

APPROACHES TO LEARNING DURING THE THIRD YEAR OF LIFE

We often focus on what 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 are better able to help them grow their knowledge and skills across learning domains.

THE TAKE HOME

1. Children need to practice self-regulation skills like they practice skills across learning domains.
2. How a child approaches learning is shaped by their culture, family, ability level, and the unique makeup and experiences of the individual child.
3. Toddlers learn how to learn through play and their everyday experiences.



WHAT DOES RESEARCH SAY?

Brain development drives toddler behavior. Over the course of childhood, the brain builds connections that support skills, including self-regulation. Warm, caring relationships support those strong, positive connections in the brain. Genes, culture, ability level, and experiences all contribute to how children manage their emotions and behavior. Strong self-regulation skills relate to more positive behavior and better school readiness. It’s easier for children to engage in learning when they can self-regulate.

Children can practice having creative mindsets — and adults can too. Children use their creativity to try out new ideas and express themselves in different ways. This creativity strengthens cognitive development. Young children are more likely to explore their surroundings when encouraged to do so by a supportive, friendly adult. They are less likely to explore if the adult is disapproving or not engaged. Their creativity blossoms when adults follow their lead and support their interests.

Curiosity sparks our motivation and learning. Children are naturally curious and excited to learn. Curiosity and initiative promote a child’s growing independence as a learner. When we learn about something that makes us curious, we are more likely to remember it.



Toddlers learn how to learn through play. When children play, they can explore as they choose. Messy play (the open-ended exploration of materials and their properties) and pretend play support children’s autonomy to explore as they choose. They can use their imagination and creativity, focus their attention, and follow their curiosities while also developing confidence in their abilities. Toddlers and preschoolers who pretend play more often tend to show better self-control. How you support children’s learning — through materials, activities, and hands-on support — may look different depending on a child’s unique characteristics.



WHAT DOES IT LOOK LIKE?

Look for these opportunities to support toddler growth and development:

- Toddlers express creativity in how they explore materials, engage with other people, and even in what they choose to wear. Having autonomy is an important part of the creative process. For example, when children pretend play, they learn to think creatively about how to use objects in new ways. They decide what and how to play. A shoe can be a boat or a sock or a sleeping bag. Learning how one object can represent something else supports their cognitive flexibility and symbolic thinking too.
- Children are little scientists. They perform experiments, problem solve, and use their imagination to make sense of the world. As they do, they show initiative and curiosity. Curiosity is joyful. It’s toddlers scooping and dumping, mixing paints, or jumping into a pile of leaves repeatedly. Their curious minds drive them to try new things. They might wonder what happens if they paint their arms or whether they can fit inside their toy bin.
- Culture is at the heart of how children learn. For example, toddlers figure out how to regulate their emotions and behaviors by watching their family and community. If an adult responds to frustration with understanding and calm, a child will see that as what is expected in their home. They use what they observe to guide their own behavior. A child with a disability may need additional supports or modifications to aid in their unique learning process.
- Toddlers get overwhelmed by their emotions. At first, they don’t have the language skills to say what is bothering them, so they may throw a toy or scream when they feel challenged. As their self-regulation skills improve, so do their coping strategies. Calm breaths replace tantrums. They say “No, I don’t like that” instead of screaming, and they take turns instead of grabbing a peer’s toy. They will still act in the moment at times, but you’ll see them wait calmly at times too.
- Open-ended materials inspire curiosity and creativity. Adults select safe materials that can meet children’s developmental needs. This includes modifying materials to make them larger, brighter, or easier to grasp or confining them to a space like a box so they don’t move out of reach. Materials such as blocks, loose parts, or natural materials like sticks or water allow toddlers to choose their own way to explore.





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:

- Set realistic and developmentally appropriate expectations for the two-year-old's behavior. Remember that a toddler's ability to self-regulate develops throughout their entire childhood.
- Acknowledge the child's curiosity, independence, and initiative. Show interest in and describe what the child is doing in their home language. This shows children that their explorations and interests have value.
- Follow the child's lead and expand on their interests. They can do this verbally or by bringing in extra materials. For example, if their child is showing an interest in trains, encourage them to check out a book from the library on that topic or create a train with blocks and other loose parts.
- Ask a family if it's OK to look at where their child plays during a home visit. Are toys and materials accessible to inspire curiosity and creativity? Does the area need any modifications? Help families find safe, open-ended materials in their home, like empty plastic containers or toilet paper rolls.
- Give their child space and time to explore materials in their own ways and to repeat actions and activities.
- Build belonging by talking with families about their expectations and culture. Help them modify practices and activities to support how their child learns in a culturally responsive way.
- Explore new places together, such as a library, a park, a museum, or a farm.
- Work with families to adapt materials or activities according to their Individualized Family Service Plan (IFSP). That way, children with a disability can join in as independently as possible.
- Think of strategies to help children manage their emotions. For example, find a quiet place for the child to calm down, take deep breaths together, or provide physical comfort, like a hug.
- Create predictable schedule and routines. Children do best when they know what to expect.
- Provide printouts of visuals for families that support children's daily routines and organization. This helps children focus on learning rather than on what they need to do.
- Validate the child's emotions and provide empathy while setting limits.
- Talk with families about how to reduce behaviors that feel challenging to them. When they want their child to stop a behavior, they can teach them what to do instead of what not to do.
- Model a calm attitude and presence. Explain how parents' calmness can help toddlers manage strong emotions, especially when they do not feel calm.
- Talk to children about what they notice in their environment, pointing out similarities and differences to foster curiosity. Talking about differences will give toddlers the words to describe how people or things are the same and how they're different.
- Practice not stepping in too quickly so their child can try things on their own as much as they can.

LEARN MORE

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



APPROACHES TO LEARNING DURING THE THIRD YEAR OF LIFE

We often focus on what 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.

GO ON A SENSORY HUNT

Create a list of items to hunt for inside your house, outside, or while in the car or on the bus. Think about engaging your child’s senses. Include materials of different shapes, colors, textures, or even sounds. Encourage them to listen for a sound or find something round or something squishy or green. Be curious together!

PLAY GAMES

Games are a great way to practice self-regulation skills during calm times too. Play games where children need to listen, follow instructions, and stop a behavior — like “red light, green light” or a slowed down version of “Head, Shoulders, Knees, and Toes.” Adapt games to meet your child where they are.

CREATE A COZY CORNER

Create a cozy, quiet space for your child to spend time in when they need to regulate their emotions or behavior. Provide options to help them feel calm (e.g., paper and crayons, books) or include a toy that encourages active play, like a push toy, if that better suits your child’s temperament. Invite your toddler to make it feel cozy by adding a favorite stuffed animal or blanket.

OFFER CHOICES

Toddlers want to assert their independence. So let them make choices. Pick two things that you would be happy with them choosing. It helps them feel in control and shows them you are confident in their ability to take initiative and make a decision.

