

Exploratory Actions for Toddlers

What is a Toddler?

Because they are transitioning from one type of “lifestyle” to another, toddlers can be thought of as the "adolescents" of early childhood. They are in a transitional place somewhere between babyhood and childhood. Toddlers are no longer totally dependent babies, and yet they do not have the personalities or the thought processes of a school age child. They are beginning to seek independence, yet they require caregiver security. They are rebellious, yet they desire caregiver approval. They are experiencing pre-school puberty! Toddlers are curious, information gatherers. They are explorers and experimenters. They learn by exploring the environment and manipulating objects. They rarely play with other toddlers. They play with objects. Much like the education of an older child should include appropriate books and other resource materials, the learning environment of toddlers must contain carefully selected toys, props, and play structures. The following play areas and props encourage toddler actions.

Ball Handling

This play area introduces the child to balls of all sizes, shapes, and textures which encourage adaptations and adjustments. Ball handling "trials and errors" provide a substantial amount of new information for the toddler to catalog and store. Teachers and parents should not have “skill” expectations for toddlers, but rather, “exploration” expectations. In other words, it is fine if a child wants to model grownup skills like throwing or kicking a ball toward a target or hitting a ball with a sponge bat; however, it is equally important to encourage exploratory behaviors with balls like rolling them down a sliding board, or taking them for a ride in a wagon, or placing many of them in a container. Lifting and carrying is an essential part of object handling as well. Toddlers should be encouraged to collect, handle, toss, kick, explore, and manipulate various sizes and textures of balls.

Suggested Equipment, Toys and Props:

Balls of all sizes, shapes, and textures

Laundry basket or some other containers for empty and fill practice with balls

Ramp or slide

Hoop or net (for tossing or kicking the ball toward)

Plastic bottles (for rolling the ball towards)

Traffic cone (for hitting the ball off the top)

Sponge bat

Plastic pool as a container for balls

Basketball hoop

Balance

Toddlers are just beginning to develop their skills in upright locomotion and balance. Balance activities challenge the toddler's posture control, stability, and travel abilities as he negotiates different widths, angles, and heights of walking surfaces. Beams and ramps should be four inches wide up to two feet wide, and should be varied in height from floor level to no higher than two feet from the floor. Obviously, more narrow ramps (4-6 inches) should be kept close to the floor. To practice postural control and stability, toddlers should be given various opportunities for stepping up, turning corners, changing directions, and walking on an incline or decline. This play area requires close supervision and mats or carpet to provide a padded surface on the floor.

Suggested Equipment, Toys and Props:

Ramps and beams of various widths and surfaces

Mats or carpet

Objects for stepping over

Stair steps (wooden or mats)

Incline mats (wedges

Ladder (flat on the floor)

Manipulation

Improvements in fine motor tasks are often sometimes not accompanied by as much adult applause or attention as we might display for improvements in gross motor tasks. Fine motor abilities involve the coordinated movement of the hands and fingers. Toddlers need ample opportunity to explore and manipulate a wide variety of objects. They need to practice stacking, stringing, twisting, turning, and pounding various sizes of objects. They also need to practice placing shape blocks in appropriate holes and to work basic puzzles. Lifting and carrying is another important component of manipulation. Object handling like “fill and empty”, messy play with water, sand, and other textures allows practice of fine motor skills and eye-hand coordination in a very appealing context.

Suggested Equipment, Toys and Props:

Plastic or wooden nuts and bolts

Boxes to stack

Empty plastic tennis ball cans to stack

Puzzles

Stacking toys

Plastic or wooden letters and/or numbers

Shape sorting toys

Pounding toys

Stringing toys

Cups and other containers

Sand and water table

Small shovels and spoons

Pop up toys

Sturdy book

Space

Space awareness is an important aspect of a child's knowledge development. To be able to go through spaces without touching means that children know how much space their bodies consume and that they can control their movements. In addition to going **through** spaces, toddlers like to remain inside safe spaces. Therefore, some tunnels or boxes should be semi-enclosed. Spaces like tunnels, hoops, jungle gyms, boxes, and baskets encourage recognition of spatial relationships of toddler's body to other objects. Small plastic pools and some of the new "instructional" carpets are excellent for establishing spatial boundaries. They also allow for visual and spatial organization of a play area.

Suggested Equipment, Toys and Props:

Hoops	Boxes (open or closed)
Arches	Baskets
Foam pool noodles	Plastic pool
Barrels and tunnels	Nylon tent
Jungle gym	Floor mat or carpet

Obstacles

Obstacles and inclines allow practice of spatial relationships as the toddler manages her body in relation to the play structures and gravity. Climbing includes shifting body weight, managing body weight, gripping, and many varied possibilities and combinations of movements. Climbing challenges a toddler to motor plan new movements in order to maneuver through tricky places. Stair climbing is important practice of problem solving and alternating use of limbs. Obstacles which have more than one entry or exit will encourage curiosity, yet allow children to feel safe. Obstacles which have options for going under, over, up, down, or through encourage not only physical competence, but language development as well.

Suggested Equipment, Toys and Props:

Jungle gym	Barrels and tunnels
Steps	Milk crates
Ladder	Ramp and sliding board
Soft Structures (mats of all shapes)	Inner tubes
Arches	Wedge mat

Wheeled Toys

Wheeled toys serve several purposes for skill development in toddlers. First, they encourage pushing and pulling. Wheeled toys allow toddlers to move with greater stability as they push them. Some push toys allow one toddler to ride and another one to push. Pull toys are challenging since, by design, they do not assist with balance. In fact, pull toys can offer substantial stability challenges if the toddler is walking forward but looking back at the toy, or walking backward in order to watch the toy. Riding toys require the child to make coordinated movements, sometimes combining foot work with steering using the hands. Wagons and scooter boards make for an enjoyable ride around the room. Children may even take rides together in a wagon or one child may push or pull another child providing opportunity for social interaction and taking turns.

Suggested Equipment, Toys and Props:

Wagon	Riding toys
Push toys	Square scooter boards
Pull toys	Ropes (attached to objects for pulling)

Pretense

Pretense means behavior that is not literal, or in other words, pretend play. Imitating adult behaviors helps children learn social roles, improves imagination, and enhances language development. Fantasy play and pretending encourages creative and adaptive behaviors, as well as many “pretend” movements. Carefully selecting and arranging toys and props gives toddlers context clues that can almost serve the same purpose of adult modeling.

Suggested Equipment, Toys and Props

Plastic phones	Cars and trucks
Dress up clothes	Kitchen props
Dolls	Plastic lawnmower
Stuffed animals	Molded plastic tools
Boxes	
Job props	

Rhythm

Toddlers should be provided ample opportunity to listen to and respond to music. Singing, chanting, and reciting words with music promote language development, body movement, listening skills, and rhythmic reactions in toddlers. Mirrors allow toddlers to watch themselves dance, sway and bounce to the music. Noise makers and musical instruments allow toddlers to make their own "music". Ritual singing of songs or chants at transition times or as an opening or closing activity reinforce the certainty of familiar routines.

Suggested Equipment, Toys and Props:

Rhythm instruments
Noise makers
Mirrors
Rattles

Hats
Marching flags
Music tapes and CD's
Circle Time Songs