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Why Two-Year-Olds May Behave Differently to Three- and Four-Year-Olds

Early childhood is the time when children learn to think, learn about themselves in a social context and develop language – all at an astounding rate. The stage of development between the ages of two years and three years is a huge one. The whole early years period is a time in which children develop rapidly, socially, emotionally, intellectually and physically; during the year between ages two and three this development is even faster. Once a child is two the chances are that they will have begun to explore their environment, they are mobile, they are developing independence and they are starting to know what they want to do and conversely what they don't want to do. However, their social skills in terms of turn taking and sharing are not as strongly developed. They still have difficulty with waiting and ideally want things to happen for them immediately. Due to the fact that they are always 'on the go' they need a lot of sleep and can easily become cranky and fractious. Their language skills are not sufficiently developed for them to make their needs known and therefore they are more likely to

have temper tantrums as a result of the combination of this and the other factors above. This phase isn't known as the 'terrible twos' without good reason. All this means they can be quite unpredictable. Two-year-olds tend to get frustrated easily and this can sometimes lead to destructive behaviours.

Young children will only be able to behave in a way that is appropriate to their own age and stage of development; so two-year-olds are unlikely to be able to behave in the same way as four-year-olds, not because they don't want to, but because they simply can't.

Concentration spans are different for two-year-olds compared to four-year-olds. Temper tantrums are more prevalent from about 18 months to two-and-a-half years than they are at four years old. However, each individual child is different so there are no hard and fast rules, only generalisations.

At the age of two children still have a tendency to play alongside others – engage in parallel play. They also find it difficult to see anything from another's perspective.

Two-year-olds benefit from the time and attention of adults within a setting – as do all children – however, once a child is older they are better able to express their needs and wishes and function more independently. Two-year-olds need time in order to develop these relationships and need more time to have their physical and emotional needs met and to create attachments. If adults know children well and take time to develop bonds, ensuring that they know they are valued, this helps children to develop their social and emotional capacity and consequently has an impact on their behaviour.

Extending young children's vocabulary is a key issue. At the age of two, children's language is developing at a fast pace. By enabling children to express their feelings and extend their language we enable them to better regulate their own behaviour.

Adults who understand young children's physical needs as well as their emotional needs – by getting to know the child well – can pre-empt difficulties; if you know a child is very tired you also know when little tantrums may be likely to occur. While this can be true of all small children it is more likely to occur with a two-year-old than a three- or four-year-old just because they tend to get tired more easily.

Two-year-olds are so much more egocentric than their older counterparts; supporting them in small group work to encourage turn-taking skills and language development is crucial. Giving them a secure and predictable environment scaffolded by an adult to develop skills, which in turn leads to the beginnings of the development of empathy, has an impact on their social and emotional skills, which in turn affects their behaviour within a setting. As the attention span of a two-year-old is much less than that of a three-year-old, any group activities need to be very short.

Additionally, two-year-olds tend to need more support at transition times. This is not just when they arrive and separate from the person who brings them to the setting, but within the session/s as they move from one activity to another, are requested to join an activity, and, for example, at tidy up time. If adults can give clear notice of these times and physically help them to move on by being a constant alongside them, this lessens the chances of the

children failing to understand what is happening, and with it, the chances of them becoming upset or anxious.

Meal times with two-year-olds can also prove a challenge sometimes, as they are becoming increasingly independent and this is also a stage where food fads may well occur. This is something that can be anticipated; however, given two-year-olds' unpredictability it can be hard to manage. This is an area where working with parents is key.

Think and reflect

What is it like for a two-year-old in your setting?

Do they know they are a unique child?

How do they know and how do you know this is true?

Are their relationships positive ones?