

# Social-Emotional Development:

## 12 to 24 Months



**ZERO TO THREE**  
Early connections last a lifetime

## Young Toddlers and Social-Emotional Development

Young toddlers are starting to develop a sense of self-awareness—that they are separate and independent from others. They now understand that other people have thoughts and feelings that may be different from their own. Realizing this helps children begin to develop empathy—the ability to put one’s self in another person’s shoes and imagine what he is feeling. Young toddlers are also becoming more interested in their peers, though at this age they usually don’t play with other children, but next to or nearby.

*Zachary, 18 months, notices an older toddler, Patrick, playing on the beach. He walks over with his shovel and carefully watches Patrick playing. Patrick’s mother asks, “Would you like to play too?” Zachary, with his mother’s prompting, starts digging a hole near his new “friend.” He continues to watch the older child carefully and sometimes seems to imitate what he is doing. The two boys play side-by-side for a little while before the Zachary toddles away to check out the seagulls.*



## What Can You Do?

**Support young toddlers’ developing skills.** Toddlers learn best when you let them play, explore, and follow their interests. They develop new skills when you give them just enough help so that they can master a challenge without becoming overly frustrated. If you see your 20-month-old trying to get the square block in the round hole of her shape-sorter, you may guide her hand over the various holes to show her how to solve the problem and let her drop it in the correct hole when she finds it. You can:

- Help your toddler become a confident problem-solver. Give your child some time to try to figure a problem out on his own—like how to get his rain boots on. When you see him start to get frustrated, give him the help he needs to master the challenge. For example, you may line up the boots with the correct feet, and then suggest your child lean on a chair while he slides a foot in.
- Praise the process, not just the result. The goal is to help children feel good about their efforts, not just the outcome. When you notice your child’s efforts (You are working so hard on that puzzle, I can see you’re really thinking through where each piece fits), it highlights the skills she’s using to solve the problem. This builds persistence and resilience.



**Remember that toddlers still have very little self-control and need your help when peer conflicts come up.**

Even though they may seem like “big kids” now, toddlers can’t yet share, take turns, or follow rules without adult help. They have little self-control, which means they are not good at waiting and also have a hard time stopping themselves from acting on their desires. You can:

- **Provide lots of support to young toddlers playing in a group.** Help them share. You might set a timer to give them a visual reminder of how long they have to wait for their turn. In the meantime, help the waiting child focus on another activity. Offering activities that don’t require a lot of sharing (like outdoor play, art, or music) is a good idea too.
- **Play turn-taking games when it’s just the two of you.** Take turns rolling or kicking a ball back and forth, going down the slide at the park, or pouring water out of cup during bath time. Activities like these help children “practice” the art of sharing.
- **Use feelings words to describe your child’s emotions.** Children learn to use words instead of actions (like hitting!) when you are a role model. Describe your child’s feelings (You look like you are feeling mad/sad/grumpy/silly/happy/proud). Model friendship talk so your child can learn how to be with peers: Can I play? Can I have a turn? But remember, it will still be another 1-2 years before your child can start doing this on her own.

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**Help your child feel safe and secure.** The world can feel scary and unpredictable to young toddlers. Now that they are walking, they can find themselves in an unknown place (even within your house or backyard) without meaning to. They can reach things they couldn’t before. They might also find themselves falling more often as they master the skill of walking. You help your toddler feel safe when you encourage him to explore safely and provide reassurance when he needs support. You also help him feel secure when you use predictable routines across the day. You can:

- **Be a safe “home base” for your toddler.** Watch how your little one will move away from you, look back to check in, and then continue on her adventure. Toddlers see their loved adults as a home base for support when they are feeling unsure or scared. When you reassure your curious toddler in these moments, you help her learn, grow, and develop confidence.
- **Establish routines and transitions.** Knowing what to expect helps toddlers feel safe, confident, and in control of their world. Try to keep daily routines in the same order and at about the same time each day, and give children notice when a change is coming. You might say, “After lunch, we will sit in the rocking chair and read a story. Then it will be naptime.”

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**Look for ways to make your home culture part of your child’s everyday routines.** A child’s culture is an important part of who he is. The connection he has to his culture shapes his identity and self-esteem in healthy and positive ways. You can:

- **Teach your child’s caregivers the words** your family uses for important people (mother, father, grandparents) and things (such as bottle, blanket, pacifier).
- **Choose books and music that reflect your home culture.** These are often available at your public library for no charge and will quickly become a beloved part of your child’s daily routines.

**P-5 1 Domain #1. Early Childhood Development**

Early Childhood Development is part of the ZERO TO THREE Competencies for P-5 Professionals™ which serve as the framework for all of ZERO TO THREE’s professional development offerings. They include eight core competency domains essential for professionals working with expectant parents, children from birth to 5 years old, and their families.

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