Life in the toddler room is either an ever-changing delight or a nightmare, depending on your understanding, attitude, and preparation.

My introduction to a toddler room was such a nightmare that I promised myself I would never repeat that experience. There were always multiple children crying. The only toys any one of them wanted was one another child held. None of them played more than minutes with a toy after acquiring it by taking it away from another child. All I can remember now is telling myself, “Don’t swat them. Try to keep them safe. Their mothers will be here soon.” You can tell I totally gave up on making any of them happy. That seemed impossible. I was more miserable than the whole room full of toddlers combined.

In contrast, if you were to ask me today where I would choose to spend my day, I would choose the toddler room in a flash. What have I learned that has changed my attitude and aided my preparation so that I can be confident of a delightful day with toddlers?

The key is capitalizing on the knowledge that toddlers will engage repetitively in an activity that is on the edge of their ability to accomplish it with support, a stage identified as the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) by the Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky. Prepare the environment so that each toddler has access to activities at ZPD, spread those activities throughout the room in centers, and position adults so they can move with the flow of the children’s play.

Preparing the environment
Prepare the environment by choosing materials to engage the toddlers’ varied developmental levels, materials that build emerging skills and teach self-regulation. Materials also need to support discovery and self-help skills. Always be prepared with back-up materials you can add quickly if you need to stimulate new interest. Include enough duplicate materials that turn taking is minimal with the youngest toddlers and planned with the older toddlers.
Young toddlers are unable to take the perspective of another child and assume if they want a toy, the other child wants them to have it too. When they act on this assumption and pull the toy out of the other child’s hand, they really have no clue why that child cries or tries to hurt them. As their cognitive and emotional development allows them to occasionally take turns with scaffolding, you are close by to assist the children in negotiating turn taking—not sharing, because sharing means there was first ownership and the equipment at school does not belong to any of the children.

Arrange the room so that it is free of clutter to avoid tripping, with clear, safe pathways because toddlers run. Add a consistent schedule and a soft place for quiet retreat, and your room will be ready.

The step that is most often assumed is that all adults in the room have been taught how toddlers play. In a basic in-service workshop or class in toddler characteristics, you can expect teachers to come away knowing that toddlers are increasingly mobile, have emerging language, and often display erratic behavior. You will be able to recognize they seek autonomy and control that often results in willful and defiant behavior. Toddlers’ social awareness is slowly developing, and they have constant urges to test and experiment. These are the very characteristics that make toddlers monsters if you try to block them or delightful when you adjust your expectations and work with them in their play.

**Setting up activities**

Rooms for young toddlers (12 to 18 months) typically have areas for language, art, and physical activity. Rooms for older toddlers (18 to 36 months) will have additional areas or an interchangeable combination of dramatic play, blocks, sand and water (sensory), science (discovery), music, and manipulatives.

The activities below describe a continuum of skills that toddlers learn at different stages and that allows the teacher to prepare the environment for children’s success. At the same time, these activities can be used for preparing teachers to work with toddlers.

**Salt-flour clay**

Salt-flour clay is a perfect medium to begin training support teachers. Make the clay by combining 3 cups flour, 1 ½ cups salt, 2 tablespoons cream of tartar, 3 cups water, and 3 tablespoons of cooking oil in a saucepan and cooking over medium heat until thick. After cooling, knead until smooth. Store in a tightly sealed plastic bag.

**Stage 1 toddler**

Pulls clay apart into small pieces, and then drops it on the floor, on the table, or into the hand of a nearby adult.

**Adult:** Offers a hand as a receptacle for the tiny pieces. Smashes the clay back together and returns it to the child.

**Toddler:** Repeats the action.

**Adult:** If the adult is patient, attentive, and provides language for the texture, process, color, and size of pieces, this cycle may repeat itself as many as 20 times in a row.
Stage 2 toddler
Smashes the clay and attempts to press a cookie cutter into it, mimicking other children.

Adult: Aids in smashing the clay flat enough so the child can cut through it with the cookie cutter. Talks about the sharp and soft sides of the cookie cutter so the child puts the sharpest side into the dough. Encourages the child to touch both sides of the cookie cutter to experience and be able to recognize the difference. Aids in separating the cookie from the dough. Talks about the shape of the cookie, the child’s persistence, and the success in making the cookie. Smashes the remaining piece back together to start again.

Stage 3 toddler
Attempts using a rolling pin to roll out the dough. Initially, the child just rolls the pin over the top of the clay with no flattening because of the lack of muscle strength in the arms to add enough pressure.

Adult: Co-constructs with the child by putting hands over the child’s hands and applying pressure so the dough rolls flat. Grunts and makes other noises that indicate this is hard work, needing lots of muscles while using words to say these things.

Toddler: Uses cookie cutters independently of the adult to make multiple cookies that may be saved. May even use more than one cookie cutter to achieve more than one shape cookie.

Adult: Names the shape of the cookies, counts the cookies, does simple comparisons such as, “You have one, two stars and one, two, three hearts. You have more hearts than stars.” The adult may even ask, “Do you want to make one more star so you have the same number of stars as hearts?”

Stage 3 toddler
Begins to roll on a snake that an adult has begun.

Adult: Coaches the child to make it longer and longer. Some toddlers may still need a little co-constructing with the adult hand so the child can feel the pressure needed to shape the snake.

Stage 3 toddler
Uses blunt scissors in both hands to cut the snake.

Adult: Smashes the pieces back together and begins to form another snake or makes the snake so the child can continue to cut. When the adult is excited about this awesome accomplishment and shares that excitement with the child, the child will continue this activity for more than 10 minutes.

Stage 4 toddler
Watches the adult press a hole in a ball to make a bowl and mimics that behavior. The child will be able to go round and round to make a ball and even little balls to become eggs to go in the nest. If one child makes a nest, everyone needs one and this takes lots of time. The child uses the pizza cutter to cut flattened clay and calls it pizza that is then served to the adult and other children. Older toddlers may even begin a play scenario with the items they are making with the clay.

Adult: Makes snakes and balls to construct simple animals.

Stage 4 toddler
Mimics making snakes and balls and creating simple animals. At this stage, toddlers can put clay into a garlic press and squeeze it to produce strings.

Stringing beads
Introduce the Stage 1 toddler to beads by placing the beads and the pipe cleaner (chenille stick) inside a small bin or tray to limit the beads that roll off the table. With a Stage 3 toddler, use a small (3-inch diameter) lid from a yogurt container to hold pieces of cut-up straws. This spreads the materials along the table, limits the amount spilled at any one time, and eliminates the sharing of materials that this stage child is rarely ready to easily do. (They don’t always need to share materials to learn that skill.)

Stage 1 toddler
Explores the large beads and pipe cleaner on the tray.

Adult: Crimps one end of a pipe cleaner to keep the beads on it. Models putting the pipe cleaner into the bead hole and holding the emerging end with one hand while sliding the bead on the pipe cleaner with the other.

Stage 2 toddler
Slides beads onto pipe cleaner.

Adult: Offers a pipe cleaner to use as a boa constrictor that eats all the little mice (cut pieces of straws). Sees how many snakes a child can fill to the top.

Stage 3 toddler
Explores string that has been cut by the teacher in advance to 15-inch length with the end stiffened in white glue.

Adult: Demonstrates stringing straws onto the string. Note: Using cereal for stringing
becomes another snack rather than a learning activity.

**Stage 4 toddler**
Explores half-inch cardstock squares that the teacher has cut and punched in the center with a hole about the diameter of a round toothpick.

**Adult:** Encourages the children to alternate paper and straw in a simple AB pattern. The children end up with leis or necklaces that are self-rewarding.

**Stickers**
Toddlers love stickers, but that doesn’t mean they automatically know how to take them from a page of stickers and place them onto a piece of paper. It’s another skill that has a continuum and can be taught easily with a little preparation of the materials and training of the teacher.

**Stage 1 toddler**
Explores stickers that have been cut in advance into five strips from the sticker page. This small rectangular shape makes it easier for the child to remove the stickers.

**Adult:** Demonstrates bending the strip to free an end of a single sticker. Encourages the child to pull the end of the sticker to remove it from the back and then stick it on a half-piece of paper. If the paper is too large, the child doesn’t see progress and will quit sooner. The young toddler will stay at this small-motor task for a long time if the teacher stays on task.

**Stage 2 toddler**
Learns how to fold and peel the stickers independently as a result of gaining greater small-muscle control.

**Adult:** Engages the child in conversation and reflects on the child’s behavior and play. Don’t be surprised if children remove as many stickers from the paper as they put on. They are practicing small-motor skills, not creating a work of art their parents will frame.

**Drawing with chalk**
Introduce chalk on the chalkboard to young toddlers. White or colored chalk, sidewalk chalk chunks, or small sticks will all work. Whiteboard crayons will also work if you have a whiteboard. If you use colored chalk or whiteboard crayons, be sure to roll up children’s sleeves because they will rub the board with their forearms.

**Stage 1 toddler**
Makes vertical lines and then longer lines that curve. Makes circular marks and then horizontal lines.

**Adult:** Names the lines and colors and comments on how pretty the picture looks. The emphasis is still on process rather than product. Narrates the process and aids in peacefully sharing materials. Resists taking the chalk and drawing a representation of something. The children are not ready to copy adult artwork. If the adult wants to draw for the joy of drawing and do some giggling and narrating at the same time, the children will enjoy that as long as their art is equally as acceptable as the adult’s.

**Stage 2 toddler**
Becomes fascinated with erasers.

**Adult:** Recognizes that erasing is another skill to be learned.

Always bring more than one eraser so the wait time is less.

**Shaving cream at the sensory table**
Toddlers are in the sensory stage, so the key to soothing them is through touch. An inch of sand or water is the customary material for the sensory table, but you might also use aquarium gravel or packing peanuts. Toddlers love to find small items under the sand or gravel and bury them again. You can add cars or small trucks. Rubber ducks or other bath toys are super fun and soothe almost any crying child.

For easier cleanup, lay a sheet under the table and try to keep the table centered over the sheet. Instruct children to “Keep the… in the table,” but keep in mind that children will forget or just toss it because it is self-rewarding. I give them reminders that we need to keep the material in the table or choose somewhere else to play. A child that comes just to scatter is simply told: “That isn’t what we do here, so you need to go…(give them two choices).” If the child doesn’t choose one of those places, then you physically put the child in one of them next to another adult. That usually helps the child get redirected. If the child returns to the sensory table, you offer another chance, with a reminder about the rule.

For variety, offer a tabletop activity with shaving cream. Have a wet towel and several dry dish towels handy in a plastic bag ready for cleanup. Squirt a small amount of shaving cream in front of each child and model exploring its texture with your own fingers and hands on the tabletop. Use
vocabulary to describe what you feel and what you are doing with your fingers and hands.

Toddlers who are tactually defensive or slow to warm may be hesitant to use their hands in the bubbles. If so, offer them simple tools such as a comb, plastic fork, craft stick, or toothbrush. Anything that will make a textured line in the shaving cream will do. These children may begin with the tool and then explore with their hands.

Actively exploring toddlers will jump right in and be asking for another squirt of shaving soap in no time at all. As with all drawing or sensory activities, the adult narrates the experience, providing words to define the textures and lines and encouraging the children to make connections to other textures and lines they have previously experienced.

A few drops of liquid watercolor can be added to teach concepts of color, but the color is not an important part of the basic exploration of texture, line, and shapes that will happen when an adult narrates the experience.

**Scissors and cutting**
Most toddlers are not ready for a sharp pair of scissors until they are past their third birthday or what I have been labeling a Stage 4. Cutting can begin without structure with a Stage 1 toddler and half-inch clay snakes. When you move to cutting drinking straws, take heed: A piece cut off a basic drinking straw will fly! The movement is so engaging that this is a perfect beginning material to teach the skill of cutting. I put the straws and scissors in a small bin or sensory table to manage the mess. You might also offer cardstock strips (½-inch by 6 inches).

For children to be successful in cutting, they need to hold the scissors in the dominant hand with the index and long finger in the big hole and the thumb in the small hole. The thumb needs to be up and the hand separated so the child can cut.

**Stage 4 toddler**
Picks up the scissors and prepares to cut.

**Adult:** Helps the child hold the scissors correctly and puts the straw or cardstock strips perpendicular to the scissor blades. A noisy intake of breath or giggle is important to reinforce the joy of the newly learned skill.

**Stage 4 toddler**
With practice, learns to hold the straw as well as the cardstock strip independently.

**Adult:** Reminds the children to make the cut-up straw or cardstock go into the bin, even making a game out of it (so there will be less on the floor to clean later).

**Stage 4 toddler**
Learns to fringe 3-inch squares of paper.

**Adult:** Makes a game of cleanup. What may happen is that the toddler turns, cuts the paper or straw, and forgets it will fall on the floor. One simple game is to use a toy dump truck to load the paper into a basket at clean-up time. Cleanup can be an activity itself separate from the cutting.

**Drawing**
Another activity that works across the range of toddlers is drawing
on a large sheet of paper. You can buy butcher paper in a roll or dive into recycling bins for the brown packing paper that is wadded up as packing material in a myriad of shipping boxes. I just flatten out the brown paper and roll it up to be used later. I use the paper to completely cover a table and secure it with masking tape. This keeps the paper from shifting.

For drawing, I choose tools according to the readiness of the group of children to use the tool independently. For example, I begin any unknown group of children with large Crayola® crayons because the color flows onto the paper with a minimum of effort and skill. I vary the tools to add interest and teach Stage 3 toddlers to use markers, but I don't expect them to draw only on the paper if they are left unsupervised.

The sensory pleasure of drawing on themselves, plus the beautiful colors on their hands, arms, and even clothes are too self-rewarding for toddlers to resist. Even preschool or kindergarten children will use a marker occasionally to paint themselves. A Stage 3 toddler can be taught to match the lid to the marker, replace it, and press it against a hard surface until hearing the lid snap shut. This doesn’t mean children will always remember to do it on their own.

Write the child’s name near the marks the child is making and don’t worry that multiple children are working on the same piece of art. If Johnny wants to take his piece home, just cut off his part from the whole.

Stage 1 toddler

Stage 2 toddler

Stage 4 toddler

Gluing paper

Stage 4 toddlers will enjoy gluing small pieces of paper onto a half-size sheet of white or colored paper. You may simply save and recycle the cardstock confetti they created while learning to cut rather than taking time to make your own.

Because twisting the base of the glue stick is self-rewarding and super fun for toddlers to do, it takes a high level of self-regulation for them to stop twisting when the glue peeks above the rim of the tube. For this reason, I don’t show them the base can twist and present them with a glue stick with the glue already appropriately peeking.

Stage 4 toddler

Explores the small pieces of paper.

Adult: Removes the cap of the glue stick and demonstrates rubbing a small piece of paper across the top of the stick and then placing the piece on the half-size sheet of paper on the table. Then the adult holds the glue stick while the toddler attempts to draw the small piece of paper over the end of the glue stick and paste it, glue-side down, on the paper.

With practice, Stage 4 toddlers will master the technique of holding the glue stick while they draw the small piece of paper over it. By contrast, if you try first rubbing the glue on the larger sheet of paper, you will not get a gluing activity. Instead, it becomes a painting activity similar to using crayons, except the glue is mostly transparent on the paper. Consequently, it lacks the reward of color appearing with the movement of the glue stick across the paper. Even older toddlers don’t seem able to find the spot where they placed the glue even if they painted the whole paper. The results are that either no pieces of paper end up being placed on the larger paper, or they all fall off because the glue was dry by the time the toddler shifted to the new activity of placing pieces on top of the glue-covered paper.

Lacing board

Make simple lacing boards with pictures of animals and objects cut from magazines or printed from a computer. Glue the pictures to cardboard or cardstock,
cut around the object, and use a hole punch to punch holes about a half inch from the edges. Use colored shoelaces with plastic or metal ends.

**Stage 3 toddler**
Puts the lace down a hole.

**Adult:** Helps pull the lace through the hole and is patient when the toddler chooses holes randomly and always pushes the string down from the top.

**Stage 4 toddler**
 Begins to grasp the pattern of down-one-hole and up-through-the-next with coaching and modeling from the adult. Begins to use adjacent holes occasionally. It’s an amazing transition.

**Reading and language**
Have nearby a few board books for young toddlers and picture books for older toddlers so that listening to an adult read a book is always an option. Most teachers can read to one or two children and keep an eye on another center at the same time. Listening to books is soothing for young children and entertaining if the teacher reads with expression or allows the child to interact with the book by pointing to pictures. You can never read too often to children.

**Stage 4 toddler**
Uses simple flannel or magnetic board pieces to retell a familiar story.

**Adult:** Chooses stories with simple, repetitive storylines and simple pictures that represent the sequence of events. A story such as *Brown Bear, Brown Bear* is one children love to hear repeatedly.

Offering animal pictures for the children to place on the floor, flannel board, or magnetic board as they turn the pages of the book provides a wonderful sharing activity rich with emergent literacy skill practice. The children will mimic the pattern learned from the teacher in a shared reading where the use of these materials is demonstrated. Even at this age, children love to pretend to be the teacher and direct their peers as they place their pictures.

**Puzzles**
Stage 1 toddlers can be successful replacing the pieces on simple puzzles. They are naturals at dumping the pieces onto the table or floor and will stop at this and move on without the guidance of an adult.

Select wooden puzzles with knobs and a single piece for each hole. Between one and three simple puzzles are all you want on the table at a time for this young toddler. After the toddler turns the pieces of one puzzle onto the table, move the other puzzles beyond their reach and turn over the puzzle board and all the pieces. Use words (*turn the piece over, twist, wiggle*, for example) and gestures to coach the toddler to place a piece into the appropriate space.

If needed, guide the child’s hand with your hand. Or place the piece into the puzzle, remove it, and give it to the child to put the piece in place. Expect the child to choose putting the puzzle back together repeatedly with increasing independence before looking for a new puzzle to solve. These techniques work with all skill levels of toddlers.
**Stage 4 toddler**
Can solve puzzles up to 13 pieces inside a board frame. The child will still enjoy a one-time assembly of easier puzzles already mastered, but the puzzle is still challenging yet doable and keeps the child solving it over and over.

**Adult:** Places one puzzle for each chair at the center plus two extras to encourage choice. The toddlers will need to take turns with one another and maybe even wait for a little bit so that they have a turn putting all the puzzles together. About mid-year you can bring fewer puzzles and model how they can help one another put the same puzzle together. This will be hard for them, but some will begin to understand and have the patience to do it.

**Blocks**
There is a progression of structures toddlers build as they become more proficient in the use of blocks. Stage 1 toddlers may help build a tower, but their primary objective is knocking it down. This is so rewarding that a young toddler is seldom able to resist even with a verbal reminder from a nearby adult. If you don’t want the child to knock down the structure, then the child needs to be in another area in the room or restrained in the lap of the adult. The adult’s role is to build or help the toddler build. Wild giggles usually signal the tumbling of the blocks as the toddler repeats the destruction over and over again. Few adults can match the toddler’s attention span for this activity.

Cardboard or foam blocks are safest for this stage because toddlers’ control of their bodies often sends the blocks flying wildly and dangerously if the blocks are hard.

**Stage 2 toddler**
Can build more independently and higher. Structures are often not architecturally sound, which causes the blocks to tumble on their own.

**Adult:** Observes whether spontaneous collapse of the building is accompanied by squeals of excitement. If not, the child may be open to adult suggestions for structural designs that the child might try to stabilize the tower. Demonstrating the suggested block placement may help the child be able to use the suggestions in a structure.

**Stage 3 toddler**
Begins to build simple enclosures, or end-to-end blocks.

**Adults:** Adds small cars, dolls, or animals to be used to drive on the road, sleep on a bed, or gather inside a fence. At this stage it may still be hard for some to work on a structure with another child.

**Stage 4 toddler**
Able to give and take on a plan with an adult nearby to mediate resolution of disputes that will arise. These children will begin to use the block structures as a framework for pretend play. Their play is still associative rather than truly cooperative at this stage because they are pretending their own separate, although often similar, narratives. These children can play well nearby and some begin to tell peers what they should do. Each group of two or three children will
need a separate set of materials if you have a large group.

**Construction**

For variety in block play, consider using plastic packing foam that does not bead or crumble. This material combined with golf tees and dowel mallets make wonderful construction materials for individual and shared building.

Scavenge at furniture stores, home supply stores, or medical and science labs that receive shipments of sensitive equipment. Enlist parents to watch for the packing materials at their places of work. These pieces end up in dumpsters and landfills if we don’t rescue them for the toddlers in our care. The randomness of their size and shape adds to the creative challenge they present to the children.

**Stage 1 toddler**

Uses the mallet to pound the golf tees into the foam or simply pushes them in with fingers or hands. This is a great large-motor, eye-hand coordination activity and super engaging.

**Adult:** Pushes the tee about a half-inch into the foam so the toddler is ready to pound. When a tee is removed, it leaves enough of a hole that even a young toddler can push another tee into it. If the adult helps the child find a hole and successfully push in one tee, the toddler is able to find the hole afterward using the hunt-and-peck method.

**Stage 2 toddler**

Adds more tees to the foam before muscles tire or attention span wanes.

**Adult:** Models putting together two pieces of foam and joining them with a golf tee.

**Stages 3 and 4 toddler**

Beginning to put pieces of foam together, as modeled by an adult. The younger toddler will simply join pieces randomly together, but the more experienced toddler will create elaborate buildings even in cooperation with peers that are limited only by the amount of building materials available.

**Adult:** Offers variety of foam pieces, such as crosswise sections cut from a pool noodle (will look like wheels).

**Supporting play**

Toddlers are delightful when they are focused and working at or near their ZPD. Teachers can provide this challenge by knowing what they may appropriately expect of a toddler, preparing a toddler environment, and interacting with strategies that support toddlers’ play. Playing with toddlers can be a pleasure as you watch their skills emerge.

**About the author**

Genan Anderson, Ph.D., is professor and early childhood program coordinator at Utah Valley University in Orem, Utah. In addition to her experience as a preschool teacher, center director, and college professor, she volunteers as the toddler teacher for the Sunday service at her church.