the way that you would for an adult that's asking why. So yeah, just keep in mind that it's just a communication tactic that they have at this age.

And they're also testing at age three. They're testing boundaries and they are testing consequences and cause and effect. And you're very defiant at the age of three and so this can be super hard.

You're going to push all of your buttons because they want to see how much they can get away with and make sure that you still love them. Sometimes they can even get into unsafe situations just to make sure that you're going to rescue them.

So ways that can help to mitigate this behavior is that 10 minutes in child directed play. Man, I can't emphasize that enough. Letting them choose how you play is really so important to them to connect with you and let them feel loved.

And then you can also try to figure out what their love language is. Some children need more than 10 minutes, some of them, it's quality time and they need extra time connecting.

some children, its presence, Some of the words talking to them and just telling them you love them over and over again. You know, acts of service, they'll ask you to get things for them all day long.

And so whatever their Love language Try to sort that out, speak it to them, make sure they really feel loved, and that will in turn cause them to have to push less buttons to see that you still really love them.

But they will still do it, even if you do all the right things. Three is really hard, so still expect that. Also, make sure you have very firm boundaries at this age.

You do not negotiate with a two or three year old. They are not rational. And as soon as they think they can negotiate, they're going to hold whatever irrational stance they have and just gaslight you until you run out of steam.

Like they are really difficult. So when you a boundary, like it's bedtime, you need to keep coming back to that. It is bedtime. Sorry, we can't do that, it is bed time.

This is the age where they love to do things like, but I'm thirsty, I am hungry, and I have to use the potty, But I forgot to this one thing. But, you know, have all of these questions.

Can we just have one more book? And they'll really, really push all the boundaries to see what they can get away with. So figure out where those boundaries lie, talk about them amongst other caregivers and keep those boundries really firm.

Because at this age, it's actually, if it may seem like they're trying to move the boundary, but they are not. They just want to see where it is. And they just wanna know that like, okay, It actually is bedtime.

It's not, let's see what I can get away with time, you know? And it was comforting to them to have that boundary there and to really have it firm And then do allow for some natural consequences, again, for things that are not going to be dangerous.

And you can also start with logical consequences at age three. So an example of this would be, let's say they leave their Legos out on the floor. A natural consequence would be you accidentally step on it and hurt your foot, which unfortunately happens more to the parents than the kids.

But for example, let's say that happened, that would considered a natural consequences. Like, shoot, when leg goes around the floor, it's just what happens and you step and they hurt.

They hurt you feet. But a logical consequence would be something like, there's toys all over the place and it's hard for me to walk through this room and they're not wanting to clean it up.

We need to get rid of some of these toys. Like we need either donate some these of toys or put them in a place where you can't have them anymore because naturally there are just too many toys to keep control of.

And so that's a natural consequence. So natural consequences are things that if you think of like maybe the adult version of something, what would be the, you know, adult consequence of, say, screaming?

You know? Maybe because like if your child is screaming when you're in the car and it's dangerous, there isn't really a natural consequence to get them to stop.

But a logical consequence might be, You need to Stop the Car. And so what what Would you do for an adult or what Be done to you if you were to act that way as a grown-up.

What would be sort of like the kid version of that? So, you know things like taking away toys are almost never logical Unless they're using the toy in a way that's unsafe like they are hitting somebody with it then absolutely like this is a toy that is hurting somebody it needs to be put away.

You know for behavior like They're not wanting to eat. It doesn't make sense to take away a toys for something like that. You know, so only the logical consequences are okay.

And also do not use food ever.

Resources and Closing

Like you should never withhold food as a consequence to children. It's okay if they choose not to eat right now, but they can be offered that same food later.

You need to come up with some sort of a boundary of what's going to be okay, you know? You don't necessarily have to make them whatever they want to. That can be a very slippery slope.

And at this age, there's a lot of food pickiness, but you can tell them, you know, I'm choosing to offer this food and you choose whether or not to eat it.

Then this is the next time food's going to be offered. So they have all that information. All right, so some resources that can help you a little bit with parenting in the future.

Of course, subscribe to this podcast. I have a whole bunch of episodes even within this same season about toddlers and their development and health. There's a podcast called Your Parenting Mojo.

I really love that one. Safe to listen to with kids in the car. And it's all about evidence-based parenting. This woman, Jen Lumenland, just goes through all of the research and tells you what's actually backed by evidence, what actually works when it comes to parenting and children.

It's really wonderful. There's the healthychildren.org website that is put out by the American Academy of Pediatrics and it has a whole bunch of parenting information as well as health information.

And like I had mentioned, love and logic and bringing baby home are the two parenting classes that I really love. I also have a book called The Baby Manual.

If you are having another baby, that would be a great book for you to have. It has all the things you need to think about and know about when your baby is first born.

Its on Amazon and on Kindle. And I hope you'll tune in next week. Subscribe if you haven't already. Sorry, in two weeks we are going to be talking all about different preschools and how to choose a preschool.

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