

# Brain Development



### KEY TAKEAWAY

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

When we think about how to support a toddler's development, we usually consider the basics: keeping them comfortable and safe and making sure they sleep well and get 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 they learn about the world around them. The way you respond to them can help teach their brain to build and strengthen the connections that will help them 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 parent or 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 between you and your toddler (see [Attachment](#)).

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 them to learn.

Each positive interaction is another brick in a healthy foundation for all of your toddler's later development. Together, they set your child 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 them, whether that's a bright colour, a fluffy dog or a spinning wheel.
- Talk to them regularly. Chat about what you're doing, what they see and what gets their attention.
- Cuddle and comfort them when they cry or are upset.
- Sing songs.
- Play simple games.
- Read to them.



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 them.

## 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

Everyone feels stress. But while some stress can help your child develop, other stress can harm them.

#### 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, these experiences don't have to be harmful to their 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.



## DID YOU KNOW?

With your support, your child's ability to cope with tolerable stress will grow over time.



## KEY TAKEAWAY

Like adults, all children feel stress. But as parents and caregivers, we can help our children deal with stress in a way that supports their healthy development.

### The effect of toxic stress

When a child experiences toxic stress, the basic structures of their developing brain may be damaged. And without a sturdy foundation to support future development, they may be at risk for long-term 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 them 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 [Family Violence/Abuse](#)).

#### If you or your partner(s) experienced toxic stress when you were a child,

you may benefit from extra support as you adjust to being a parent or caregiver. Try talking to your health care provider and asking about programs that may help.