

Physical Activity Ideas for Toddlers (1 to 3 year olds)

How much do toddlers need?

I'm often asked whether toddlers need structured activities or should they be exposed to more creative, make-believe, and imaginative play with fewer boundaries?

As a parent and International Kids' Fitness Presenter I've observed many parents enthusiastically provide activity after activity for their toddler, many worried they don't provide enough structured, organised activity for their child's development.

There are lots of great structured activity programs out there, many providing loads of great opportunities for kids to be physically active and gain an appreciation for their bodily movements simply through having fun. However, there is also such a thing as overdoing it, but at what point is that boundary drawn? While toddlers definitely benefit from structured activities, remember their age and keep it in perspective. I believe that toddlers need a balance between structured and unstructured play. Whether that's provided by you or in a class of some sort will be up to you, and the needs you see for your child. Before you can decide what's right for your child, think about the different developmental milestones of every child.

Developmental milestones are a set of age-specific tasks that most children can do at a specific age. However, remember that every child is unique and these milestones are guides only.



By the end of 12 months you are looking to see if your child:

- Reaches sitting position without assistance
- Crawls forward on their belly
- Assumes hands-and-knees position
- Creeps on hands-and-knees
- Transitions from sitting to crawling or prone (lying on stomach) position
- Can pull themselves up to a standing position
- Walks holding on to furniture
- Stands momentarily without support
- May walk two or three steps without support.

By the end of 2 years of age you are looking to see if your child:

- Walks alone
- Pulls toys behind while walking
- Carries large toy or several toys while walking
- Begins to run
- Stands on tiptoe
- Kicks a ball
- Climbs onto and down from furniture unassisted
- Walks up and down stairs holding on to support
- Take steps backward.

And by the end of 3 years of age that they can:

- Climbs well
- Walks up and down stairs, alternating feet
- Kicks a ball
- Runs easily
- Pedals tricycle
- Bends over easily without falling.

Unstructured playtime is learning time where they can be free to play, express their own behaviour and explores new learning patterns. Creating structures in your backyard, inviting other children around to play and having a family pet can all contribute to their development. It's during this time that toddlers often learn how things work, develop problem solving and imagination, and refine skills that they've already learned. And on top of all this, they get to just be a kid! Start introducing your children to parks with climbing gyms or have smaller climbing equipment in your yard to encourage strength, coordination and balance. Just ensure you keep a watchful eye on them.

Here are some basic ideas for building toddler learning skills in a fun way at home!

Cubby houses: Divide the back yard into four areas by using rope, bricks or pavers (something that they can identify as a pretend wall). These areas will be different cubby houses. Tip: put a picture of an animal or fruit in each area so they know where they are up to. In each cubby house place an activity they must do for a set time or put some favourite music on that they work to until it stops. They then move to the next cubby house to complete the next task.

Some ideas that you could use in the individual cubby houses are:

- Balloons on a string that can be tied to their wrist, they can practice skills such as bouncing and catching, kicking and throwing skills.
- A hula hoop is another great tool as it helps them practice skipping, jumping and of course having fun trying to hula.
- Small softballs and a bucket: get them to stand in a hula hoop and throw the ball into the bucket which is placed a short distance away, this allows them to practice throwing and accuracy.
- A mini trampoline is always great fun and an excellent strength and cardio workout, or a hopper (a large fitball with handles on them), these are fantastic for body awareness, balance and coordination.

Balloon activities: Blow up a few balloons for each child and encourage them to throw them in the air, catch and kick them. Depending on the age of the child balloons can be used to throw, catch, kick or hit with a fly swatter. If you have a waste paper basket of ample size they can also try to throw the balloon into the basket to mimic a mini game of basketball. A great alternative to a balloon is a rolled up newspaper to be used as a mini-basketball.

For older or more experienced children tie a rope across 2 points to create a mini net for them to throw or hit over. Play hot potato with the balloons where the child has to try to keep the balloon off the ground for as long as possible. As they get older and develop some of these skills you can progress to soft balls.

As balloons move through space much slower than balls it's a great cognitive learning experience too, as they learn to judge the time it takes for the balloon to fall. Try a range of soft balls of different sizes so that children can learn about size and shape at the same time. For example when they kick a balloon versus a ball they will soon learn the different force that's required for each in order to achieve a similar distance.

Balance: Definitely a skill that this age group needs to accomplish. Start with a rope on the grass and get them to practice walking along it, then you can progress to a line of bricks or pavers or a balance beam of some sort. Just practicing balancing on one leg, then the other leg is an achievement and helps strengthen their legs and ankles and control their body.

Musical statues: Similar to musical chairs. Ask the children to move to music and then stop in any position they like when the music stops. It's meant to be fun so they can be as creative as they like! The child who moves first is out of the game (if you feel the children are ready for that otherwise you can just keep playing until the song finishes).

When they have got used to the game introduce extra skills, for example, jumping, hopping or skipping. The hopping and skipping is fun because when the music stops they have to finish balanced on one leg!

Treasure hunt: Be creative with this one! You can use anything you want as treasure and how difficult you make it will depend on the age of the child. It's also fun to provide each child with a bucket to keep the treasures as they find them!

Most of all if you enjoy it, they will too – have fun!

Liz Wells

Fitkid Australia Pty Ltd

For more information or to contact Liz email liz@fitforlifeonline.com.au