Birth – 18 months

In the first 2 or 3 years of life, the emotional centres of a child’s brain is developing more than the ‘thinking, planning, reasoning and talking’ centres.

This explains why toddlers often get very emotional and ‘act without thinking’. It also helps us to understand that very young children are not capable of behaviours such as planning to cry just to annoy you or to get back at you.

When older children and adults get very emotional, the reasoning or thinking part of their brain gets shut off, and they too, might ‘act like a baby’ or ‘act without thinking’!

Babies and toddlers live in an emotional world. They are particularly sensitive to the non-verbal aspects of communication: the way they are looked at, spoken to and touched by the most important people in their lives: you!

Babies are not able to talk about how they feel, they are not able to calm themselves down and they are not physically able to do much to change things in their environment. It’s no wonder they often get frustrated and have tantrums!

During this stage, babies are learning about TRUST.

Each time you pick him up and comfort him when he is upset and every time you have fun playing together he is getting messages that strengthen his template for healthy relationships. These messages include:

‘When I need help, someone will be there for me.’

‘It’s fun being with other people’

‘The world is a safe place.’

What babies need:

• The same few special adults who will love me, enjoy me, meet all my needs and keep me safe every day
• Please make my world predictable and consistent
• Hold me close, gently rock me and talk to me calmly in a soothing tone. I can’t settle myself when I’m upset or over-stimulated.
• Please don’t fight. Angry or frightened voices and faces feel dangerous to me. Seeing and hearing fighting is as bad as having it done to you.
• I love your nurturing touch
• I need opportunities to explore and practise a range of movements
• I need someone to talk/read/sing with me every day
What parents can do:

- Provide loving care
- Learn to understand what his body language is telling you he needs
- Respond to his needs
- Help him to manage his feelings and settle his body
- Arrange back-up support for yourself for those times when you need it

An example of how babies communicate: Feeding time

Get to know your baby’s body language signs that say ‘I’m hungry’ (signs like mouthing/hand to mouth...)

Feed him when you see his hungry signs.

Hold and stay with him, while you feed him.

Get to know his signs that say, ‘I’ve had enough now’ (signs like turning away/pushing away/back arching...)

Stop feeding him when he shows his ‘I’m full’ signs.

18 months - 3 years

A toddler’s brain is still growing rapidly at this stage with the most growth occurring in the ‘feeling, emotional’ centres and in those areas relating to physical skills like running, jumping, balancing, feeding and dressing themselves.

To learn and master a new skill we all need to practise that skill over and over again. Toddlers are just starting to enjoy the sense of power that they get from being able to do things by themselves. They need lots of opportunities to practise these new skills – repetition is important. It is important for a toddler to feel good about himself.

At around 18 months children begin to develop a sense of self - of ‘me’ and ‘mine.’ Commonly, toddler talk includes phrases like, ‘Me too!’ ‘Wait for me!’ ‘Me do it!’ ‘Mine!’ With an awareness of what belongs to ‘me’ it is often difficult for toddlers to share toys with others. This is an important stage in the child developing a sense of identity and independence.

Toddlers have more trouble stopping an action than starting a new one so it is more effective to say to a toddler ‘Walk slowly!’ than it is to say ‘Stop running!’

Toddlers can be very determined and assertive when they decide they want to do something. They often get frustrated when it doesn’t work out the way they’d like. This often happens when they are not physically able to do what they want or when rules/limits don’t allow it.

Because the toddler’s emotional brain centres are so active, a toddler who is frustrated is likely to react in an emotional way. That’s why tantrums are common at this stage and why it can be difficult for toddlers to cope with not being able to have what they want.

From about 18 months of age, the centres of the brain which help us to control our impulses are just beginning to develop. At this stage he may ‘know’ that it is not acceptable to bite people but at times he may not be able to hold back his desire to do it. As the frontal areas of the brain mature children’s ability to control their impulses increases.

The left side of the brain is starting to grow faster at this stage too as shown in children’s language development. While they are still learning to use words toddlers have difficulty expressing their feelings using language. Toddlers who are practicing the new skill of speaking often experiment with the word, ‘No!’ as they enjoy the feeling of power it gives them.
What toddlers need:

- I feel good about myself when I can do things by myself
- Let me practise doing new things over and over again
- Let me try to do new things
- Keep me safe while I explore and experiment. I might test the boundaries but I need to know where they are!
- Understand and comfort me when I get frustrated

What parents can do:

- Understand that toddlers have limited control over their emotional responses
- Support his development of self-control by modelling appropriate responses
  eg. ‘It’s not ok to hit Marcus, but you can tell him you don’t like it when he takes your truck’
- When he does something that is inappropriate, let him know that what he did is not ok, but that you still love him
- To help a toddler cope with change provide predictable routines and prepare him for what is about to happen next
- Make opportunities for your child to be successful- give only as much help as he needs
- Show your interest and delight in him as he practises the same skill over and over again
- Accept accidents/spills as a normal part of learning something new
- Provide reasonable, consistent boundaries
- Calm yourself before you respond to your toddler
- Have a support network in place so that you can arrange to have a break when you need it most

A mealtime example:

Encourage him to feed herself.

Serve food in a way that allows him to be successful at feeding himself eg cut food into bite-sized pieces
Provide a child-sized fork, spoon etc.
Accept that meal times will be messy.
Accept that he might say ‘No!’ to some foods
Allow him to help you with cooking eg stirring, cutting out biscuits, washing dishes.
3 - 6 years

Children at this stage still need to practise new skills. Now they have more physical and language skills children have the ability to start making more decisions themselves. To do this, they need to be given more freedom to try new things, while parents still ensure they are safe.

During these years, growth of connections in the left side of the brain will speed up. This is the side of the brain that organises and recognises speech and language. Children’s use of language increases rapidly, especially when they are included in conversations with other people. At the same time, there will also begin to be more rapid growth in the thinking and reasoning areas of the brain. They will begin to ask lots of questions as they try to work out why and how things happen.

➡️ What children need:

- Opportunities to practise new skills
- Play with children of the same age
- Opportunities to use my imagination and try new things
- Encouragement to make my own suggestions and decisions

➡️ What parents can do:

- Provide opportunities for children to play with their friends
- Give children praise and encouragement for trying, not just for success
- Provide opportunities for him to make decisions about everyday things that concern him Eg which clothes to wear

➡️ A MEALTIME EXAMPLE:

Allow him to decide how much food to put on his plate.
Accept his decision to stop eating when he says, ‘I’m full.’
Accept spills as normal.
Allow him to decide whether he will try new foods.
Respect that he may dislike a new food.
Sometime between the ages of 8 and 10 years developmental growth in both sides of the brain begins to even out, as the 'bridge' between the left and right hemispheres strengthens. Generally this means that children at this stage become better able to manage their feelings, are better able to make decisions for themselves and to understand the reasons and consequences for actions and behaviour.

**What children need:**
- To be able to achieve something I can feel good about
- To enjoy friendships with children my age
- To learn how to get along with my friends and adults

**What parents can do:**
- Provide opportunities to develop special interests and practise skills eg sports/music/games/hobbies.....
- Provide opportunities for socialising with friends eg joining clubs/free play at home
- Offer children choices
- Support children in their attempts to solve their own problems
- Help children to make and learn rules eg in games
- Celebrate the child’s achievements

**A mealtime example:**
- Allow children to decide when they are hungry or full.
- Provide food and utensils so that children can prepare snacks or simple meals for themselves and their friends.
- Allow children to make suggestions for family meals.
- Allow children to help with shopping for and cooking meals.