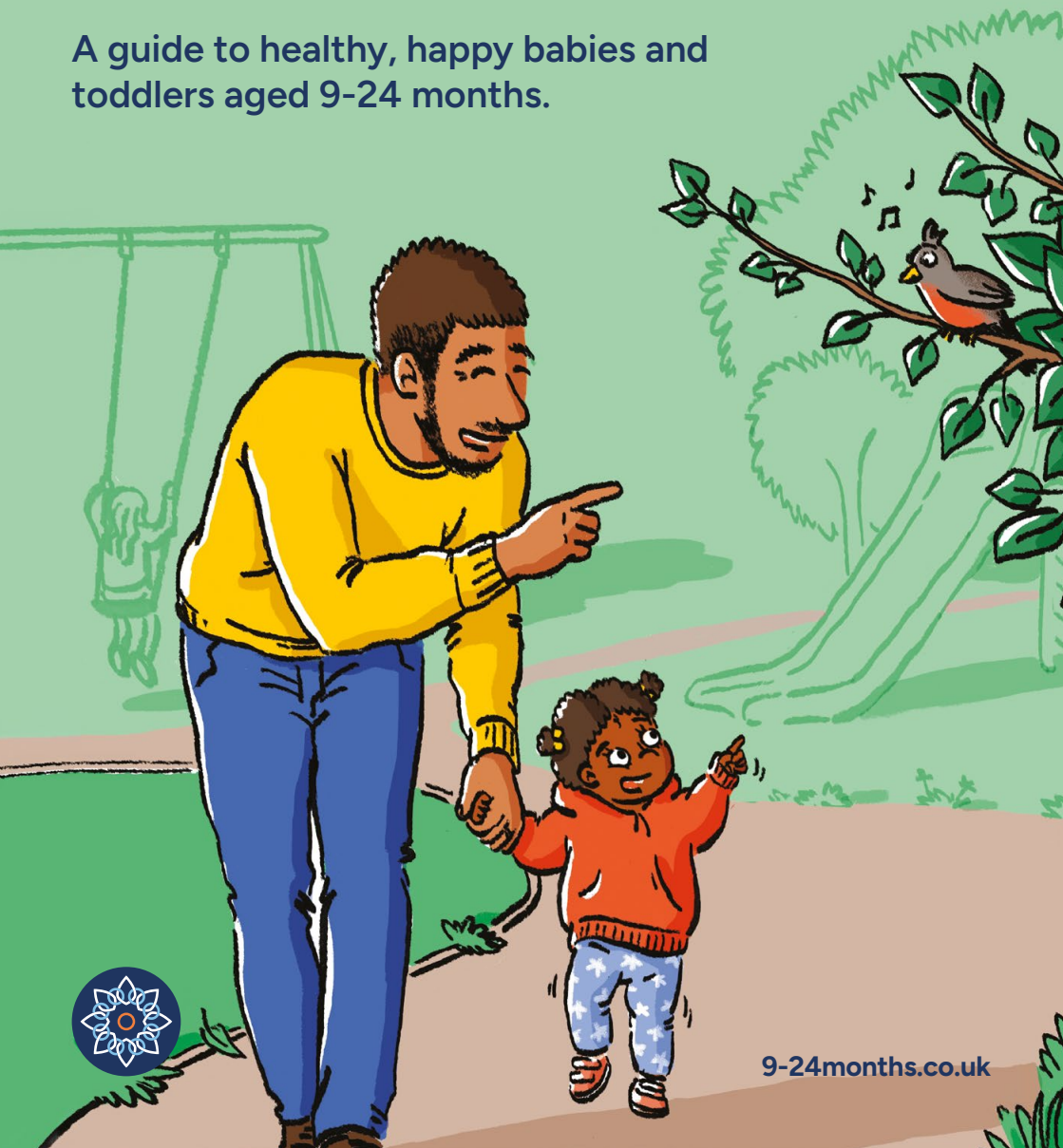
9-24 months:

Wobbles, Words & Wonder

A guide to healthy, happy babies and toddlers aged 9-24 months.



9-24months.co.uk

Introduction

The first two years are a time of very rapid development. Babies grow and learn faster than at any other period in their lives. You are the most important person in their world.

This guide is for parents and carers. When we say 'you', we mean anyone caring for the child.

It is about how your child learns about themselves and the world around them. It is based on research and explains how children learn to manage their feelings, pay attention, show what they need, and build close bonds with family and friends. These skills are often learned through play.



Share this guide with your family – it will help them too!

Scan here for more advice.

How different children grow

Some toddlers learn new skills quickly. Others need more time, or will learn to connect or play in a different order. This guide describes what many toddlers do, but there are many healthy ways to grow and learn.

Some children, including those with special educational needs or disabilities (SEND), may need these ideas adapted. Your health visitor or the professionals supporting your family can help you find what works for your child.

Top tip

If you are ever worried about your toddler, don't be afraid to speak to your GP or health visitor, or visit your local Best Start Family Hub or children's centre. Your child's health check at 2–2½ years is also an opportunity to ask questions and raise concerns.

Not enjoying this stage, or finding it difficult, does not mean that you are a bad parent. It also doesn't mean you'll always feel this way. With the right support, things can get easier, and you can enjoy spending time with your child more.

Taking care of you

Everyday experiences with you help your toddler's brain develop. Every time you respond with a cuddle or a smile, you help shape how your toddler learns and grows. When parents and carers feel supported, it helps toddlers too.

Raising a young child takes a lot of time and energy, and many parents find it hard sometimes. The joy of hearing your child giggle and the pride of hearing them learn to speak sit alongside the challenges of supporting them as they learn to manage their big feelings, test boundaries and develop their own independence.

Top tip

Try going to local playgrounds, libraries, Best Start Family Hubs or children's centres to meet other parents and carers of toddlers the same age. Getting to know other families can offer friendship, support and opportunities to share the many joys and challenges of raising a young child.

Some children will start going to an early years setting around this age. This is a big transition.

If your own childhood experiences are affecting how you feel about parenting or your relationship with your toddler, support is available. Talking to a health professional can help. In many areas, specialist parent-infant relationship services can work with you and your child to strengthen your relationship and support you both.

Did you know?

I don't need a 'perfect' parent during this transition — I mainly need a calm presence I know I can keep returning to emotionally.

Scan here for more advice.

Learning to pay attention

Toddlers can find it harder to listen and pay attention when there is lots of noise, movement or talking going on around them.

In noisy places like shops or play centres, it is difficult for toddlers to listen to you or follow instructions if there is too much going on around them.

Some things toddlers do can be frustrating for adults. For example, banging a spoon on the table or dropping toys for you to pick up. They are not doing this to be difficult. Doing things over and over again helps toddlers practise skills and learn what to expect.

Top tip

Instead of asking "How do I stop this?", try asking "What is my child trying to tell me?". They may be testing to see what happens or they may be tired, hungry, frustrated, excited or finding something difficult. When you know what is behind what they are doing, it can be easier to respond in a helpful way.

Simple routines and practice help toddlers learn. When they feel safe and confident, they are better able to pay attention, learn new things and enjoy exploring the world around them through play.

Top tip

Try doing things each day that they are used to, such as sharing a story, singing songs, eating meals together or following a bedtime routine. This helps children to know what is coming next, which helps them feel safe and secure.



Learning to communicate and speak

Toddlers tell us lots of things without using words. They look, point, smile, move and make sounds to show what they want or need. Notice what they are noticing and join them where they're at. When you join in with what your child is doing, it helps them stay engaged and keep learning.



Top tip

When you talk to your child, try getting down to their level and speaking close to them. This can make it easier for them to focus on your words and listen, most of all when there is lots going on around them.

Children naturally learn to talk at different times. Try not to compare your child with others as this can sometimes cause worry that is not needed. But if you keep thinking that something doesn't feel right, checking in with someone trained to help (e.g. a health visitor) is a good idea.

Young children process new things much more slowly than adults.

Did you know?

It helps when you let me take the lead and follow my interest. If I say "car", you could say "Yes, a blue car!" or "Wow, a racing car!" This helps me hear new words and learn how words fit together to make longer sentences.

Top tip

When you ask your child a question, pause and wait for 10 seconds before jumping in with another question or hurrying them along.

Giving toddlers a long time to respond shows them you want to hear them and this helps them want to tell you more.

Learning to connect and understand each other

As your toddler grows, the simple things you already do together become even more important. Sharing books, noticing the same things, and talking about what interests your child all help them learn. These everyday moments also help strengthen your relationship and help your child feel close and connected to you.

You don't have to get everything right. After a difficult moment, offer comfort and take time to reconnect. A calm voice, kind words or a cuddle can help. As your toddler grows, they may spend more time with grandparents, childminders, nursery staff or other trusted adults. They may also become more upset when you leave them. This can be hard for both of you.



Many parents worry that crying when they leave means their child is not securely attached to them. In fact, it is often a sign that your child feels safe with you and wants you close by.

Scan here for more advice.

Notice what happens when you come back. Many toddlers settle quickly after a cuddle, kind words or another way of feeling close to you.

Top tip

- Talk to your child about the new situation ahead of time. "We're going to visit Grandad's house - he has blocks to play with!"
- Name their feelings. "I can see that you feel a little unsure about playing here right now. Let's have a cuddle and you may feel ready to start playing with your cousins soon."

When a toddler cries and someone responds, they learn what to expect. When they smile and someone smiles back, they learn the same thing.

These back-and-forth moments are very important for children's development. But if an adult looks at a phone during play or talking, the child may feel left out. They do not understand why the adult has stopped responding.

Screen use should be avoided for under 2s and no more than an hour a day for children aged 2 to 5.

Scan here for more advice.

Learning to support emotional ups and downs

As they get older, children's emotions change. They start wanting things and start to cry in reaction to things that you say and do. This stage can be tough for many parents.

From an adult point of view, it might seem that children at this age are being naughty, but they are not. Their brains just work differently to yours. When they start wanting things, they can get 'stuck' on a single thought and find it hard to move on.

Also, your toddler may seem naughty when they are learning about the world and testing what happens when they do different things. This is why consistent boundaries are really important in making them feel safe and secure. Sometimes, they are expressing feelings that they do not yet have the words to explain, such as "I'm hungry" or "I'm tired".

Did you know?

I feel safe with you when I can explore and know that you will tell me what I am allowed to do and what is not safe to do.

Toddlers don't always like moving from one activity to another. They might get upset when it's time to leave the park or stop playing.

When children feel understood, they often calm down more quickly. Once they feel calmer, you can help them focus on something else. "I wonder if we'll see any dogs on the way home?"

Top tip

Try to keep boundaries. Your toddler may get upset when they can't do or have something they want. Keep the boundary, but help them with their feelings. Over time, this helps them learn what is OK and how to cope when things don't go their way.

It can be hard for toddlers to listen when they are having a tantrum. Wait until they are calm before trying to talk about what happened.

Top tip
When a toddler is upset or annoyed, try describing what they are doing. Using the same words that they are using and mirroring their facial expression and tone of voice shows that you 'get' how they're feeling. Describe to them what they're feeling, and why – "You're sad because we had to leave the park. You were having fun on the swings."

Children becoming upset in the moment is completely normal. Sadness and anger are part of life. It is good to be able to express a full range of emotions in different situations.



Children learn how to stay calm and manage their feelings when caring adults help them through difficult moments. Over time, they begin to use these skills on their own.

Regular sleep and daily routines help children know what comes next, helping them feel safe and ready to learn.

Scan here for more advice.

Learning to eat and drink

Eating together helps children learn by watching you.

Try not to rush mealtimes. Make them as relaxed and enjoyable as possible. Eating involves lots of new skills, such as picking up food, chewing, drinking from a cup, and learning to listen to their body's signals about when they are hungry or full. Young children need plenty of time to practise and learn.

It's normal for appetite and food preferences to vary from day to day and from meal to meal. Over time, children usually meet their needs through a mix of foods, even if each meal seems small or the same over and over again.



It is common for toddlers to prefer foods they have had before and to be unsure about new ones. They may need to see, touch or taste a new food many times before they accept it.

Top tip
While you are preparing meals, give toddlers food to hold and feel, and name foods they are interested in.

Try to focus on enjoying food and trying new things, rather than finishing everything on the plate. Letting children decide how much to eat can help them learn to notice when they are hungry and when they are full.

Top tip
As they get older, you could start giving your toddler simple choices at snack time. When they show a preference for an item, build on this by naming the snack and adding new words such as "You're hungry" or "This is cold and crunchy".

It's important to brush teeth from the start to help develop good oral health habits for life.

Learning to move

9-24 months is the window in which many children learn to stand and in time walk on their own.

When children learn new movements, they also learn how to solve problems, pay attention and build confidence. It helps to give children lots of safe chances to practise moving around. Stay close and watch as they learn. Playing on the floor, crawling, reaching, pulling up, and walking all help build strong bodies and brains.

Did you know?

I feel safe with you when I can explore and know that you will tell me what I am allowed to do and what is not safe to do.

Top tip

As long as your toddler is safe, try not to intervene too quickly. Toddlers learn by making mistakes. According to one study, toddlers take more than 2,000 steps during playtime and fall about 17 times every hour.



Movement helps communication too. When toddlers can move towards people and objects they want to explore, they create more chances to share attention, gestures, sounds and words.

Potty training

Research shows it's best for your child's bowel and bladder health to stop using nappies between 18 and 30 months.

Potty training should be seen as a process and not a single event. It happens over time and children can practise sitting on a potty or toilet from when they can sit up independently. Even if your baby or child has SEND, you don't need to wait to start potty training.



Scan here for more advice.

Learning at home

Young children do not need lots of expensive toys. They love copying what you do, and helping you at home can be fun for both of you.

Top tip

Try letting children help you by counting the socks in the laundry basket or digging in the garden. Describe what you are doing in your daily life. It can help you and your toddler stay connected.

Toddlers need simple, familiar places to be without a lot of distractions. Don't feel the need to give them something new each day.



Top tip

When your toddler shows you something, join them where they are and explore it together. It can be really rewarding to see the world from your toddler's view and they really enjoy and learn from having all your attention for a while.

Looking at books, talking about pictures and enjoying favourite stories together is fun and a great way to help them learn. Stories often have a beginning, a middle and an end, as well as repeated words, rhythms, and rhymes. Sharing books at regular times of the day, such as before bed, can help babies and toddlers know what to expect and feel safe and settled. Phones and other devices stop these back-and-forth moments and make it easier to miss your child's signals.

Toddlers are learning how the world works. They might drop a toy on the floor, wait for an adult to pick it up and then drop it again. They are not trying to be annoying but are making a pattern they can understand. This is also why young children often want the same story or song again and again.

Top tip

If they're asking for you to repeat play or things to do – go for it!

Things your toddler wants you to know

Your toddler needs you

- Children experience sounds, lights, touch and movement in different ways. Some enjoy lots of activity. Others prefer quieter spaces. Getting to know what helps your child feel relaxed is part of learning about them.
- Children respond in different ways depending on what is happening, their stage of growing and learning, and sometimes it's just about how much sleep they have had.
- Paying attention to your child and learning their signals is one of the most helpful things you can do.

Your toddler is not being naughty

- Toddlers aren't being "naughty". They have big feelings but their brains aren't yet able to control those big feelings. They may know what adults want them to do, but their brains are still growing and learning the skills needed to stop, wait, share and stay calm. This takes lots of time, support and practice.

Expensive toys are not better than you at helping your child to grow and learn

- Toddlers do not need toys that flash, move or make noises in order to learn. It is helpful to give them some playtime without lots of competing sounds, lights or movement, so they can choose what to focus on.

All toddlers sleep in different ways at different times

- If your child is sleeping well, enjoy it and make sure you rest as much as you can. If your toddler doesn't sleep well, there could be many reasons, and these change often.

Doing the right things won't always lead to instant results, and that's OK

- Don't worry if something doesn't work straight away. Learning and growing comes through repeating, practising and sticking with it!

Scan the QR code for more advice

- Find your local Best Start Family Hub
- 9-12 month health visitor review
- 12-month and 18-month jabs
- 2–2½ years health visitor review
- Best Start in Life - Childcare & Early Years Education - Find out about the available childcare support.
- Weaning and feeding
- Safe sleep advice
- Toothbrushing & dentist
- Potty training
- Screen time

Visit 9-24months.co.uk to view this guide online and find useful links.

Local information:

Learners from birth

This guide was created collaboratively by:

"This guide gives parents practical ideas to support their toddler's learning and development as they grow, explore and become more independent."

- Paul Waugh, Early Education Minister

"This guide helps parents and carers understand and enjoy those special early years, as toddlers discover the world, develop their own personality and learn through play and everyday moments together."

- Baroness Merron, Early Years Health Minister

Get free practical guides including The Children's Toothbrushing Guide and The Potty Training Guide at learnersfrombirth.co.uk.

