

Toddlers to Teenagers: Strategies for Now!

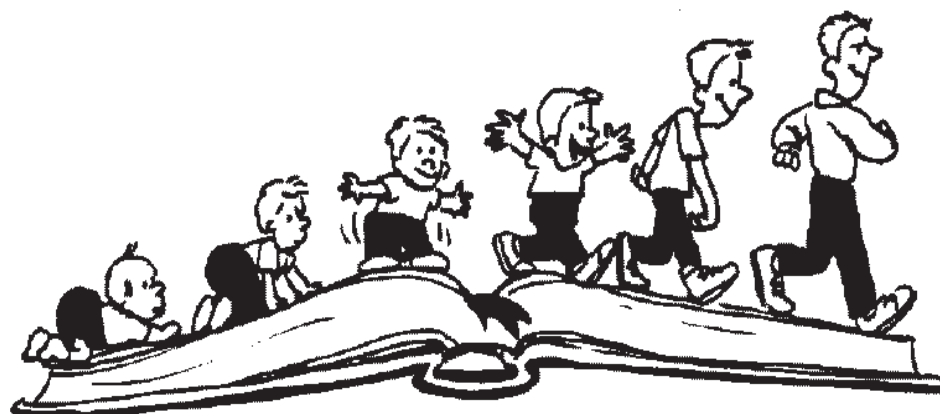
Dr. Nancy Benson, MA, Ph.D.

Before becoming a parent of two daughters, now grown, I taught middle school language arts. This was a wonderful education for me. I learned that teens and preteens come in a wide range of maturity and behavioral styles. Anticipating motherhood, I sobered to the thought that even my lovable infants would become teenagers simply with the passage of time.

Is there a link between toddlers and teens? My years of observing toddlers and their parents have convinced me that we lay the groundwork for adolescence and adulthood in the toddler years. The “Terrible Twos” describes the unpredictable nature of toddlers as well as our negative teenage stereotype—angry, moody, high energy, impulsive, rebellious, and prone to tantrums. Parents of toddlers have a glimpse of what life with teenagers can be like, except that toddlers don’t drive cars.

Parenting behaviors also make a difference.

Toddlers who are bribed or



intimidated into desired behavior, toddlers who have no limits, who remain unaware of others, who have not practiced self-control will become problem teenagers and adults.

What kind of teenager do you want?

Confident, resilient, adaptable, reliable, trustworthy, friendly, social, poised, competent, honest, communicative, caring, motivated to achieve in sports and academics—all these could describe the ideal. Keep in mind, however, that much about children and teenagers is beyond our control. The teenager, like the toddler, is not you.

Parents and teachers of toddlers are called to make special contributions!

Your toddler needs you to help him/her make the transition from totally dependent infancy toward childhood, then to adolescence and young adulthood.

WHY BOTHER TODDLERS?

The toddler years are the optimum time to teach and establish empathy, pro-social behavior, and deferred gratification. Toddlers need parents and teachers to help them develop skills that will take them beyond tantrums when angry and frustrated. Otherwise, our toddlers are doomed to manage their adult lives with two-year-old social skills.

Toddler years and developmental stages.

Toddlers, by definition, have a unique learning task, in that they must unlearn some assumptions from infancy. Infants learn very early that their needs will be met by the caring people in their lives. Because of their absolute dependence on adults, infants are

the center of their own universe. They laugh, cry, and engage to guide their important people in meeting their needs.

Life changes for the toddler. Toddlers learn that they are not the center of life itself and that some things they want aren’t safe or healthy. When we interact with or parent a toddler, we are also parenting a future teenager. It’s too late to say, “Because I said so!” to a teenager who has never learned about limits and boundaries as a toddler.

GUIDELINES FOR A TODDLER CURRICULUM

The task for parents and caregivers is to model specific behaviors and to consciously teach toddlers in a fun, firm, and loving way. This means that parents need to plan their family curriculum for toddlers in advance.

Adjusting for toddlers.

Infants begin with high security and attachment needs that are met with close physical contact, holding, and cuddling. While toddlers also need close physical contact, toddlers and older children thrive on challenges, resulting in confidence, optimism, and resiliency. Maintain an observant eye, but stay in the background.

Resist the urge to rescue.

Resist “babying” the child with minor injuries. If we rescue too soon, swooping in at the slightest mishap, we defeat the child’s natural exploration, teaching fear and excessive dependence on adults

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instead. Permit “good” stress, that is, an annoyance rather than danger, to teach your child persistence, patience, and resiliency.

Help a toddler through a frustrating time.

Give words of understanding and encouragement. Sometimes you have to name a feeling for the toddler, “Are you angry? What do you want to do about that?” is a natural question. Engage the toddler in the process of resolving his upsetting feelings and discuss how to disperse them in appropriate ways, for example, hitting a pillow, or telling a teacher.

Actively teach new behaviors to toddlers.

In routine situations, you can help your child practice adaptability, patience, deferred gratification, attention span, flexibility, empathy, and persistence. Parents can also help toddlers let go of some “negative” behaviors, for example, excessive anxiety and shyness, impulsiveness, narcissism, temper tantrums, anger, frustration, hitting, yelling, hurting.

Teach and model.

Demonstrate and help with taking turns, sharing, “gentle” touches, waiting, finishing, and cleaning up. Teach household chores along with sorting, classifying, organizing, and self-help skills. Toddlers benefit from making choices. Try direct teaching of physical skills, for example, ball-handling, for extra conversation time.

Set boundaries and plan ahead.

Take on the teaching and guidance form of discipline—be proactive, plan ahead, and prevent meltdowns. Make it easy and fun for the child to cooperate and adopt your curriculum of pro social behavior. Look for messages in negative behavior—what is the child experiencing? What has changed?

Prevail over peer groups.

Figure out how to make your family plans and outings the most interesting, fun, and adventurous of all. When in doubt, travel! By the way, parents, not children or others, get to decide about

friends, sleepovers, and who may spend time with their child.

Establish family traditions.

Routines and rituals provide structure for everyday activities and also can create memorable family celebrations. Involve your toddler and older children in household and family chores. Helping is the toddler’s job at home. Establish expectations of trust, respect, and frequent communication between parent and child.

Change the Terrible Twos into the Terrific Twos!

Just renaming it is an improvement already! Enjoy the quirky, unreasonableness of your toddler when it happens. Help your child find the FUN in cooperating. Help yourself find the fun in being with toddlers! Teach yes and reward yes! Play silly games with “NO!” (“Do you have purple hair?” No!)

Secure and loving relationships precede learning.

These are built with time, taking the time, and having enough time to enjoy a task without rushing and prodding the child. Teachable moments abound when you slow down to the toddler’s pace!

Take maximum opportunity of these moments, even going back to a particular incident, “Remember when we were in the grocery store the other day...” With humor and respect you can learn a lot from a meltdown. Your toddler has plenty of insight and ideas to share with you—just ask for help!

Dr. Nancy Benson is the owner and director of Treehouse Learning in Louisville, where she enjoys the company of children, teachers, and parents. Nancy holds both a Master’s Degree and a Ph.D. in Education from CU-Boulder. She can be reached at (303) 666-1950 or e-mailed at nancy@treehouselearning.com. Please check out the program Web site at www.treehouselearning.com



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