

Brain Development



KEY TAKEAWAY

The experiences your child has as a toddler will affect his health, well-being and coping skills for the rest of his life.

When we think about how to support a toddler's development, we usually consider the basics: keeping him comfortable and safe and making sure he sleeps well and gets enough to eat.

But what about building your toddler's brain?

Early Experiences Build the Brain

During the toddler years, your child's brain is making millions of new connections every day as he learns about the world around him. The way you respond to him can help teach his brain to build and strengthen the connections that will help him feel safe, trust others, be confident and live a healthy life.



KEY TAKEAWAY

Early experiences play a big role in shaping your toddler's brain. And while every child develops at their own pace, a healthy brain supports development in all areas.

How Can You Build Your Toddler's Brain?

You can help build your toddler's brain through what experts call "serve and return" interactions.

What are "serve and return" interactions?

Showing attention and responding with warmth, support and enthusiasm to what your child communicates. Imagine a tennis game between a caregiver and a child. But instead of hitting a ball back and forth across a net, they send and get different types of communication, such as touch, sounds, words, smiles and eye contact.

Serve and return interactions help build a solid foundation for your toddler's brain – and support all future development. Serve and return interactions also build attachment (see [Attachment](#)) between you and your toddler.

On their own, these moments may feel short and unimportant. But a lot of serve and return interactions throughout the early years help build new paths in your child's brain and encourage him to learn.

Each positive interaction is another brick in a healthy foundation for all of your toddler's later development. Together, they set him up for success in everything from learning to read to dealing with stress to forming good relationships.





HOW TO

Use serve and return interactions

- Pay lots of attention to your toddler.
- Take note of what interests him, whether that's a bright colour, a fluffy dog or a spinning wheel.
- Talk to him regularly. Chat about what you're doing, what he sees and what gets his attention.
- Cuddle and comfort him when he cries or is upset.
- Sing songs.
- Play simple games.
- Read to him.



See the **Brain Builder** boxes throughout this book for more ideas on how to support your toddler's brain development through everyday activities.

See [Dealing With Common Challenging Behaviours](#) to learn more about how to respond to challenging behaviour in a way that supports your toddler's development.



TRY THIS

Put aside your cell phone when you're playing with your toddler so that you can focus on him.

How Does Stress Affect Your Toddler's Brain?

Stress also shapes your toddler's brain development – in both positive and negative ways.

Good stress vs. bad stress

Some stress can help your child develop, while other stress can seriously harm him.

What is good stress?

Stress that's healthy for a child's development. Experiences like meeting new people, for example, prepare kids to cope with future challenges.

What is tolerable stress?

Stress that – with the support of a loving adult – a child can cope with. Difficult experiences may be painful to a child, but with love and adult care, they don't have to be harmful to his development.

What is toxic stress?

Stress that harms the development of a child's brain and body and can cause lifelong challenges. Toxic stress is the effect of serious, ongoing hardship, abuse or neglect on a child who doesn't have adult support.

The effect of toxic stress

When a child experiences toxic stress, the basic structures of his developing brain may be damaged. And without a sturdy foundation to support future development, he's at risk for a lifetime of health problems, developmental issues and even addiction.

What you can do

It's possible to fix some of the damage of childhood toxic stress later in life. But it's easier and more effective to build solid brain structure in the early years.

If you're living through very difficult circumstances, you can turn toxic stress into tolerable stress and lessen the impact on your toddler by being a safe and loving person for him to turn to. At the same time, find the support you need to help you cope with the challenges you're facing (see [Parenting Issues](#) and [Violence and Other Abuse in the Home](#)).

If you or your partner experienced toxic stress when you were children, you may benefit from extra support as you adjust to being a parent. Try talking to your health care provider and asking about programs that may help.