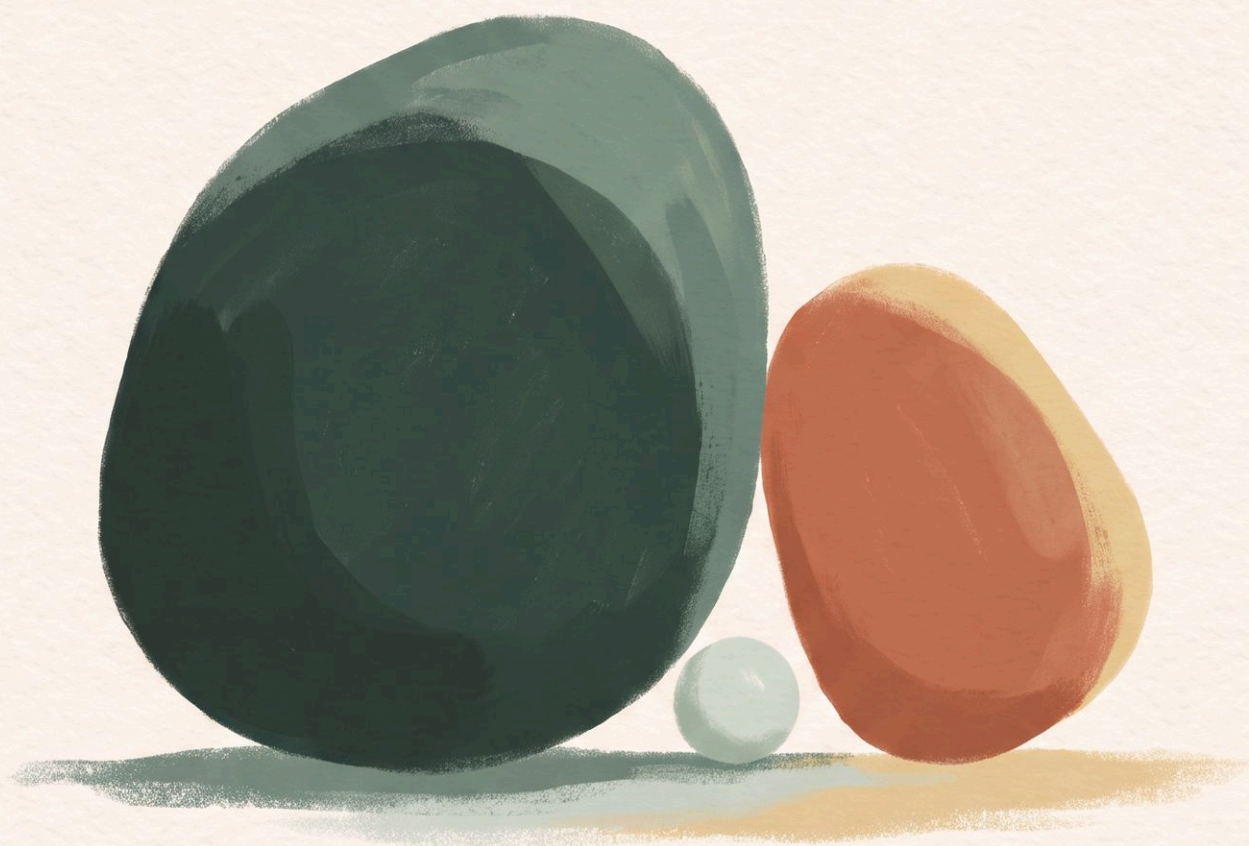


Small & Steady

The Toddler Play & Conversation Plan

FOR AGES 18–30 MONTHS · THE GUIDE

Six small moves, and the hard parts too, for the day you already have.



Contents

	Right now? The page for hard moments	3
	Before you start A letter, and our promises	4
	Start here The whole plan on two pages	5
1	The six steady moves What to do, and why	7
2	Nine everyday anchors A card for each routine	22
3	Big feelings Meltdowns, limits, goodbyes, repair	42
4	Everyday life Sleep, food, 5:30pm, other kids, screens, a new baby	50
5	The four-week starter One focus a week	61
6	When it doesn't go to plan Seven common snags	66
7	The roadmap, and when to check in What shifts, worries about talking, when to get help	68
8	Skip this, avoid that What to let go of, mistakes worth avoiding, safe-home sweep	74
9	Everyone who cares for them Including you	81
	Evidence notes Every source, with its limits	85

Page numbers are links. Also in your download: **Phone Cards** (22 cards for the moment you're in) and **Print Pages** (fridge sheets, toy rotation, caregiver sheet, word banks, notes and keepsake pages).

Find your page

For the hard moments. Tap the page number.

They're melting down

Stay safe, close, few words, wait.

p.44

We have to leave (the park, the bath, the house)

Warning, a job, a choice.

p.46

They hit, bit or threw something

Hurt child first, then short and calm.

p.47

Drop-off tears

Short goodbye, always say it, come back.

p.47

Bedtime is a battle

Same routine, boring returns.

p.51

They won't eat

You choose what, they choose how much.

p.55

It's 5:30 and everyone's falling apart

Snack, ten minutes together, then dinner.

p.56

The tablet fight

Warning, timer, next thing ready.

p.58

They're sick, hurt or choking

Who to call: 911, Poison Help or your doctor.

p.73

I'm about to lose it

Make them safe. Step away. Breathe.

p.48

I'm worried about their talking

Count, call, and what happens next.

p.71

I'm worried about other development

What to watch for, and who to call.

p.69

Something's been swallowed or tasted

Poison Help: 1-800-222-1222. Emergency: 911.

Before you start

You already talk to your toddler all day. You narrate the grocery run, sing in the car, and read the same book about a bus until you could recite it in your sleep. That counts, and it's more than you think.

This isn't another activity library. It's the opposite: the short list of things worth doing on purpose, so you can stop worrying about the rest. We read 34 studies and the current guidance from the AAP, CDC, WHO and US dietary guidelines, and boiled them down to six small moves used inside the routines you already have, plus straight answers on the hard parts: meltdowns, bedtime, food and nutrition, other kids, screens, safety, the mistakes worth avoiding, and your own very tired self.

Everything here is for your child. The way it's written is for you: short, specific, and built so you can open one page in the middle of a real day.

OUR PROMISES TO YOU

No extra hour. Everything fits into meals, baths, walks and bedtime.

No guilt. Some evenings the TV is how dinner gets made. That's family life.

Nothing to score. No charts, no streaks, no way to fall behind on this plan.

Honest research. Most studies of toddlers show links, not proof. The evidence notes say which is which, for every study.

What we can't do is promise your child will talk sooner or hit any milestone early. What we can give you is everyday ways to connect and talk, and a clear page on when it's worth asking for more help. If something is worrying you, that alone is a good enough reason to call your pediatrician.

Start with the next two pages. They're the whole plan. If you're reading this in the middle of a hard moment, the page after the contents is for you.

Small & Steady

The whole plan *on two* pages

Six moves. Use them inside routines you already have. That's all of it.



1 Follow their lead

Join whatever your toddler is already into, instead of steering them toward what you had in mind.



2 Take a turn, then wait

Say one thing, then leave a pause long enough for your toddler to answer in whatever way they can.



3 Add one step

Say back what your toddler said, with one or two words more.



4 Name the invisible

Put words to what your toddler can't see or touch: feelings, what happened earlier, and what comes next.



5 Notice the effort

Describe what they did and how they tried. For everyday helping, a real thank-you beats a prize.



6 Clear the stage

For the few minutes you play together, make the space calmer: fewer toys out, the TV off, your phone out of reach.

Take a turn, then wait



Say one thing, then leave a pause long enough for your toddler to answer in whatever way they can.

Conversations with toddlers work like a game of catch. You throw, you wait, they throw back, even if the “throw” is a point, a squeal or a look. The waiting is the part adults skip. Five seconds of silence feels like an hour, so we fill it. Hold on. The reply usually shows up right when you were about to give up.

Answer everything they send your way as if it were a sentence. A point gets a word. A grunt gets a reply. In one study that followed babies from 9 months, children whose mothers responded quickly and meaningfully to what they did and said tended to reach language milestones, like first words and two-word phrases, sooner.

10 years

In one study that recorded families at home, toddlers who had more back-and-forth exchanges at 18–24 months had higher language scores about ten years later. That’s a link only: chatty toddlers also get talked back to more. But waiting for a reply costs nothing, and it’s a lovely way to connect.

Gilkerson et al., 2018

WORTH KNOWING

If your toddler rarely responds to you even with lots of patience, doesn’t usually look when you call their name, or rarely points to show you things, mention it to your pediatrician. It isn’t a parenting problem, and asking early is always fine.

What it looks like

INSTEAD OF

× “Do you want milk? Milk? Here’s your milk.”

× A running commentary that never stops.

× Missing a point because you’re mid-sentence.

TRY

→ “Milk?” Pause, and look at them expectantly. They reach. “Milk!”

→ One short comment, then a pause.

→ Stop and follow the point. “Plane! Up high.”

THE EASY HABIT: ANSWERING YOUR OWN QUESTION

We ask, pause for half a second, and answer for them. Everybody does this. Next time, lean in, raise your eyebrows and wait about five seconds. Watch their face, not the clock. If nothing comes, say the word yourself and carry on. There’s no failing.

TRY THIS TODAY

At one meal today, pause after you say something and watch what your toddler does with the space.

IF YOUR TODDLER...

...don’t answer

Make answering easier: hold up two things to point at, or sing a song they know and stop just before the last word.

...get upset while you wait

Skip the pause when they’re hungry, tired or hurt. Never make them work for food or comfort. Save the waiting for calm, playful moments.

...point more than they talk

Name every point. The things toddlers point at tend to turn up as spoken words a few months later. Name each one.

STRETCH IT · 24–30 MONTHS

As sentences arrive, the turns get longer. Listen to the whole thing, pause, then answer what they meant. See if you can keep one topic going for three or four turns.



Breakfast p.24



Getting dressed p.26



Out and about p.28

WHERE YOU’LL USE IT



Move & explore p.32



Helping p.34



Bath p.36



Books p.38



Bedtime p.40

Research: Gilkerson et al., 2018 · Tamis-LeMonda, Bornstein & Baumwell, 2001 · Ferjan Ramírez, Lytle & Kuhl, 2020 · Iverson & Goldin-Meadow, 2005. Details and limits in the evidence notes.



ANCHOR 7 OF 9 · EVENING

Bath



Two cups, warm water and ten minutes of their full attention.

Bath is one of the few times in the day when your toddler stays in one place, your hands are free, and nobody's phone is within reach. You have their full attention, and they have yours.

SET UP

Two cups of different sizes. Maybe a sponge. Put the other bath toys away for tonight.

SAFETY

Stay within arm's reach, eyes on them, for the whole bath; a toddler can drown in a few inches of water, silently. If the phone or doorbell goes, lift them out and take them with you. Bath seats and rings don't make it safe, and older siblings can't be in charge. Test the water with your wrist or elbow before they get in (if you can, set the water heater to 120°F/49°C; renters can ask the landlord), and you work the taps. Empty the tub as soon as you're done.

MOVES IN ACTION

Follow their lead. Watch what they reach for first and start there, even if it's the plug chain.

Take a turn, then wait. They pour, you pour, then pause and watch their face before you fill the silence.

Add one step. "Wa-wa" becomes "Water! Warm water." "More" becomes "More water!"

(tips the cup out)
Uh-oh!

Uh-oh! All gone. Empty!

wait... watch their face

More!

More water! Big cup.

*(pours, splashes,
laughs)*

Splash! Big splash. Wet hands!

...just want to splash

Splash with them and name it: big splash, little splash, fast, slow. Following their lead means the plan is working.

...aren't using words yet

Your turn can be a sound or a pour. Watch for their answer: a look, a point, a laugh. Each one is a turn, so answer it as if they'd spoken.

...are tired and it's a battle

Skip the cups tonight. Wrap them in the towel and play "Where are your toes?" Two minutes of that counts.

...want the same game every night

Good. Repetition is how words stick. Keep the game and change one small thing: a new cup, or one new word.

STRETCH IT · 24–30 MONTHS

Offer choices you control: "Duck or boat?" Ask which cup holds more, then test it together. Talk about next: "After bath, pajamas and a book."

WORDS TO USE ON PURPOSE

full

empty

in

out

under

over

big

little

more

all gone

one, two, three

warm

wet

WHY IT WORKS

In one lab study, 2-year-olds didn't learn a new word when their mother's teaching was interrupted by a short phone call. It was a single short session, but it's a nice reason to enjoy bath as a phone-free pocket. The small words on this card are worth using on purpose too: in one study, toddlers who heard more size and shape words (big, tall, round) used more of them themselves.

Reed, Hirsh-Pasek & Golinkoff, 2017 · Pruden, Levine & Huttenlocher, 2011

In the moment: safe, close, few words, wait

1. Safe

Move them, or whatever they're throwing, away from danger. Hold a hand that's about to hit. That's the only urgent job.

2. Close

Stay near. If they push you away, sit a step back where they can see you. You're not leaving; you're waiting.

3. Few words

One short line, said once or twice: "I'm here." "You're so mad." "I won't let you hit." No reasoning, no lecture, no bargaining.

4. Wait

Let the anger burn out. When the crying turns from angry to sad, that's your moment: arms open, a cuddle if they want one.

WHAT IT SOUNDS LIKE

*(on the floor) Noooo!
My cookie!*

You're so mad. You want the cookie.

sit close... wait... say less

(kicking, crying)

I'm here.

the crying turns sad

(arms open) Come here.
That was a big feeling.

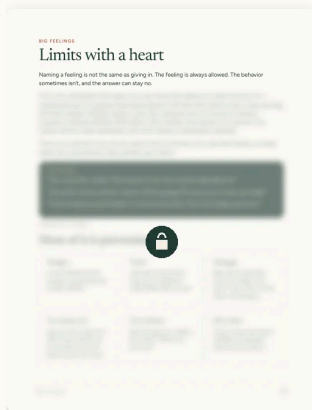
AFTERWARDS

Afterwards, keep it short and warm. Name what happened in one sentence ("You were so mad when the tower fell"), give a hug, and move on. Don't make them apologize on cue or talk it all through. The lesson is that big feelings pass, and you stay.

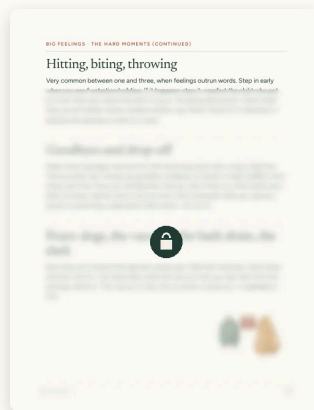
THAT WAS THREE OF THE BEST PARTS

Here's what's waiting in the full guide

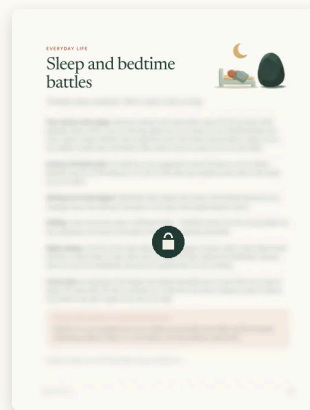
You've read one move, one routine card and the meltdown page. These are some of the other 84 pages.



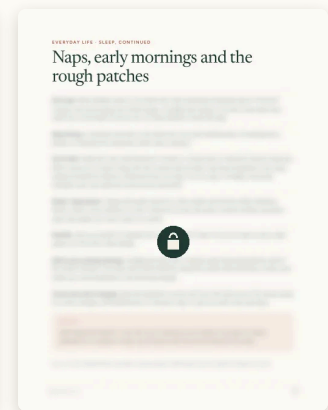
Limits with a heart: holding the no without a fight · [p.45](#)



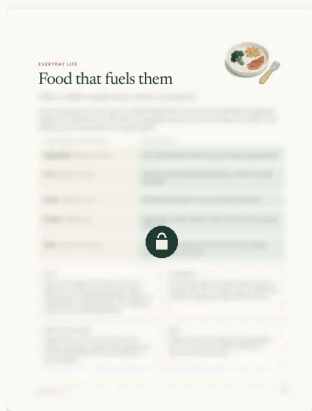
Hitting, biting, drop-off tears and new fears · [p.47](#)



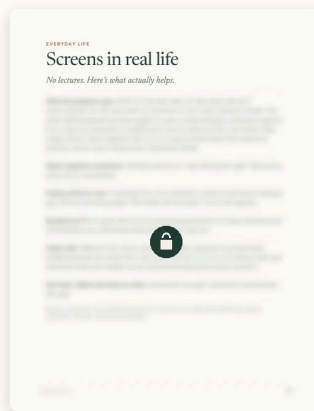
Sleep and bedtime battles · [p.51](#)



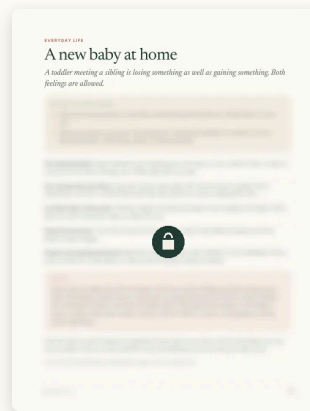
Naps, 5am wake-ups and sleep regressions · [p.52](#)



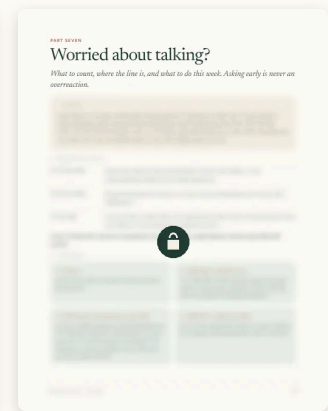
Food that fuels them: the toddler plate, iron, vitamin D, milk · [p.53](#)



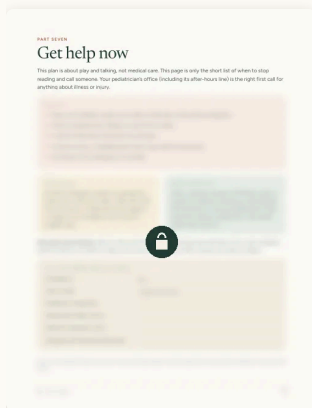
Screens in real life (AAP 2026) · [p.58](#)



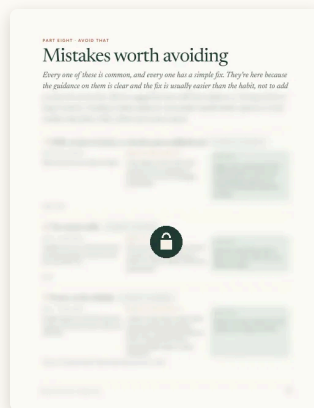
A new baby at home · [p.60](#)



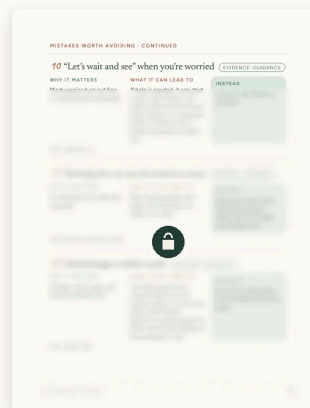
Worried about talking? The exact line, and what to do this week · [p.71](#)



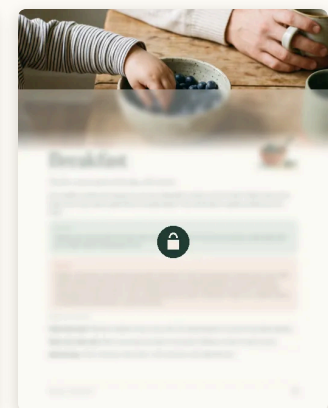
Get help now: who to call, and when · [p.73](#)



12 common mistakes, and the simple fix for each · [p.76](#)



The 15-minute safe-home sweep · [p.79](#)



8 more everyday anchor cards · [p.24](#)

Why parents get the full plan

You don't need hundreds of activities. You need a few good patterns.

We read 34 studies and 26 pieces of official guidance (AAP, CDC, WHO, US dietary guidelines, FDA, safety agencies) so you don't have to, and turned them into one plan that agrees with itself from page to page. It starts with talking and play, then covers the everyday things that get in the way: big feelings, sleep, food, screens and safety basics. All of it fits inside the time you already spend together. No supplies, no extra hour, no subscription.

- ✓ The 94-page Guide
- ✓ 9 everyday routine cards with scripts and safety
- ✓ Sleep and naps, nutrition, the 5:30 stretch, screens, a new baby
- ✓ Who to call, and when; a safe-home sweep
- ✓ 6 moves, each with what to say and what to swap
- ✓ Big feelings: meltdowns, limits, hitting, drop-off, fears
- ✓ 12 common mistakes, each with its simple fix
- ✓ 22 phone cards and 8 print pages for the fridge and caregivers

\$49.99, one time

Instant download. Yours to keep and share with everyone who looks after your child.
smallandsteady.com

