The terrible twos and threes: your child’s behavioural development

Children go through different behavioural stages as they grow and develop. It can be useful to know the sorts of behaviour that might be coming up.

If you have concerns about your child’s development, discuss your concerns with your child and family health nurse.

Babies and toddlers (up to 3 years old)

In the first three years, your child is developing all sorts of new skills and abilities, which all have an influence on the way that they behave.

Your child will start to copy their peers and to take turns with others when they’re playing. You child is developing their independence, but balancing that with staying close to you.

Preschoolers (4–5 years old)

By preschool, your child is developing an understanding of social rules and greater empathy. At the same time, you can expect to see an increase in prosocial behaviour (for example, offering to share food) and a decrease in any aggressive behaviour.

Common early years behaviour

There are some common challenging types of behaviour that you might experience with your child. These include whining and pestering, tantrums, biting, and swearing.

Parents feeling concerned about their child’s behaviour is quite common and peaks when your child is around 3 years old.

Whining and pestering

Whining and pestering are common in early childhood and can be challenging, but are not usually cause for serious concern.

Tantrums

Tantrums are a natural part of growing up and not usually cause for serious concern. Typically, they start to diminish naturally once your child reaches 3 years and older.

Biting

Biting behaviour and its meaning change with age, ranging from testing new teeth and exploring reactions when your child is a baby, to behaviour that corresponds with the peak in tantrums.

Swearing

For most young children, swearing is a way to get a reaction from adults and can be successfully managed by ignoring the behaviour.

If you are feeling frustrated or angry about your child’s behaviour, or it’s worrying you so much that you’re skipping activities and outings, it’s a good idea to talk to your child and family health nurse or GP about things that you can do.