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Safe Exploring for Toddlers

en español: [Exploración segura en la primera infancia](#)Reviewed by: [Mary L. Gavin, MD](#) Listen Print

On the Move

Toddlers — it's hard to imagine a more fitting name for this stage of development. Between the ages of 1 and 3, toddlers are literally scooting away from babyhood in search of new adventures. They're learning to talk, to walk and run, and to assert their independence. For many in this age group, "outside" and "play" are becoming common requests.

As a parent, you're focused on keeping your little one safe. Supervision and safety precautions, such as gates and electrical outlet covers, are important.

But you'll also want to offer your toddler chances to explore. That means close supervision, but with chances to enjoy different environments. From a walk in the woods to a trip to a museum, parents can give kids the

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space and freedom to investigate, which is an important part of helping them grow.

Why Explore?

Exploring the inside and outside world — with supervision, of course — is important for toddlers' emotional, social, and physical development. They learn more about the world and how it works. It's one thing to see an orange, but it's another to hold it in your hand, feel its cool, smooth surface, smell its fragrance, maybe even taste it. That development is all the better if you ask questions: What color is it? Is it big or little?

Exploring also gives toddlers a chance to work on important motor skills. Whether it's kicking a ball or climbing stairs, they can persist until they get it right. Doing so not only adds skills, it boosts their sense of confidence and competence. In other words, they begin to think: "I can do it!"

Letting kids explore is one way to see that toddlers get enough daily physical activity. Allow plenty of time every day for your child to be active throughout the day.

Ideas for Exploring Inside

Possibilities for indoor amusement are endless; here are just a few:

- **Mirror, mirror.** At this stage, kids learn to recognize themselves in pictures or mirrors. Securely set up a mirror at eye level and let your child explore his or her own face. Ask "Where's your nose?" or "Can you open your mouth?" Fill a small photo album with pictures of relatives and friends that you can look through

together or let your child look at on his or her own. Toddlers also enjoy imitating the behavior of others. Try playing physical or verbal imitation games.

- **Kid-friendly cabinets.** Turn some low-lying cabinets into exploration shelves, stacked with things a toddler can pull out, bang together, and shake around. Choose only child-safe items and be sure to supervise.
- **Tactile toys.** Toddlers love to use their sense of touch. Set your older toddler up with some Play-Doh (store-bought or homemade), finger paint, or other age-appropriate materials that can safely be squeezed, patted, poked, and prodded. Younger toddlers will like wrapping paper, wax paper, or textured toys that are fun to touch and crinkle.
- **Household toy box.** To encourage imagination, create a toy box with dolls, safe housekeeping items like clean sponges or brushes, dress-up clothes, and toy telephones (without cords). Plastic containers with lids, plastic cups and plates, and just about anything you can stack, pile, fill and empty, or nest also make great toys for toddlers.
- **Climbing mount staircase.** Many toddlers like to climb stairs. Go up and down together on carpeted stairs, but be sure to replace gates when you are done. On flat ground, depending on your child's age and abilities, practice walking backwards or on tiptoes. Imitate animals (walk like a penguin, jump like a kangaroo, etc.) or dance to music.

Outside Exploring

- **Play ball.** Have a variety of balls around to play with. During the toddler years, kids learn to kick, throw, and catch balls.
- **Beach it.** Even just in the backyard, water and sand are great tactile attractions for toddlers. Create a water table or use a small basin or bucket to float boats, use other water toys, and splash around. Create a sandbox or take kids to the beach to let them feel sand on their toes and fingers. Always supervise kids around water, and dump out water from containers when you're done. Be sure to cover sandboxes when not in use to keep pets and other animals from contaminating them.
- **Examine nature.** Encourage your child to pick up leaves and rocks, feel the bark on trees, and collect bugs.
- **Chalk it up.** Sidewalk chalk comes in big sizes, perfect for the toddler grip. Their "drawings" are abstract at best, but they'll delight in watching their scribbles appear.
- **Make a lunch date.** Group expeditions that bring a bunch of toddlers together in an open space—a park, gym, recreation center, or someone's backyard—can be fun for adults *and* kids. The kids might not interact much at this age, but they're learning to and are eager to see other faces and kids.

Tips for Safe and Happy Exploration

Supervise, but step back. Pay attention to your urges to help. After providing the materials your child needs, fight the urge to overmanage the activity. If your child wants to bang blocks together, don't intervene unless there's the chance that someone might get hurt.

Correct, when necessary. If you see your child doing something dangerous, unhealthy, or destructive — walking with pens, eating crayons, or throwing stones, for example — gently instruct them about the proper use of the object: "Chairs are for sitting, not standing" or "You can bang the spoon on the pot, but it's not for hitting people." Try not to react more strongly than the situation calls for. Toddlers often will push the boundaries and ignore your initial request. If reminders don't work, try to distract them with other activities and items, or use a time-out if needed.

Remember: "It's all about the journey." Anyone who's tried walking a child to the library or a friend's house knows that the journey there is full of distractions and stops. Kids often want to examine everyday items most of us overlook. Bugs, rocks, lawn ornaments, fallen leaves, parked cars — they're all fascinating to toddlers. Encourage them to touch bark, examine twigs, watch spiders, or look at the colors of lights and shop signs, watch doors opening and closing, trucks idling, and people boarding buses.

As parents, you might feel impatient to get busy and get your child to the activity you've planned. You want to get started "doing something." But to kids, this exploration **is** doing something. Rather than rushing along, take a deep breath and make new discoveries together.

Reviewed by: [Mary L. Gavin, MD](#)

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