

# Social-Emotional Development:

## 24 to 36 Months



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

## Two-Year-Olds and Social-Emotional Development

This year children begin to play interactively with their peers. You will also begin to see toddlers doing more pretend play. This type of play--where children pretend to make dinner or act like a superhero--helps them build language, thinking, and social skills.

*Two-year-olds are also beginning to understand the feelings of others, for example, you might see a toddler comfort a peer who is hurt. At the same time, toddlers struggle with resolving conflicts and still love to say "No!" They need an adult's support and guidance to share and take turns. These skills don't emerge until closer to age 4.*



## What Can You Do?

**Help toddlers understand their feelings.** Toddlers can experience more complex feelings now like pride, embarrassment, and shame. Help your child make sense of her feelings by giving her the words to describe them: *You are feeling sad and jealous that Carly got the cupcake.* **You can:**

- **Explore feelings through play.** Use puppets or stuffed animals to create a story about your child's typical frustrations or fears, like having to share toys, adjusting to a new baby, or separating from you at child care. Make sure the story includes suggestions for how to manage these feelings.
- **Help your child express his feelings in age-appropriate ways.** Teach children words for their feelings and ways to express them. For example, toddlers can stomp their feet, draw a picture, pound play-dough, or throw a foam ball when they are mad.

**Encourage early friendships.** It takes time for children to develop skills like sharing, taking turns, resolving conflicts, and building friendships. Playing with others helps children develop all of these important skills. **You can:**

- **Offer some activities that don't require sharing.** Art projects, sand or water play, and making music are all options that can keep conflicts to a minimum.
- **Give children regular opportunities to play with peers.** Stay close to help with conflicts, if needed.



## Encourage early friendships. (continued)

- **Help your toddler to see others' points of view**, which encourages empathy: *Casey is feeling sad because his daddy had to go to work. Let's see if he wants to read a book with us. Maybe that will help him feel better.*



**Let your child take the lead in deciding what to play.** Choose play activities is an age-appropriate decision for a toddler. **You can:**

- **Join in your child's play sometimes.** Ask your child, "What should I do?" This makes him the "director," which gives toddlers a sense of independence. Let your child decide what should happen next as you play. Offer suggestions if he seems stuck, but let him decide.

**Help your child learn to resolve conflict in healthy, appropriate ways.** You can help them learn this new skill when you model how to manage disagreements. **You can:**

- **Point out the consequences of the child's behavior:** *After you pushed Justin, he started to cry. It hurt. He felt sad and mad.*
- **When your child is calm, go over what happened.** Use simple language. Talk in a calm, not-angry voice: *You pushed Justin because you wanted the bucket back.*
- **Brainstorm better choice(s) your child can make next time.** Older 2-year-olds may be able to offer some ideas on their own. Others will need suggestions, like asking for a turn or asking for help from an adult. Most two-year-olds will need help to carry out these strategies.



## 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 a favorite stuffed animal, foods, or toys).
- **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 favorite 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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