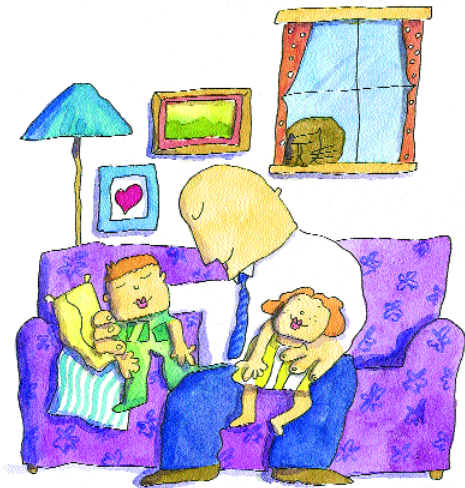


Early Childhood (1 - 4 years)

For parents



Early childhood, ages 1 to 4 years, is a time of wonder and exploration. From toddlers' first steps and words, they grow into young children able to run, climb and carry on conversations! They are curious about the world and suddenly able to get places they weren't able to before. While young children are still very dependent on you - they are definitely beginning to develop their own ideas. Their physical abilities are often ahead of their judgment. The challenges for parents of young children are to help them explore safely, to introduce expectations and limits on behavior, and to help them learn healthy ways to handle their emotions. There are many right ways to raise healthy children!




Thinking Ahead: Family Relationships

Feelings

- ☼ Spend time every day playing with, cuddling, holding, reading and talking to your toddler or young child. Hugs and chats are the glue that holds his day together and makes life fun.
- ☼ Show affection to all members of your family. When people greet each other with affection, it teaches and gives messages of caring.
- ☼ Make it a point to spend some individual time with each child in your family. While it may seem that the youngest needs the most attention, each child needs special time with you.

Relationships

- ☼ Try to build in opportunities for each person in your family to play with or do things with your toddler or young child. Other family members contribute to your child's sense of how to do things and how to have fun. 
- ☼ Promote family relationships and communication. Meal times can be an opportunity for everyone to be together and to share their activities.
- ☼ Encourage the development of good relationships between brothers and sisters. Acknowledge conflicts between brothers and sisters without taking sides.



Consistency

- ✿ Discuss and come to agreement with all members of the family about how to encourage your young child's independence and what the limits should be. Talk with family and caregivers about what your daughter is learning so others will not do things for her that she can or wants to do on her own. Be sure to talk about rules you have set to help prevent injury and avoid conflict.



- ✿ Especially while your children are young, try to limit the number of people who provide care for your child while you are working or not available. Having many caregivers can be confusing for a young child who is beginning to learn routines and recognize people.





Thinking Ahead: Helping Your Child Gain Confidence



Learning and Language

- ☼ Learning words begins with hearing language in the early weeks of life and increases through childhood. You can help your child develop language skills by reading books, singing songs, and talking about the things you are doing and seeing together.
- ☼ Children learn from interacting with others. Talk with your health care provider about your child's readiness for a play group or preschool program. Call [Childcare Aware \(800\) 424-2246](tel:8004242246) for information about the programs listed below:
 - Play groups - Find or start a playgroup in your area. Talk to other families with young children and plan regular or informal playtimes. Parents also benefit from the companionship and support.
 - Preschool programs - Most communities offer a variety of educational programs.
 - Head Start and Early Head Start - These programs provide services for eligible families and children, birth to age five.
 - Early Intervention (EI) - These programs provide services at home or in other settings for children birth to three. EI helps families understand the needs of children who have, or might have, a disability.

Exploration

- ☼ Television and videos should be a minor part of your children's day - an hour or less a day spent watching them is considered best. They are not recommended for children under 2 years.
- ☼ Offer encouragement as your toddler or young child tries new things, investigates interesting toys, and builds on growing abilities.

Rewards and Encouragement for Good Behavior



- ✿ Praise your child for new accomplishments and good behaviors, including cooperating with others. Your child will respond enthusiastically if you:
 - Tell him how helpful he is when putting toys back on the shelf.
 - Tell her how well she does eating her food.
- ✿ Set limits as your form of discipline with a toddler or young preschooler. During this age period, your child will learn boundaries if:
 - You and other members of your family are consistent in what you say and do.
 - You do not get into arguments with other family members about important rules.
- ✿ Plan what to do when your child doesn't go along with your rules. For example, you could:
 - Stop play, distract him with another toy, gently move or restrain him to discuss what's going on.
 - Place her in a chair next to you so she can "think about what has happened."



Self-confidence

- ✿ Help your child develop ways of calming himself. Little children often need parents to help them feel better if they are unhappy or upset.
- ✿ Give children a chance to speak for themselves and express their feelings when they can't get their way. Encourage assertiveness within limits, but no hitting, biting, or hurting others.
- ✿ Encourage your child to play alone as well as with playmates, brothers, sisters, and parents. This will help develop her ability to explore toys and activities on her own.
- ✿ Toilet training is a goal for parents and children. Two years is usually a good age to start. Talk with your health care provider about how to tell when your child is ready and how to begin toilet training.



Thinking Ahead: Being Part of Your Community

Opportunities to Meet Others

- ☼ Join a small group of parents of neighborhood children your child's age.
- ☼ Become involved with activities and organizations to help you and your children make friends and to be part of your community.

Resources

- ☼ Talk with your health care provider, relatives, and friends about choosing and evaluating child care choices. Contact Child Care Aware at (800) 424-2246 to locate approved centers or providers. Ask the questions you need in order to decide if a child care center or provider meets your child and family's needs. See page 92 for a *Child care checklist*.
- ☼ Evaluate your health insurance benefits and other resources that pay for health care. Ask your health care provider what she knows about community resources or other kinds of financial help available for families.

Contributions

- ☼ Find out what you can do to make your community a better place to live. Become part of efforts to provide good, safe resources for children.





Thinking Ahead: Healthy Habits



Food and Eating

- ☼ Encourage good eating habits by eating well yourself. Continue teaching your child to drink from a cup. At 18 months try a spoon. For 2 year-olds try a child-size fork and spoon. Offer a choice of nutritious foods. Offer two or three healthy snacks in addition to regular meals (see page 94 for tips). Try to eat meals together as a family. Make eating an enjoyable time.
- ☼ If you are breast-feeding, talk with your health care provider about other foods to offer your child and the best time to wean your child to a cup.
- ☼ If you are bottle-feeding, discuss with your health care provider changing over to regular whole milk (not skim or low fat) and the best time to wean your child to a cup.

Oral Health

- ☼ To protect your child's teeth, don't put her to bed with a bottle of milk.
- ☼ Make your child's first dental appointment when he is about a year old. Arrange follow-up appointments every six months or so unless you and your dentist feel your child needs a different schedule. Talk with your dentist about whether to give your child fluoride supplements. Ask any other questions you have about your child's teeth.



- ✿ Starting when your child gets her first tooth, begin to brush with a soft toothbrush and water. For two year-olds, begin to use a pea-size amount of toothpaste containing fluoride. Around four years of age, encourage her to brush her own teeth and teach her how to reach every area of her teeth with the brush.
- ✿ If your child still sucks his fingers or thumb at 4 years, gently begin to help him stop.

Health and Development

- ✿ Expect your child to be naturally curious about her own and others' bodies, including genitalia. Use correct terms for all parts of the body. Explain that some parts of the body are private. Ask your health care provider about good ways to talk to your children about their bodies.
- ✿ Take into account your child's growing skills, abilities and limitless curiosity. Put safety devices on windows. Since children love to tug on things, notice where plugs, cords, and table cloths are. Be sure electrical outlets, wires, and other small appliances are out of your child's reach.

Safety

- ✿ Use a safe car seat. Ask your health care provider when to switch from an infant car seat to one for larger children. Contact the National Safe Kids Campaign for more information (800) 441-1888. Check community organizations for car seat or booster seat (for 4 years and older) lending programs.
- ✿ Watch your child closely near streets, cars, and other moving equipment.
- ✿ Develop rules about danger - streets, swimming pools, caution with strangers.

