

Toddlerhood

Toddlerhood is one of my favorite periods of childhood development, and not just because you can finally enter them in beauty pageants. (Don't worry, they do get used to the fake teeth.) *Toddler* is a term used to describe children ages one to three. Babies and toddlers are mostly what I've been exposed to at this point. I'm hoping parenting just gets much easier after this. It does, right? I know this is a book and I can't hear you, but I'm going to take your silence as a yes.

I used to wonder why I had hair on my legs, but now I know it's for my toddler sons and daughters to pull themselves up off the ground with as I scream in pain. Based on my experience, a baby will start walking at around eleven months ... I think. Oh, jeez, I don't remember. I just know they start walking before they ride a bike and start smoking. All healthy babies eventually walk, but we treat those first steps like someone has just risen out of a wheelchair at a healing revival. "He's *walking*! It's a miracle!"

I guess walking is sort of impressive after ten months of just lying around. Actually, they don't immediately walk or even toddle. They "cruise" or hold themselves up with furniture in search of the hardest and sharpest surface to bang their head on. When they finally let go and take a few steps, it's more of a stumble or a stagger,

like they are a drunken old man or a zombie extra from *The Walking Dead*.

What amazes me is that once they actually learn to walk, they are immediately trying to get away. You just say, "Time for a bath!" and they scoot away like they have an escape car outside. I don't know where they think they are going. They can't even reach the doorknob. I am always like, "What are you doing? You only know *us*! Think it through!" They've only been on the planet for twelve months, and they can't really go stay with a friend or check into a motel, but that doesn't stop them. It doesn't matter if they don't have a plan. They are just trying to leave.

Once your baby starts to walk you'll realize why cribs are designed like prisons from the early 1900s. This is clearly because toddlers are a danger to themselves. The main responsibility for a parent of a toddler is to stop them from accidentally hurting or killing themselves. They are superclumsy. If you don't believe me, watch a two-year-old girl attempt to walk up stairs in a long dress. It looks like a Carol Burnett sketch. Also, toddler judgment is horrible. They don't have any. Put a twelve-month-old on a bed, and they will immediately try and crawl off headfirst like a lemming on a mindless migration mission. But the toddler mission is never mindless. They have two goals: find poison and find something to destroy.

Toddlers love toilet paper. I mean, I love toilet paper, too—who doesn't? Even the most devout conservationist can't live without their toilet paper. "Reuse! Recycle! Wait ... What? We're out of toilet paper? Chop down that forest! Fast!" But toddlers love toilet paper for all the wrong reasons. They have no idea what it is for or how to use it, but they are passionate

about a nice, big, fresh roll of toilet paper. They love to play with it, wear it, eat it, and, especially, unroll it. Leave a toddler alone in a bathroom for five seconds, and they somehow unroll three hundred feet of toilet paper with supernatural speed. Then you walk in and bust them, and they just look at you like, "What? This stuff is obviously for me, right? It's right at my eye level, and it's the most fun thing in the house." All the geniuses at the Fisher-Price laboratories have yet to develop something as fun for a toddler as a ninety-nine-cent roll of toilet paper. Unfortunately for me, whenever this unrolling happens, it's always the last roll in the house. Have you ever tried to reroll an entire family-size roll of toilet paper? I just leave it in a big, undulating pile next to the toilet. I'm not going to throw it away. After all, it is still toilet paper.



I reckon a two-year-old is on the loose in these parts.

After toddlers make the evolutionary leap to *Baby erectus*, you still end up pushing them in a stroller or carrying them most places if you'd like to reach your destination in the next decade. Fifteen-month-old Michael loves to run around, yet he always wants me to carry him everywhere in my sling. He is huge, but I can hardly feel my back breaking when I walk around with Michael in the sling because of the attention that he draws from everyone we encounter. I call Michael a "gateway" baby. Even people who don't like babies or children melt around his sweetness and charm. Michael makes the crabbist New Yorkers smile. It's like I'm carrying the heaviest ventriloquist doll ever, but the routine is in gibberish.

The interesting thing that happens when walking around with a baby strapped in front of you at adult eye level is the baby acts like he thinks he is the one walking around and you are just this weirdo strapped to his back. He starts to have "conversations" with adults that you encounter. When babies move away from just the *mama-dada-baba* sounds, they start to make sounds that *could* be words, but they're not. It's the seriousness with which they deliver their baby talk that is the most entertaining. Michael's babble is delivered with the intensity and cadence of an Obama speech. People are compelled to respond in kind, but then Michael will just look at them like, "That's not what I said at all, you moron."

They make up for it when they turn two and they just start *talking*, and I mean talking all the time. It's as if all of those things they wanted to say before just come jumbling out in a whirlwind of botched sentences. They can't pronounce anything. "I wan pahk go down yittle swide eat apoo." I'm like, "C'mon, learn English. This

is America, for God's sake!" When Katie was two, her English was so bad I thought she might be al-Qaeda. Some of this may have been because when I dressed her in a baby burka, she looked kind of suspicious.

Toddlers, for some reason, are always out of breath. They always sound like they have traveled by horseback for hours in order to deliver important news. "Mommy, Mommy, Daddy, [*breath, breath, breath*], I need to tell you something [*breath, breath, breath*] ..." This news is so important, parental titles are unimportant. "Daddy, Mommy, Daddy! I need to tell you ..." I'll chime in, "Yes, yes. What is it?" By that point, it will be apparent by the look on their face that they have completely forgotten what they even wanted to tell you. "Um ... can I have some juice? I mean, I wet my pants." Toddlers also love to tell you secrets, especially when you are wearing a white shirt and they've been eating chocolate.

Everyone with a toddler has had that embarrassing moment when their kid will innocently yell a word in public that sounds like a really bad grown-up word. Once when two-year-old Jack was playing swords in the park with another boy, he yelled, "I'm gonna hit you with my big stick," but using the *d* sound instead of the *st*.

When Marre was two, I was in line at a crowded New York City grocery store, and I gave her a sippy cup of *juice* in a futile attempt to stop a meltdown. She bellowed at the top of her lungs, "I don't like jews!" Thank God, we live in New York City and my family looks like Hitler's fantasy. Otherwise, that would've been pretty awkward.

Jeannie has often described two-year-olds as at the peak of cuteness. For some reason, everything a toddler

says is adorable. Maybe it's the squeaky voice. Maybe it's the made-up words: "Lasteday I had pesketti." or "It's waining! Can I bring my unclebrella?"

They can talk, but they can't exactly follow logic. Dr. Harvey Karp, author of *Happiest Toddler on the Block*, calls it the caveman phase. I've never known a caveman, but I guess that makes sense. You can't really reason with a two-year-old. There is a lot of redirecting: "Okay, instead of playing with the scissors, let's play with the ball. No, the hanging wineglasses are not a ball. Here, sit in this crib." Two-year-olds don't understand consequences. "If you keep taking off your shoes in the cab, you will lose your shoes!" Then you realize that's the point. They are trying to lose their shoes. That's why they are taking them off. The only consequences are for you. You will have to get them a new pair of shoes. Toddlers are adorable, but taking care of them doesn't really get easier. Whoever came up with the term "terrible twos" must have felt very foolish after their kid turned three.

Three-year-olds are just rude. They are still supercute, but now they are supercute *and they know it*. They have gotten supersmart, and they are not afraid to show it. It's like living with a child emperor. They act really entitled, bossy, and outspoken. They think the world revolves around them. I realize I'm describing myself, but somehow it works better for a three-year-old.

Recently I took my three-year-old, Katie, to the post office. As we were walking into the post office, a lady was walking out and stopped and smiled at little Katie. Katie took her thumb out of her mouth, looked the lady up and down, and said rudely, "What are *you* doing here?" This wouldn't have been so awkward, impolite,

and funny if we knew the woman. We had never met or seen the woman before and didn't even know someone that looked remotely like the woman. In Katie's three-year-old world, this was an appropriate response to someone smiling at her.

Katie still sucks her thumb at three years old. When she was two, everyone told us that she would stop when she was three, but she kept on sucking her thumb. She is our third child and our first thumb sucker. Thumb sucking brings with it so many mixed emotions. There is that immediate fear that somehow we have failed her. That she is sucking her thumb because she doesn't get enough attention or she wasn't nursed long enough. The reality is that she probably gets more attention and has better parents than our first two kids. Still, why the thumb? Am I worried that one day the thumb will be replaced by a crack pipe? Yes. Is that likely to happen? No.

Thumb sucking is adorable in many ways. When Katie is angry, she uses the thumb sucking as an exclamation to emphasize her point. "I'm not taking a bath ... [*insert thumb*]." When she has a stuffed-up nose, it is incredibly comical to witness her attempt to suck her thumb and breathe at the same time.

Of course, we've tried to stop her from sucking her thumb. We put some nasty goo on her thumb that she quickly got used to. She found a way to wipe it off and sucked the thumb with twice the vigor. We tried telling her to stop sucking her thumb because she was a big kid now, but that only made it more special and prompted Katie to do the double-handed thumb suck. She holds a protective hand over the hand that has the thumb being sucked. With the double-handed thumb suck, she still only sucks on one thumb, but it looks like she's playing

a tiny harmonica. She then proceeds to hum quietly to herself as if to express her contentment with her thumb. We call this the thumb hum. At this point, I'm tempted to tell her to just start a toddler folk band.

Now that we have a new baby, we have been advised by our pediatrician that "she's only three" and to just let her suck her thumb so she can decide on her own when to quit. I wanted to put her on that thumb replacement patch but Jeannie said we should wait until she is four. Everyone knows that a thumb sucker at age four is destined for prison.

Toddlers are too cute to punish. They get let off so easy. They can behave abominably, but what's the worst thing that can happen to them? A time-out? Big deal. All I want to do is take a time-out. I was recently watching a football game with Katie, and the announcer said, "The Jets have asked for a time-out." Katie saw the quarterback talking to the coach and asked, "Why did he get a time-out?" I thought for a second and then just said, "Because he didn't listen to his daddy."

You don't have to worry about anything as a toddler. You don't get punished, everyone spoils you, and you have no job. You are treated like a king. I always say to my toddlers, "Enjoy it while it lasts! It's all downhill from here."

The more I'm around young children, the more I realize we are all just giant toddlers. I think we are always unconsciously seeking to return to our early childhood. This is why we go to bars. Now that I have little children, going to a bar is a completely different observational experience. Many bars have a dartboard, a pool table, and various board games. There is music, dancing, and singing along to karaoke. There are Jell-O shots, for God's sake. Think of the last two times you

had Jell-O. When you were three and when you were in that bar in Florida for spring break. Have you ever turned off the lights in a room filled with children? They immediately start screaming and acting insane. Is it merely a coincidence that lights are so low in bars? It's just a license for adults to misbehave.

We go to bars so we can behave like children, toddlers, really. Have you been to a bar at two in the morning? You might as well be picking up a kid at nursery school. It's the same experience. The behavior's the same. In both places, there's always some stranger yelling for no reason at all, "Whooo hooo! Wheeee!" or someone climbing up on a table and getting into trouble with the authorities. In both places, people break into song: "Sweet Ca-ro-line, Oh oh ohhh! Everybody! Oh oh ooo, Old MacDonald had a farm, E-I-E-I-OH!" You go into the bathroom at the bar and it's obvious some people aren't potty trained. In both places, there's usually someone crying, "She was my best friend! But not anymore! I want my mommy." Occasionally, a fight will break out: "He was standing where I wanted to stand. So I punched him in the head. I want more juice." Nursery schools and bars at 2 a.m. are the only places where it is completely normal if someone just spontaneously throws up on the floor ... and just like a toddler, the bar patron wakes up the next day not remembering or caring how they behaved.