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The Giant Leap From Toddler to Preschooler – Ep. 25

Dr. Kimberly Bell: [00:00:00] Have you ever had that feeling in your stomach that you're worried about something, but you can't quite figure out what? Young children get that feeling all the time. They feel all the same big emotions grownups feel, anger, fear, frustration, but they don't have the experience to name the feeling or figure out where it came from, much less manage it on their own.

So they tell us how they feel through the way they behave. In other words, behavior is the way young children communicate. Our job as grownups is to figure out what their behavior is saying and help them learn to handle the difficult moments that are a part of life.

Welcome to the Hidden Language of Children podcast, a podcast devoted to helping grownups decode the meaning behind children's behavior.

I'm your host, Dr. Kimberly Bell, Chief of Clinical Practice, Training & Innovation at the Hanna Perkins Center for Child Development in Shaker Heights, Ohio.

At Hanna Perkins, we understand a child's behavior is communication, and we work with adults to understand it, [00:01:00] too, so they can enjoy parenting more while helping their children grow into resilient, caring, and confident people.

I'm here today with our producer, Bob Rosenbaum. Hi, Bob. Why don't you introduce our topic for today?

Bob Rosenbaum: Glad to, Kim. Thanks. So today we're comparing and contrasting to answer the question: What's the difference between a toddler and a preschooler? So if you've ever picked up a child from their first few days of preschool, you know it's not a gradual transition from one to the other.

For some children, things go great, others struggle, but I've never met anyone who wasn't surprised at how fast their toddler became a real school boy or a real school girl after just the first few days. So we're going to talk about that transition from toddler to preschooler, what's taking place and why, and of course, how to support it in ways that are loving, nurturing, and allow plenty of room for wonder, enjoyment, and fun. So first, [00:02:00] Kim, let's define our terms. Acknowledging that every child is going to develop at their own pace, what are the ages that are typically assigned to toddlerhood and to preschooler?



Dr. Kimberly Bell: Toddlerhood is called that because they are toddling, which means that it tends to start right around the time that a child learns to walk. So you're looking at 12, 13 months-ish depending on the toddler. There is so much groundwork being laid that when we finally see it on the outside, there's been a lot happening that we haven't seen going on under the surface. What I mean by that is first we have the biology of development, the getting taller, the learning how to walk, holding your head up, holding your trunk, reaching and grabbing and crawling and running and skipping and jumping.

All of those kinds of things are sort of your body biologicals. [00:03:00] Then you have the idea of toilet mastery, which we want to happen in those toddler years, right? Before preschool. We often need that to happen before preschool starts. Preschool starting at, say, age 3. So between one and three, we have a lot of biology that happens in terms of mastering your body, keeping it clean and dry, learning to wash your hands, all of those things that you're working on with a child. What you don't realize as you're doing all this very body-oriented stuff in those first few years of life is that there is a whole psychology that is happening on the inside of the child, and it doesn't really show itself until the child starts to do things like say, "No. Mine. Me do it."

[00:04:00] This beginning of language, the assertion of self, right? The putting the power of the self out there, of being a separate person, and that is a huge part of what happens in toddlerhood. And then what is once that groundwork has been established, the child sort of all of a sudden becomes what we consider to be a preschooler.

A child who is 3 who will play with friends; and who will tolerate separations from parent; can keep their parent in mind for a few hours at a time in a way that a toddler really can't. And so it looks like all of a sudden, but the every single step along the way prepares them to react the way that they react in those first few days of preschool.

Bob Rosenbaum: So toddlerhood, [00:05:00] roughly 12 months to 3 years. Preschool, roughly 3 years to 5 years?

Dr. Kimberly Bell: Yeah. Five.

Bob Rosenbaum: OK, good. And you talked about the "me do it," which of course is commonly known as the Terrible Twos. For people who have been through it with a full context and understanding of what's going on, they tend to enjoy that period more than, than I think people who are mystified by it because they can recognize that there is this internal development and this sense of self and this emerging sense they want to be independent even though they have almost no facility to do so.

Dr. Kimberly Bell: Yeah, and so that is the basis for the progression in Hanna Perkins from doing for, doing with, to standing by to admire, right? As you're coming out of the infancy phase, you're doing so much doing for, and the toddler phase is so much doing with.



And so that means tying shoes and getting dressed and what part of bathing can they manage, [00:06:00] and handling maybe handling diapers to the extent that they can independently, changing them standing up, offering the potty. And so it's a very intensive parenting time emotionally, because at the same time, there's increased pushes to be independent at times when the toddler can't.

They have access to new aggressive feelings that they don't have any control over, and so they rely on your emotional resources far more than even they did in infancy, right? Infancy is a lot of care and sleepless nights. Toddlerhood is a lot of emotional aspects of self, a lot of pushing and pulling. "I want to be independent. I need you now." And those things can happen minute to minute to minute.

And so it's called the Terrible Twos because they dysregulate so quickly emotionally, and it takes so much time and [00:07:00] effort for the parents to be constantly loaning out their resources to regulate them over and over and over again throughout the day.

It's a tough time. Yeah.

Bob Rosenbaum: Yeah. It is. It is. And what about their understanding of other people and the world around them?

Dr. Kimberly Bell: I know people will disagree with me, but toddlers will play with others in a parallel play kind of way, right? They will participate with others. They're not doing cooperative necessarily, hand things back and forth, whatever it might be. But toddlers will always prefer their parents.

If they have to choose between doing something with mom or dad or grandparent or, doing something with a peer, they're going to choose the parent, right? This is a child who is sitting in your lap being read to, who is, um, wanting you to play games, who will take a toy that they're playing with, um, [00:08:00] across the room and walk over and hand it to you.

Just hand it to you, and then you hand it back, and then they walk away. So there's this preference for being with the parent and no real investment in developing other relationships, and I think that we overestimate toddlers wanting to do that.

Bob Rosenbaum: It sounds like inside they're moving toward this ability to recognize the independence of others and their own independence and agency, but what they know is the 100% care that they received as an infant. So their knowledge of what happens in the world hasn't caught up yet with where their brain is taking them.

Dr. Kimberly Bell: Yeah, there isn't a capacity to perceive the larger world. That doesn't even really happen 100% till kindergarten. There's a lot that happens. You know, the years between 1 and 5 are dense with development.



Every minute of [00:09:00] every day. That's why sometimes parents will be like, "Well, should I get flashcards? Should I get this? What should I do?" And I'm like, "Don't, just live." Do you know what I mean? Just live with intention. Like, every single day gives you 100 teachable moments. You just don't know it.

You're just doing the thing called parenting, but you don't really recognize how dense your time is with a child and so yeah, there doesn't necessarily have to be like, "Oh, I have to teach them."

Now, if you have a child who has a developmental difficulty, a cognitive difficulty, a physical difficulty, it may become more intentional on a day-to-day basis because some of their limitations are causing that development to, uh, need more conscious attention, if you will.

Bob Rosenbaum: OK. We've outlined toddlerhood. We haven't gotten into a whole lot of detail, but we've outlined what's going on there. Let's talk about what's going on in a preschooler. Ages 3 [00:10:00] to 5.

Dr. Kimberly Bell: So , when you hit 3-ish, you have had an explosion of communication verbally.

So you now have many, many, many words, and you can express yourself, and you can also often express feelings in words. Angry, frustrated, happy, sad, mad – those kinds of things have meaning to you because your brain has developed to a point where when your parents said to you, "I know you're feeling really mad," and you're like, "Oh, this is what mad feels like? OK, now I have a word for this feeling that I'm having that's called mad," right?

So you have enough of this experience banked up by 3 that you are drawn more towards the outside world. What are these different relationships? My relationship with my mom is different than my relationship with my dad, and my mom and my dad have a different [00:11:00] relationship, and I have brothers, and I have sisters, and I have uncles, and I have aunts, and I have grandparents.

These all begin to take on more depth of meaning, and so does, "I want to be like an adult." And so there is the beginning of identifications. So when a new let's say, a new baby is born, at first it's going to be my baby, and I'm going to mother it the way my mother mothers, right? There's this identification and trying on of roles that happens, and then they start to not feel so strongly about the baby because th- they realize that's not really their baby, is it? And it takes a lot of attention away from them, and it's not very fun to play with, quite frankly. And so then you get the experience of what we call ambivalent feelings or two-way feelings. So this is all much more complex than in a toddler, and that makes them more ready to [00:12:00] question things in the outside world.

So when they go off to preschool, they have a new relationship called teacher. And they learn what that is. And then they learn how to play cooperatively with other children. You can't just take something, you have to share it. You have to ask for a turn. You have to wait your turn.



And you start to learn things like, I don't know, maybe your numbers and your colors and counting and, all of these cognitive skills start to come up to prepare you for kindergarten, which is when the body really shifts for a time from this emotional, physical development of self into this cognitive sponge that's ready to learn math and science and all kinds of cool things like that.

Bob Rosenbaum: It's no coincidence that children go to preschool at the very moment that their brains are getting ready for this new view of the world and the new understanding of what's going on [00:13:00] around them.

Dr. Kimberly Bell: Well sure, because school was developed around the needs of children, right? If you think about old-timey days when all the children were in the same classroom in small groups, right? Every age maybe was in a classroom. You start to notice what does this age need versus this age and the ages tend to clump together, and that's how our educational system was developed.

So it's not magic.

Bob Rosenbaum: So we're at a point in time here in the 21st century where preschool is becoming universal. It's not quite there yet, but the concept of universal preschool and free preschool for everybody is pretty well accepted. And then there's the toddler programs.

If you know you're going to send your 3-year-old preschool, and if you know that a toddler is still clinging to mommy and still very not yet their independent self, why bother with a toddler group?

What are they going to get out of that?

Dr. Kimberly Bell: OK, so let's, let's differentiate childcare from educational [00:14:00] experiences. OK? So in most childcare settings, you're there as a replacement caregiver because somebody has to work, right? And it's an all-day thing, and you get dropped off, and you separate whether you're ready for it or not. And that's not a criticism, that's a reality in our world, and there are ways to do it and do it well.

That's just not the topic today. The topic today is a preschool and a toddler program, and those two things are very different, first, from childcare. Usually, preschool is half a day, and toddler programs are maybe only an hour and a half. Many programs work on separation in toddlerhood. It's not my favorite thing to do.

I prefer for toddlers a parent and child experience that's like an hour and a half long because what you're doing is you are leveraging your [00:15:00] relationship to introduce your child to what's coming in the future in a smaller way. So if we take a toddler to a gym class, and we stay in that gym class, and we participate in that gym class, you have a brief introduction to what a teacher is, because there's a teacher in that class.



You have an introduction to sharing, but you're right there to help them do it. You have the child seeing the parent's enjoyment and learning to enjoy it. You see the parent investing in the teacher and listening to the teacher and learning from the teacher, and then you copy that.

You don't learn it because there was a teacher there. You learn it because the teacher was there with your parent, who then shared it with you. And so it's like a pairing of your chosen individual with their trusted adult. [00:16:00] And in times when we've talked about how to introduce a babysitter, it's the same thing, right? You do it gradually, and you let your child know that you trust this person, and they are your agent, right?

And so toddler groups offer mini-preschool experiences that will mirror preschool, but it's short, and you stay with them. And that way, when they do start a preschool program, mentally, cognitively, and emotionally, they are taking you with them from their previous experience. It's not a brand-new experience for them come preschool.

Bob Rosenbaum: All, all sorts of things are at least familiar to them.

Dr. Kimberly Bell: Yeah

Bob Rosenbaum: They've been through it before, albeit not alone. But it's

familiar and they know what to do or they can absorb what to do.

Dr. Kimberly Bell: It's like, oh taking attendance is not new. Talking about the weather every day is not new. Having transition [00:17:00] time between group play and individual play is not new.

Really in the simplest terms, they've had practice, but within the safety of your relationship with them. It's a beautiful thing.

Bob Rosenbaum: A little bit earlier in this conversation, you mentioned separation. And we know that preschool is a big first test of separation, and it can be tough. Some kids just fly right through it, and some kids don't. Where does separation come in the toddler stage?

Dr. Kimberly Bell: Separations are very short. So let's talk a little bit about what happens during separation, 'cause this is something that's hard for an adult to wrap their head around.

When you say to a child, you know, "You're going off to school, I expect X, Y, and Z behavior from you," right? "I expect you to learn. I expect you, I expect you, I expect you." That's wonderful. I love, I love when parents set up expectations, like, "Here's what I expect when you're away." But the brain power of a toddler [00:18:00] cannot keep that in mind for very long. It doesn't play on a loop in their mind while they're grabbing a toy from somebody else if you're away from them.



And so the need for the parent to be there sets up there's lots of different words for it... we call it an object representation, but other people just call it an internalized image. It's that, that thing that all adults have. If you were-- if I were to ask you right now, Bob, bring to mind some of your mother's words, or what would your mother think of what you're doing right now?

You have this whole relationship with your mother in your head that you can call on at any time, right? That has to develop. That does not just exist from the beginning, and toddlers' brains just don't have the strength of memory to keep that in mind. A lot of their memories of their mother at toddlerhood are still very [00:19:00] biological, sensory.

They're not words. They don't have their mother's voice in their head because they don't have enough language to have those kinds of memories. That's getting really technical. You'll just have to trust me. And so when they are 3, they have more of those in their mind so that when they do go to school, they can say, "Mommy does it this way."

"Mommy brushes my hair this way." And that is what keeps us safe during separation, is the knowledge that they come back, is the repetition of them leaving and coming back, and leaving and coming back, and leaving and coming back, so that now I can trust that moms always come back, right? Dads always come back.

And some kids just don't have as many of those at 3 as other kids, and so some kids are like, "See ya, Mom. Outta here," and other kids are terrified, and [00:20:00] that's separation anxiety. And so preschool, believe it or not, is really originally developed not for cognitive development. It's really developed to be preschool, right? The thing that comes before school.

So this is the time where you get used to being away from your parent. You manage the separation anxiety. You learn to sit in circle time on your own. And then kindergarten, when your brain is really super primed for learning, is when you take those skills from preschool and you turn yourself into an elementary school kid, a kindergartner, and then a first grader.

And so separation anxiety is natural, and normal, and typical, and there is a lot of disagreement about what to do with it. But certainly here at Hanna Perkins, we have strong feelings about the fact that we can't just distract and deny. We need to be able to [00:21:00] help kids by gradually transitioning the amount of time that they're away from their parents at any given time.

Bob Rosenbaum: So let's elaborate just a little bit on that distract and deny. That's the instinct that parents have when their dumpling is having an uncomfortable moment.

Dr. Kimberly Bell: I understand that Hanna Perkins is unusual in its separation process. But when we have kids going, you know, we have toddler group where they are together, and then in preschool, parents start in the classroom for maybe, I don't know, a week, maybe two.

They're in the classroom with their child, and they only stay an hour and a half, two hours, and then the parent goes into the waiting room, and the child can come and go and touch base. And



then the parent goes on what we call going on a walk, where they leave the building for a half an hour, and then they come back.

And then as the child masters that, then the parent leaves for, like, a full hour and a half, and then the child's day gets extended [00:22:00] until they're there for a full preschool day. OK? That is very intentional, and not everybody can manage it. But if you take that and you at least talk about the feelings and recognize the feelings, right?

Remember, at Hanna Perkins, kids can get through anything that can be talked about. So if you don't have a program that offers that, you can make sure you have other things. Your child carries a picture of the two of you together.

You can create a book that has pictures of you going through your day. This is mommy at work. This is daddy at lunch. This is, you know, this is what everybody's doing so that they can bring you to mind internally by looking at a picture and knowing what you're doing, or they can make a phone call, or they can write a letter. These things do not play into a problem. They help a child build the internal visual and word-based memory of their parent and hold onto it throughout the [00:23:00] day.

Bob Rosenbaum: ... as opposed to distract and deny, which would be dropping off the little one at preschool, the preschool teacher gets them involved in blocks and you sneak out the back door

Dr. Kimberly Bell: Sneak out the back door.

Yeah, parents disappear. Don't love that

Bob Rosenbaum: And what do-- s- some people, some kids are going to be fine if that happens others less. What does that-- What's the dynamic do? What does that create?

Dr. Kimberly Bell: Here's the thing. If some kids manage it, some kids foreclose on it, which means they just get into learned helplessness about it. But if they've gotten into learned helplessness about it, you'll know that when you go to pick them up because they'll be super mad at you in lots of different ways.

Like, they'll be like, they'll make you wait, they'll tell you they don't want to go. Like, they just get they're cranky when you get there, and you're like, "Oh, they like school more than me." Nope, they're mad 'cause you left in the first place. They waited on you all day, now you're going to wait on them kinda thing.

So it depends on the individuality of the child, [00:24:00] but some kids, it, there are several reasons. One, if something has happened in their life that has made the world less trustworthy or simply they are of a temperament that is very sensitive and they are easily overwhelmed by the



outside world, and mom's not there to help emotionally regulate the way she usually is, right? Or dad.

There are lots of things that make children's responses to separation different. If you're having a struggle, you just need to reach out and get help, not because you're not doing it right, but because child development specialists can help you understand what's uniquely going on with your child.

I've learned this recently, Bob, I'm really into this concept now, where you can read all the books you want that give you tools for parenting, right? And if you don't understand why you're implementing those tools, they aren't going to work, because you're going to feel like [00:25:00] you don't know when to implement which tool and why isn't this tool working?

But it, but talking to a developmental specialist allows you to understand your child. What is child development? How is my child developing? And then the tools to help your particular child come to the surface as "Oh, that's why that wasn't working, and that's why this thing will work."

So it doesn't say anything about the way you were raised, the way your parents parented, the way you parented your previous children.

This is just a unique human individual who is going through intense amounts of development in their first five years of life, and we have to be the flexible ones when we are helping them become a functional human beings.

Bob Rosenbaum: Yeah. Nurturing them through from one step to the next in the way that's going to be most effective for the child, that [00:26:00] lets them do things at the pace that works for them, at a level that they can understand so they can choose to separate rather than have separation thrust upon them.

Dr. Kimberly Bell: Yeah.

Bob Rosenbaum: So as we're talking about this, I'll mention that if you live in the Cleveland area, Hanna Perkins offers its own toddler group called First Steps Together that's unlike any other that we know of in this area. Children love it, but it's not just a simple playgroup. It's structured 90 minutes twice a week for the toddler and parents or caregiver and they do it together, and it's led by trained child development specialists to accomplish two important things. First, it helps parents or caregivers understand and practice the things that we've been discussing here today and provides them with the words and tools to support their children through toddlerhood and into preschool. Second, toddlers get to experience the transitions, [00:27:00] the excitement, the sharing, the waiting, and following instructions, all of the everyday stuff that they're going to face when they start preschool, and this way when they start, it's not new to them. They learn to manage the challenges alongside somebody they know, trust, and love; and it sets them up for a positive preschool experience, whether they end up in the Hanna Perkins Preschool or somewhere else. So if you're interested in that program and you're in



the Cleveland area, you can get more information from the Hanna Perkins website at hannaperkins.org. That's H-A-N-N-A P-E-R-K-I-N-S. All right, Kim, you want to take it from here?

Dr. Kimberly Bell: Sure. So if you have any questions about parenting or child development, we are always happy to answer them. You can send questions by email to hiddenlanguageofchildren@gmail.com.

Thank you for joining us. We hope you enjoyed this conversation and found something to take away from it. The Hidden Language of Children podcast is a production of the [00:28:00] nonprofit Hanna Perkins Center for Child Development in beautiful Shaker Heights, Ohio.

Our producer is Bob Rosenbaum, and Dan Ratner is our consulting producer. If you like this podcast, please subscribe to hear future episodes, and share it with your family and friends. Again, we are happy to hear from you. You can contact us at hiddenlanguageofchildren@gmail.com. For more links and information about our approach to healthy child development, visit us at hannaperkins.org.

I'm Dr. Kimberly Bell, and we will see you next time.