

Sleep Well, Take Risks, Squish the Peas

Secrets from the
Science of Toddlers
for a Happier, More
Successful Way of Life

Hasan Merali, MD

Contents

INTRODUCTION:

Toddlerhood: Who is that little person, and why did they put a bead up their nose?	1
--	---

Part I: A Gold Star in Life 11

CHAPTER 1:

The Basics: Eat what you want, take naps, and run around.	13
---	----

CHAPTER 2:

Kindness: No matter what you do, I will share my stickers.	31
--	----

CHAPTER 3:

Laughter: Knock, knock . . .	57
------------------------------	----

CHAPTER 4:

Reading: Story time, all the time!	75
------------------------------------	----

CHAPTER 5:

Play: Having fun equals a better life.	97
--	----

Part II: A Gold Star at Work	121
CHAPTER 6: Teamwork: Let me help you with that.	123
CHAPTER 7: Mentorship: Show me the way, and I will work harder.	147
CHAPTER 8: Self-Talk: Encourage and guide yourself to success!	171
CHAPTER 9: Asking Questions and Saying “No!”: “No, I don’t wanna . . .”	191
CHAPTER 10: Risk-Taking and Confidence: Jumping out of this tree house is the only way I will learn if I can do it . . . and I can probably fly anyway.	217
CONCLUSION	245
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	249
APPENDIX	251
NOTES	255
INDEX	305
ABOUT THE AUTHOR	312

Introduction:

Toddlerhood

*Who is that little person, and why did they
put a bead up their nose?*

Imagine, if you will, a different type of world. You arrive at work one morning on your bright red tricycle and just as you are pulling into a parking space, someone in a Power Wheels SUV cuts you off and takes the spot. It turns out it's Frankie. He's new to the company, and you don't know him well yet. Without even a bit of frustration, you wave a happy "Good morning!" to him and find your own space much farther away from the office building. You prefer the extra exercise anyway. After you dismount from your tricycle, Lucy, who you just met a week ago, sees you in the parking lot. She runs as fast as she can toward you to greet you with a big hug. Your hair is completely messed up; your shirt is on backward for some reason; and there is chocolate smeared on your cheek from the chocolate chip pancakes you ate for breakfast. Lucy does not care. In fact she doesn't

even notice (and for that matter, neither do you). All she sees is a person with a good heart. She holds your hand and the two of you walk into work together.

Later that morning, you sit in on the quarterly finance meeting full of excitement and with a big smile on your face the entire time. Any opportunity you get, you try to make jokes, and your colleagues make even more jokes as they know you will laugh. *This meeting is actually fun*, you think to yourself. Questions fill your brain, and without a worry of how stupid they will make you look, you ask each one. Your objective is purely to understand things better, which, by the end of the meeting, you do. You have absolutely no fears about speaking your mind, and every idea you have is acknowledged by your coworkers. Over the last year, several of your ideas have propelled the company forward, but you feel you have not had an equitable raise. Without hesitation, you set up a meeting with your boss to discuss this. Your series of honest questions and remarkable confidence help her better understand your contribution, and she agrees to an even higher raise than what you had in mind. She also notes during the meeting that you are regarded by everyone in your company as the most generous and empathetic person they know. Great, now you can buy some toys for your siblings!

As you sit at your desk after the meeting, you get back to working on an important proposal that is due next week. One section deals with a particularly challenging problem that you are not sure how to solve and feel slightly frustrated. No worries, you immediately start talking to yourself from a third-person perspective to help you think through how you will complete it. It works. You successfully finish the section and are able to calm your frustration using the same technique.

Because you love exercise so much, it's difficult to be at your desk for too long, and the meeting you have at the end of your morning becomes a walking meeting. You take your lunch break later than most people today, not because you have too much to do but because you simply do not feel hungry. You eat only when you are hungry and stop when you are full, without snacking unnecessarily. You don't even feel tired in the afternoon because you didn't overeat, and you are well rested. Last night you got eleven hours of sleep and always take your scheduled nap in the late afternoon. Later in your workday, as you are walking to the supply room, you notice that Frankie is on the phone with tech support because he can't get a document from the company shared drive. You overhear him saying, "I already tried that," clearly frustrated. Now you, being the helpful person you are, disregard how he took your parking space that morning. Instead, you politely ask him to hang up the phone and then spend fifteen minutes with him fixing the shared drive issue. Whenever you see someone who needs you, you help them, no matter what.

This, my friends, is an insight into the beautiful world of the toddler mind. It is a world filled with wonder, excitement, and true happiness. A place where there is complete honesty, unflappable empathy, little judgment based on your appearance, a drive to be active and eat appropriately, and where your ideas and what you are willing to try are endless. There are, of course, things I left out of that story, such as the five minutes you spent crying and yelling when you lost your pen, the multiple injuries your coworkers sustained from coffee tables and other furniture as they jumped around believing they could fly, and how everyone in the meeting that morning pooped their pants. But focusing on the upside is the purpose of this book: to

highlight how these smart tykes can teach you how to improve your work and personal life and to generally be a better person.

How would you like to get to a point where you are generous and kind to everyone, including those who have been selfish in the past? Would you like to eat better and get your weight under control? How would you like to have no fears at work to the point where you feel comfortable asking any question? How would you like to have the ability and confidence to take more risks in your personal and professional life? I'm sure we all would, but the decades since we were toddlers have taken most of us in a different direction. It's time to go back, at least partly, to that wonderful time. You can think of this book as a reminder of a period in your life you likely don't remember well; however, it was a time when you had all those things figured out. In this book, I hope to show you why it is so important to act like a toddler.

Let's take a step back for a minute to discuss the magical time known as toddlerhood. It's a time when children take their first steps, start speaking, learn to sing, and develop their own unique dance moves. Toddlerhood starts at age one, and while the definition of when it ends varies, it is generally thought to extend to sometime when the child is three years old. This period of discovery and learning new skills blends into the next phase: the preschool phase. Preschoolers are between the ages of three and five, and it is during this time that they start to ask questions, draw beautiful pictures (at least in the eyes of their parents), and become toilet trained. It is during these two phases, when children are constantly challenged with new tasks as they learn about the world, that they demonstrate some of the best qualities we have as humans. This book focuses on

those two age ranges, and the majority of the research that will be discussed centers on children one to five years old. I mention this because, in this book, I often use the word *toddler* to encompass this age range more generally, which follows infancy (up to one year) and precedes middle childhood (after five years).

So why is it that toddlers demonstrate remarkable openness, dedication to their tasks, and unmatched curiosity? The answer is simple: Their brains are different. Early childhood is a period of rapid brain growth and development, and toddlers' brains have been evolutionarily tuned to learning, often better than adults. Neurons, or brain cells, have synapses, which are communication pathways between neurons. At birth, each neuron has about 2,500 synapses, and by age two there are 15,000. The ability of the brain to create and reorganize pathways is referred to as neuroplasticity, and it is this malleability that allows toddlers to think differently and learn remarkably quickly. Over time, however, the brain naturally undergoes a process to eliminate synapses, called pruning, and by adulthood only about half these synapses remain.^{1,2} So while you may be able to see patterns based on your experience and reach conclusions much faster than a toddler, they remain open to more possibilities, learning whatever they can in every situation.

A second major reason why the toddler brain is different than that of an adult, and hence why they behave so differently, is that they have a less developed prefrontal cortex. This area of the brain is responsible for executive control, which is what allows us to perform goal-directed behavior. Important functions such as planning and utilizing working memory to hold information in our minds while using it are examples of executive control.³ While toddlers are obviously less skilled than older children and adults in these areas, an

underdeveloped prefrontal cortex provides several advantages. For example, adults have much more selective attention, focusing only on the most relevant information. Their prefrontal cortex filters out what the brain perceives as irrelevant. Toddlers, on the other hand, distribute their attention more generally, allowing them to notice more details.

I see this best whenever I am walking with my toddler daughter, Arya. Our morning walk to day care would only take five minutes if I were alone, but with her, it is closer to fifteen minutes. This is not only due to her having small legs; it's because she notices things I don't and must stop to consider them carefully. Even though she has now done this walk hundreds of times, there is always something new she asks about. A bird call she has not heard before, the smell of wet grass after it has rained, or a cloud that perhaps looks like a bunny. This toddler-level attention to detail makes them better than adults at gathering information, which in turn makes them more adaptable to different situations.⁴

Another result of having a less mature prefrontal cortex is creativity. Unlike adults, children are much more flexible in their thinking: For example, they can see alternate uses of objects. When adults see an object, they automatically associate it with certain functions based on past experience thanks to their fully developed prefrontal cortex.⁵ Young children do not have this problem, which is why, for example, kindergarteners perform so well in the Marshmallow Challenge. In this activity, the goal is to build the tallest free-standing structure using twenty sticks of spaghetti, one yard of tape, one yard of string, and one marshmallow. When different groups have been tested, kindergartners have been shown to outperform business school students, lawyers, and most other adults. There were

only two groups that beat kindergartners. The first were architects and engineers, and the second were CEOs, but only if they had an executive administrator. CEOs alone were still beaten by the kindergartners. One of the major differences observed in how the various groups carry out the test is that adults plan the best course of action and then execute while children build multiple successive prototypes improving their design in an iterative process.⁶ The less mature prefrontal cortex can be advantageous when faced with novel scenarios. As we age and the prefrontal cortex matures, we gain executive function but lose some of the natural abilities we had to explore, learn, and be creative.⁷

Finally, young children are right-brain dominant. Rather than focusing on logic as the left hemisphere of the brain does, the right hemisphere is more emotional, nonverbal, and experiential.⁸ Toddlers show their right hemisphere dominance in many ways; they live in the moment and take risks. They will jump off tall structures, chase wild animals, and stop everything they are doing to help a stranger. They are impulsive but often in a way we can admire. They don't need to think things over for a day, discuss with colleagues, and weigh the pros and cons. They make quick decisions, and given their strong sense of empathy, they are often the best decisions. Sometimes they get injured, but their ability to steadily push beyond their physical and cognitive limits expands their range and confidence in tackling new tasks.

As toddlers get older and their brains mature, the left hemisphere engages more, and they are then driven to understand the world better. They start to ask "Why?" consistently. Since the left hemisphere has not yet balanced the right at this point, they have no fear or anxiety in asking any and every question that comes to mind,

unlike an adult who may feel the question is socially awkward or inappropriate. Learning, understanding, and engaging with people and their environment are a toddler's goals.

The adult brain, with narrowly focused synaptic pathways, a mature prefrontal cortex, and a better balance between hemispheres, has many advantages. As adults, we can plan complex tasks for the future, apply reasoning skills, and make decisions that follow a logical pattern. With this maturation, however, there are drawbacks. We lose creativity, spontaneity, curiosity, fearlessness, and an intense drive to learn and test new hypotheses.⁹ Luckily for us, neuroplasticity continues throughout adulthood. We have the ability to constantly reshape our brains so that we can improve and learn from others.¹⁰ In this book, we will explore many of the ways that toddlers are the best teachers for self-improvement.

This is a book I have wanted to write for some time. As a researcher and pediatrician who specializes in pediatric emergency medicine, I have the unique privilege of interacting with children regularly. I see them in perfect health, with overly worried new parents who bring in their baby for spit-up, and when they are just hanging on to life, like the six-year-old who was hit by a car while biking. I am also the proud father of a toddler. Some of you may also be fortunate enough to work with children or maybe you have children or grandchildren of your own. Even if you don't interact with young children regularly, or don't like children, there is a lot we can learn from them. Don't believe the images on television and in popular culture of a toddler alternately having a temper tantrum and then throwing food throughout the day. The more informal definitions of toddlers, such as "a cross between a sociopath, a rabid animal, a cocker spaniel,

a demon, and an angel,”¹¹ are also incorrect. There are many misconceptions about toddlers, and those of you who either work with them or have raised them will know better. Despite popular culture, there is no such thing as the “terrible twos” if viewed from a developmentally appropriate lens. There is no such thing as a “sugar high” or that they are all picky eaters. They are in fact incredibly gentle, loving souls and are far more advanced in their thinking and actions on many issues when compared to adults.

This is a different type of book than the excellent books about how to parent, teach, and raise your child to be happy and healthy. It is also not a book of funny quotes from children (which I love!). Instead, in this book, the roles are reversed in that I will outline many of the ways these intelligent and curious little people can teach you how to improve your work and personal lives. I will highlight a variety of interesting research studies along the way that have helped us understand how toddlers react in certain situations, and I will argue that our lives as adults would be better if we could adopt some or all of these traits.

Here, I must acknowledge the researchers whose studies I discuss in this book. Everything from the way the studies were set up to the researchers’ objective analyses was brilliant, and I enjoyed selecting the most relevant ones. And I will say the researchers had their own challenges that come with toddlers. In research, some people, or *subjects* as they are referred to, are often excluded because they didn’t meet some criteria for a study. For example, they were too young or old for a certain medication or vaccine. I found it interesting to note reasons why some toddlers were excluded from studies. These included impulse control failures, lack of cooperation, what they said didn’t make any sense, and that they tried to trick the

experimenter.^{12,13} Note that this book is not meant to be a comprehensive overview of all the literature on child psychology and development. Rather, it is a collection of some of the most important and interesting studies that highlight what we can learn from our toddler teachers. I will not go into the technical details or analyses, and I try to present the facts simply as they are in the study, with some author interpretations. Some issues may be a bit controversial, and I have noted those as well.

So let's dive in and explore the wonderful ways in which these little people think and function. In the ten chapters that follow, we will cover a wide range of topics, such as sleep, teamwork, and risk-taking. At the end of each chapter, you will also see key toddler teachings. These are actionable items you can start implementing in your personal and professional life. To summarize the entire book, I have included a sample toddler schedule at the end so you can see how this could map your schedule. Try to make use of this in your daily life as you integrate the toddler teachings.

The only other suggestion I have, if at all possible, is to observe and interact with toddlers. Many of the themes presented in this book will jump right out and you will likely discover even more ways of how thinking and acting like a toddler will help you in your life. Remember, at one time, you personified all the characteristics presented in this book. So try to go back to that and make yourself the happier, healthier version of you that you once were.

Toddlers hold the secrets to having more fun and living a fulfilling life. These are secrets we once knew and ones that a Harvard-trained physician can help us rediscover.

Terrible twos and temper tantrums are usually the first things that come to mind when people think of toddlers. But pediatric emergency medicine physician and researcher Dr. Hasan Merali has long thought toddlers are among the best people in our society and adults could do well to learn from them. These extraordinary youngsters can be impulsive, yes, but with this comes a remarkable ability to take risks and ask questions—two qualities that can help us enjoy life more. Toddlers act kindly toward strangers, are eager to work with others to solve problems and demonstrate extraordinary dedication and perseverance. These are all traits that many of us aspire to have in order to improve our personal and professional lives.

To unpack this behavior, Merali includes many examples from his experience as a pediatrician and father and draws core lessons from two decades of studies in child psychology and development. Merali connects these studies to research about adults to create the first book to offer important lessons that can be gleaned from toddlers including how to:

- **Lose weight naturally**
- **Sleep better**
- **Build stronger friendships**
- **Improve teamwork**
- **Be more productive**
- **Have more fun, and**
- **Live a more fulfilling life**

Toddlers hold the secrets to happiness and success. These are secrets we once knew and ones that are now found in *Sleep Well, Take Risks, Squish the Peas*.

