

Seven Ways to Encourage Toddler Independence

The "Me Do It" toddler phase can be challenging, but it's an important developmental time. Take a look at our team's seven ways to encourage this independence.

Is your toddler becoming more independent?

This phase can be challenging and it's often hard for parents to find the balance of letting the reins slip a little after that first year of total dependency. The move from babyhood to toddler-dom brings with it an inevitable tug of war as your expectations clash with your little bundle's newfound desire for freedom.

Let's call it the "Me Do It" movement - the stage between 18 and 36 months which will include varying degrees of intensity depending on their temperament. This stage comes with challenges such as toddler temper tantrums, that are well known, but try to also see it as a cause for celebration. It shows your child is recognising themselves as separate from others and feels safe and confident enough to take risks.

When children are allowed to try things on their own, they master new skills and build self-esteem. Allowing your child opportunities to do things independently takes longer than if you helped, but the end results are worth the extra effort. So here are seven key tips to encourage toddler development and help your child through this exciting time.

Tips for Encouraging Toddler Development

- **Offer reasonable choices when possible.** It's not always possible, but this is a good time to start picking your battles and it's important to enable them to feel they have some element of control. For example, while a toddler can't wear shorts when it's snowing outside, if they want to wear sparkly wellies in the summer that might be acceptable. For issues you feel you need to challenge, try offering two alternatives, e.g., "You can wear the green shirt or the blue shirt." This strategy allows you to set appropriate limits, while acknowledging your child's need to "do it myself."
- **Make your home toddler-friendly.** Keep plastic cups and bowls or pots and pans in a low cupboard within your child's reach. Buy simple trousers or skirts with an elastic waistband instead of poppers and buttons. Place sturdy stools in the bathroom. These small gestures help your toddler become more independent while ensuring safety.
- **Work together on toddler-friendly activities.** Children have an innate need to contribute. Toddlers can help with chores and other household activities. Let your toddler pour flour into a batch of cookie dough or buy child-size gardening tools to be used in the garden. Admittedly, your child will probably lose interest long before the task is done and may actually create more work for you. The payoff, though, is the boost to their self-confidence, which can also increase cooperation.
- **Add "toddler time" to your daily routine.** Toddlers are notorious dawdlers and can wreak havoc on a tight or well-oiled schedule. Try to build some extra time into your routine to allow for your toddler's burgeoning independence. You'll feel more patient and your toddler will feel more in control.
- **Give clear, simple directions.** Sometimes you must intervene to prevent behaviour problems from developing. In this case, use clear, direct language. Tell your child what you want him to do, rather than what you don't want him to do, and offer empathy and understanding to reduce toddler tantrums. For example, perhaps your toddler wants to climb the shelves to

reach a favourite snack. Say, "This isn't safe. I will help you. You can get the bowls from the bottom cupboard."

- **Adapt to your child's needs.** Your toddler maybe fiercely independent, but they are also still little and vulnerable. One minute your child refuses all help; the next, they may be crawling into your lap in need of reassurance. Be prepared to switch gears quickly and follow their lead.

It's Only the Beginning

It may sound obvious but remember this is only the beginning. Your child will continue to navigate between independence and the need for parental security throughout childhood and even into young adulthood.

The struggle is normal, healthy, and completely necessary for children to become strong, self-sufficient adults. Your role as a parent is to lead them through by example and guide them with gentle direction, while fostering and maintaining a warm, trusting relationship.