

APPROACHES TO LEARNING DURING THE SECOND YEAR OF LIFE

We often focus on what young toddlers are learning, but how they learn is important too. Children's approaches to learning span four areas of development:

1. Emotional and behavior self-regulation
2. Cognitive self-regulation
3. Initiative and curiosity
4. Creativity

These interconnected skills and behaviors drive how children engage with their world. When we understand how toddlers learn, we can better help them grow their knowledge and skills across learning domains.

THE TAKE HOME

1. Responsive, supportive relationships help young children regulate their emotions and behaviors. This helps them to engage in learning more effectively.
2. Children are naturally curious. They learn by engaging the senses through hands-on exploration and observing the world around them.
3. A child's unique characteristics influence how they engage in learning.



WHAT DOES RESEARCH SAY?

Curiosity drives toddler learning. **A curious mindset supports learning throughout childhood and beyond.** Children who show more curiosity tend to perform better in school and have stronger relationships.

Children need time and space to direct their own exploration. **Toddlers learn better when they have freedom to decide how to engage in their learning.** That said, they still need adult support to take their learning to the next level. Remember to follow the child's lead. Each child is unique and will be curious about different things.

Young children learn how to learn by watching us, and they are always watching. Adults model everything from a curious mindset to how to manage emotions to persistence. For example, toddlers will spend more time trying to complete a frustrating task after watching an adult persist through the challenging task first. Modeling calm persistence can build up more persistence in young children.



Toddlers develop self-regulation skills over time. Many factors affect how and when children develop self-regulation. Brain development is a big factor, as are a child’s approach the world and the family’s cultural expectations. Watching how others regulate and having the opportunity to practice are important too. During the second year, children are already developing strategies, like shifting attention, to help them self-regulate. Research shows that strong self-regulation skills relate to better school readiness skills.

Play fosters skills that support how children learn. When children play, they get to be curious and creative. They now have the motor skills to follow their own interests and ideas. They develop focus, persistence, and problem-solving skills as they make sense of the world around them. As young children learn through play, they also develop skills across learning domains.



WHAT DOES IT LOOK LIKE?

Look for these opportunities to support toddler growth and development:

- When we talk about approaches to learning, we’re really talking about how young children engage in learning to develop new skills and learn concepts. Focusing is an important part of learning how to learn. To focus, children need to practice regulating their behavior and emotions to stay on task. It’s difficult for a child to learn when their brain is flooded with emotions or something else is distracting them. As they grow, their brains build connections to support self-regulation skills.
- There are a lot of changes during the second year of life, especially with motor development. This is the year most children learn to walk. Walking is a new way for toddlers to explore what they choose. Toddlers have the autonomy to bring their shoes to an adult to show they want to go outside. Outside, they can follow their curiosity to stomp in a puddle or walk in the grass. This leads to questions and things for them to explore like, “What if I splash the puddle with my hands?” They have more control over what and how they explore.
- Curiosity drives children’s learning. Toddlers practice curiosity when they show us their interests by pointing or repeat actions many times to figure out how things work. They also gain insight into cause and effect. “If I put this red ball on the ramp, it will roll. But what happens if I push the blue ball or the yellow block? Will the same thing happen?” They experiment as they play.
- During the second year, children begin to use everyday objects in novel ways. A block becomes a phone or a stick could be a broom. Toddlers practice creativity when they pretend or when they imitate adults. Repetition invites creativity as children explore different ways of doing things.
- Toddlers learn about emotions in the context of relationships. They might show big emotions about leaving the park before they are ready or not being able to have another snack. Be understanding and calm. Label their emotion and describe how they are feeling. For example, “You’re mad right now because you do not want to leave the park.” This builds their emotional vocabulary and understanding of how emotions look and feel. For children who are dual language learners, families can label their emotions in their home language too. As their language develops, toddlers find the words to express their emotions or needs. They also learn how to respond and work through their emotions by watching adults. For example, if a child sees their parents respond calmly and patiently, the child may do the same when frustrated. Toddlers learn to use these same skills while developing self-regulation skills of their own.
- Individual differences play a role in a toddler’s approach to learning. What sparks curiosity and creativity for one child might not do the same for another. How an adult supports a child’s learning may look different depending on the child’s unique characteristics, such as their temperament, culture, and ability level.



TRY THIS!

The parent is the child's most important teacher, and you are their "guide on the side." Use these tips with families to help them support how their child learns:

- Show empathy and remain calm when a child is overcome by emotions or having trouble regulating their behavior.
- Create predictable schedule and routines. Children do best when they know what to expect.
- Talk with families about their expectations and culture. Listen for how you can support their children in culturally responsive ways.
- Follow the child's lead as they explore and create. Families can introduce new vocabulary in their home language.
- During a home visit, ask families if you can help them find items around the home that nurture children's curiosity, creativity, attention, and persistence.
- Plan with families to include materials and activities that expose children to diversity and difference. Use sensitivity as you discuss ways to include different people, places, cultures, and communities their children might not otherwise experience.
- Give the child time and space to explore toys and materials in their own way. Be understanding when they repeat actions and activities.
- Add "I wonder" statements to their day, such as "I wonder where the puddles went from yesterday" or "I wonder how we can make purple by mixing our paint."
- Help children feel safe in their home so they feel comfortable taking risks and exploring.
- Work with families to identify books, materials, and activities in the home that build on the child's curiosities, background, and interests.
- Talk about emotions and feelings with families. When families say, "I'm feeling sad," it helps a child discover their own emotions.
- Share with families how to support their child's developing self-regulation skills. When they want their child to stop a behavior, a great strategy is to redirect by teaching the child what to do instead.
- Adapt materials and activities to their child's ability level. Families might remove a couple of rings for a stacking toy to simplify the activity. Adding popsicle sticks to book pages can make them easier to turn.



LEARN MORE

- [Effective Practice Guides](#)
- News You Can Use: Approaches Toward Learning — Foundations of School Readiness
 - [Part 1](#)
 - [Part 2](#)
 - [Part 3](#)



CONNECTING AT HOME

APPROACHES TO LEARNING DURING THE SECOND YEAR OF LIFE

We often focus on what young toddlers are learning, but how they learn is important too. The how behind children's learning includes self-regulation, initiative and curiosity, and creativity. These interconnected skills and behaviors drive how children engage with their world. When we understand how toddlers learn, we are better able to help them grow their knowledge and skills across learning domains.

DO IT AGAIN!

Have you ever noticed your child do the same action repeatedly? Or bring you the same book to read every night? Repetition helps children learn about how the world works, so hide that toy or read that book again. If your child becomes frustrated during play, encourage them to keep trying. Watch their cues. Give just enough help to bring their learning to the next level.

PROVIDE OPEN-ENDED MATERIALS

Look around your home for materials that encourage creative play. You don't need fancy toys to encourage curiosity and creativity at home. Don't have blocks? Use plastic containers of different sizes as stacking cups. Look for items that are safe and appropriate for the child's ability level. Head outside or bring the outdoors in. Sticks, shells, leaves, and water are great ways to add open-ended materials to a child's play.

BE A MODEL

Toddlers learn by watching us. We model everything from curiosity to how to manage our emotions. Be curious about things in your environment. Peer under a chair pretending to look for them. Say "I wonder where or what ...". Be creative in how you use materials, like building a fort out of pillows and blankets. Name your emotions and remain calm when frustrated.

FOLLOW THEIR LEAD

Give toddlers space and time to wonder and explore. Be flexible as they use materials in creative ways. Be there in case they need you, but don't step in too soon. Children develop autonomy and persistence when they have a chance to follow their interests and try things on their own.

