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# five to thrive

The things you do every day that help your **toddler's** growing brain



a supplement for parents of toddlers

# The toddler brain is amazing...

The brain of a toddler is fizzing with activity. But all this activity is happening in a brain not yet equipped to make sense of it. As babies become toddlers their brain development changes focus. They go on building new brain connections, as they will do all through life, but these connections form more slowly than in their first year. In the second and third years of life the brain is still developing very quickly, but this development is now focused on organising all the frantic activity going on in the toddler brain.

## **baby brains are getting built • toddler brains are getting organised**

Brains work when brain cells connect together. Your baby was born with very few brain connections in place. By the end of the first year of life the brain had doubled in size, with billions of brain cells connected. These connections form in response to experience. Everything that happened to your baby built their growing brain.

The most powerful experiences for brain-building are relationships. For connections to grow in a baby's brain, the baby needs to be connected to an adult. So the brain and body, feelings and thoughts of your child have become tuned in to what is happening in your brain and body. And this strong bond means you will also be affected by changes in the brain and body of your child.

Toddlers need this close brain-and-body link to adults. They cannot manage or make sense of their own feelings and thoughts. They need an adult to do that for them, an adult who is tuned in to the world of the child.

So ... living with the chaotic brain of a toddler can be chaotic!

They can be confusing	<i>because</i>	they feel confused
They can be frustrating	<i>because</i>	they feel frustrated
They can be infuriating	<i>because</i>	they feel infuriated
They can even be frightening	<i>because</i>	they feel frightened
But they can also be delightful	<i>because</i>	they feel such delight in living
And they can be very lovable	<i>because</i>	they love you so much

Your child's body grows better when you give the child good food. Your child's brain grows better when you do five simple things that feed the growing brain:

**Respond • Cuddle • Relax • Play • Talk**



## respond

*“ My brain is very active, but it still can’t work on its own. I need my brain to be linked to the brain of an adult. Adults can manage their thoughts and feelings and behaviour, because they have brains that control their responses. But my brain can’t do this yet. I need you to respond to me so that I can learn to manage my own responses.”*



## suggestions

- Your toddler will watch the expression on your face and the way you use your hands and your body to know how you are responding to them
- They listen carefully to the sounds you make to see how you feel, and they are beginning to be able to understand the words you use, and even to make sense of whole sentences
- Toddlers also need chances to practice sorting things out for themselves, so wait-and-see is often a good first response to them at this age

## cuddle

*“ When you hold me, or lift me on to your knee, or hold my hand, I feel safe and protected, and this feeling of safety helps my brain to settle and get things sorted out. And if you feel happy when I hold you, or climb on your knee, or take hold of your hand it makes me feel that I am a real person who can make a difference to other people. Then my brain is sorting out what makes me feel safe and happy, and what I can do to make other people feel safe and happy.”*



## suggestions

- As well as cuddling, all sorts of physical contact can help your toddler to develop self-regulation – holding hands, brushing hair, massage, stroking, tickling, and so on
- Toddlers love giving as well as receiving all these different types of physical contact

## relax

*“ My brain is so active and I find things confusing. I often feel frustrated and stressed! I still can’t manage stress by myself – if I didn’t have you to help me take the stress away it could build up to a point where it started to injure my brain. But because I love and trust you, I am tuned in to you. I need you to get stressed and then to relax, and that helps me to stop being stressed and to relax. And when I relax with you my brain starts to sort out how to do that all by myself.”*



## suggestions

- Toddler brains are not yet able to manage stress – they still need to tune in to your brain and body to calm themselves down
- Your toddler still has the same brain they had when they were born. It has grown a lot, and is much more active, but it is still the same brain. When they are tired, or ill, or over-excited, or frightened, or anxious they go back to their baby needs. Everything in *Five to Thrive* applies to your toddler!



## play

*“ Playing helps me to make sense of the world. Sometimes, now that I’m a toddler, I want to play on my own. I can find out how things work and fit together. I can copy what you do, and begin to find out how it feels to be a person who can do things. I also like it when you play with me. I watch you and listen to you and learn from you all the time, and when you play with me it really helps me to start to think and understand.”*



### suggestions

- Toddlers learn through play. Singing games, counting games, action games, and let’s pretend games all help the child to make sense of the world around them
- Play that involves using their hands – drawing, cutting, pasting, building structures, cooking – helps to get their brain working as one organised unit and develops their hand and eye skills
- Play that involves movement – running, balancing, skipping, throwing and catching – helps to develop the way the brain controls their body
- Play that involves imagination – dolls, stories, dressing up – helps the child to develop their thinking skills and their understanding

## talk

*“ Being able to use words is so important to me because it is language that makes my brain work together in an organised way. I love it when you listen to me. It helps me to feel like a real person who matters, and it helps my brain to build patterns for communicating. I love it when you talk to me. I can’t control my voice properly yet, so I might shout when I mean to talk. But the more I can practice talking, the more my brain gets organised to understand and use words. ”*



### suggestions

- Listening and talking to your toddler helps to shape the way their brain is getting organised
- Reading to them helps to develop a love of books that will make it easier for them to learn all through their life, and songs and poems and rhymes are great ways to get toddlers interested in having fun with words and getting control of their voice

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## about five to thrive

*The ‘Five to Thrive’ resources provide an accessible way to approach daily living with babies and young children, and can help parents and carers to understand the importance of bonding behaviours in promoting healthy brain development.*

For more information visit [www.fivetothrive.org.uk](http://www.fivetothrive.org.uk)