

## Normal toddler development: owning body and mind



IM Pretorius, PhD & DPsych

Anna Freud Centre

Centre for young  
people

1

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

## Contents

1. Definition of toddlerhood
2. Separation-individuation
3. Owning the body
4. Aggressivity and ambivalence
5. Language acquisition
6. Object constancy
7. Shame and empathy
8. Play

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

## 1. Definition of toddlerhood

- begins when an infant takes his first faltering steps (around 1 year)
- this maturational development ushers in a surge in development towards separation and autonomy
- by 3 years, the toddler has usually built up stable images of mother (parent) and self

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

### Passion and conflict

- tension between wish for autonomy and need for security
- egocentricity
- passionate period: exuberance and frustration, conflict, tantrums, "terrible twos"
- tremendous changes internally and externally: sense of individuality, increasingly complex emotions, walking, talking, toilet mastery

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

### Psychosexual Stages

- oral: birth-1 ½ years
  - mouth is main area of excitement
- anal: 1 ½ -3 years
  - bowel and bladder are main areas of excitement and interest
- phallic: 3-6 years
  - genitalia are main focus of excitement and interest
- because baby relies on others, body pleasures and anxieties
  - rapidly acquire a social character
  - teach the baby what to expect from relationships

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

### 2. Separation-individuation

Separation: child's emergence from an almost fused state with mother

Individuation: child's assumption of his own distinct and individual characteristics

paradox: occurs through child taking on individual characteristics from mother from whom a sense of separateness must be achieved

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

### Practicing ± 10m – 18m

- walking allows greater awareness of being an entity
- child engrossed in practicing motor, vocal skills
- joy, exuberance and excitement
- early maturation of reticular brain systems and SyNS
  - responsible for excitation and hyper-arousal
- toddler darts away from mother wanting:
  - reunion: reassurance that mother wants him back
  - distance: fears engulfment from mother
- mother is home base for “emotional refueling”

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

### Rapprochement ± 18m – 30m

- new skills taken for granted: emotional issues reassert themselves
- awareness of separateness → “separation anxiety”
  - shadowing and clinging behaviour
- mother often thinks toddler has regressed
  - emotionally trying time for mother and toddler
- sadness and affects related to aloneness and loss
- tantrums, moodiness, “terrible twos”
- later maturation of PaNS
  - responsible for dampening of mood

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

### 3. Owing the body

- mother’s task: transfer her ownership of toddler’s body and needs to toddler
- mother’s own early conflicts are mobilised by child’s psychic experiences → threat of partial regression
- mother’s attitudes to child’s impulsive and messy behaviour influences child’s ultimate cleanliness and personality growth

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

Observation of a mother's conflict about weaning:  
Nick (2y 6m) and his mum

Nick's mum, another mum and I were discussing breast-feeding. Nick's mum spoke about her tiredness and resentment of Nick who demanded feeds at night. She said he was a "leech" in her bed and that she pushed him towards his father during the previous night. I said it sounded as if she was ready to wean him. She agreed with this, but said she felt so guilty, he was so healthy and his health might decline if she stopped breast-feeding. She said she was not working and so could continue to feed him.

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

- toddler's task: move from being cared for, to self care
- mother is usually target of the child's conflict
  - mum feels helpless, angry, drawn into child's conflict
- toddler's angry and pleasurable contrariness can be considered an attempt to
  - establish and confirm separateness as an individual
  - gratify wishes
- notices gender difference, discovering the body, masturbation → anxieties

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

### Toilet mastery

- 2<sup>nd</sup> year toddler is more able to recognise and control sensation in bowels and bladder
- signs that toddler is ready to toilet train
  - interested in cause and effect
  - awareness of standards and cleanliness
  - wish to emulate parents
- unwise to start until child is ready
  - child will feel acute shame and anxiety if fails to meet expectations

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

Optimal: toilet mastery

- mother encourages
  - toddler to participate and take responsibility
  - identification with parents
  - wish to be clean
  - reaction formation of disgust
- toddler does not tend to regress

Not optimal: toilet training

- mother assumes responsibility for reading child's inner signals and does not expect child's participation
- toddler tends to regress

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

Observation of conflict about toilet mastery:  
Nick (1 y) and his mum

Nick's mum spoke to me about his constipation. Nick stood holding his mum's leg and began to moan and cry. Nick then crawled under the trampoline, moaning intermittently. He got stuck and began to make louder grunting sounds of distress. The toddler assistant lifted the trampoline and helped him free himself. He moved towards his mother who said he is defecating. She said he has great difficulty passing stools and is often constipated for days. His stools are often hard and painful to pass. She said that she sometimes has to "actively help him". When I asked what she meant, she that she uses her hands to remove his faeces.

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

#### 4. Aggressivity and ambivalence

- aggressivity arises from instinctual forces and impingements
- essential for development of self and capacity to separate and individuate
- developmental task: cope with aggressivity in ways that serves toddler's personality growth

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

### Toddler's aggression towards parents

- mum is main focus
  - separating from mum
  - aggression around bodily care, eating
  - easily switch from hugging to biting
  - sadistic teasing of mum (sadistic impulses enjoyed without conflict: only feel conflict once reaction formation of pity and empathy develop)
- child is afraid of own aggressivity because
  - eradicates his love for parent
  - less because he fears retaliation (although retaliation is frightening)
  - no clear distinction between internal and external, reality and fantasy

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

### Parent's aggression towards toddler

- very frightening to child
- implies loss of love
- accentuates child's aggression
- does not give incentive and hope that child can achieve more self-control as gets bigger

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

### “No”

- toddler feels omnipotent, enjoys messy, noisy, powerful behaviour, resents being controlled
- parent's “No” typically unleashes tantrum
  - “No” is felt as assault on omnipotence, threat of loss of parent or parent's love
- child feels overwhelmed, out of control, anxious
- needs continuous presence of adult to help regain composure, regulate affects

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

### Love binds hate

- aggression mastered in context of a loving relationship: parent who can manage child's anger without feeling narcissistically wounded, retaliating or denying negativity, offers a model to deal with ambivalence
- child wishes to identify with parent, repair, reaction formation of pity
- parent helps toddler master aggression by
  - reminding child of his loving feelings when he feels angry
  - recognising ambivalence i.e. co-existence of love and hate
- aggression is not mastered through
  - verbalisation or differentiating thoughts & actions (although NB)

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

### Healthy use of aggression for self-defence

- becoming independently self protective requires:
  - internalisation of parent's valuing and protecting child's body, feelings, functions etc
  - accurate assessment of reality
  - sufficient control to choose appropriate form and amount of aggression

### Pathological aggression

- not due to aggressive tendencies themselves, but lack of fusion between aggression and love

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

### Observation of unbound aggression: Brian (2y 5m)

Mother and I went to fetch Brian from his nursery school class. As she approached him, he recoiled and then ran away. When she caught up with him, he started kicking and hitting out. She became immobile and seemed frightened. Brian's teacher told him gently to stop kicking and helped him calm. Once in the therapy room, Brian climbed on his mum's lap and made loud noises that disrupted our conversation. I said he is feeling angry that I am talking with his mum. He slid off her lap and threw a car against the wall. His mum said in an anxious voice "Oh no, there he goes again! Come Briany, be mummy's sweet baby". I said that it is dangerous to throw things. Brian started kicking me and tried to bite and scratch me. I said it's alright for him to feel very cross with me, but I would not allow him to hurt me.

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

### Father's role

- parental relationship: attitudes towards their own and each other's sexuality affects how toddler integrates his gender into his sense of self
  - father foster's daughter's femininity
  - father encourages son to identify with him
- the "third" in the mother-child relationship
  - offers a different perspective
  - helps set the boundaries
  - can diffuses intensity of mother-child relationship

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

### 5. Language acquisition

- in order to use symbols, child must achieve
  - separation
  - representational space
- the word or symbol re-presents the object within the space of representations (the mind)
- consciousness is linked to language
- that which is not linked to word is not conscious
  - it may be enacted, lived or dreamed
  - It cannot be spoken or thought about

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

### Language allows union

- allows new ways of being with - present or absent - others
- permits new model of mental relatedness through shared meaning
- allows individual to narrate own life story
  - with potential for changing view of self
- naming affects is a way of limiting them, it allows
  - mastery of affects and impulses
  - feeling of security
  - capacity to delay gratification

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

### Language leads to alienation

- language is always an approximate, incomplete
- unbridgeable gap between
  - actual world of things, feelings and experiences
  - and the re-presented world
- much of primary experience probably goes unmarked, or is misrepresented
- language leads to alienation and discontinuity of experience

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

### 6. Consolidation of individuality and object constancy: end of 2<sup>nd</sup> y

- achieve definite individuality
- internalise parental functions: regulatory functions, moral values and empathy
- mother and father perceived as a separate people that exist in the outside world and in the mind
- achieve some object constancy: establish mental image of, and retain an emotional tie to person (mother) regardless of frustration or satisfaction
  - allows some separateness and independence

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

### 7. Shame and disgust Concern, empathy and guilt ± 3<sup>rd</sup> y

- essential affects that help socialisation
- develop from experience with parents and others
- involve actual or fantasised experience of being observed: implies awareness of separateness
- partly motivated by fear of losing parent's love
- inducing too much / little can lead to pathology

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

### Shame and disgust

- child expects amplification of positive affect but receives a facially expressed disgust response  
→ affective missatunement → regulatory failure
- child still unable to auto-regulate  
→ propelled into an intense low arousal state
- represent a rapid transition from pre-existing high arousal of the sympathetic nervous system (SyNS) to low arousal of the parasympathetic nervous system (PaNS)
- eventually child auto-regulates by accessing internalised images in parent's absence

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

### Concern, empathy and guilt

- child can only develop concern and empathy if it is shown to him
- guilt: the experience in fantasy or fact of one's effect of causing damage or distress to another
- crucial for mutual play
- early manifestations of shame and guilt
  - running away
  - attempts to kiss mother better
  - offer mother titbits of food to placate her

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

Observation of fear of loosing the parent's love:  
Jack (2y 6m) and his mum

Jack grabbed all four breadsticks. His mother suggested that he give one to Meg (2y 1m) who looked at them longingly. Jack shook his head to indicate "no" and continued to stuff the breadsticks into his mouth. His mother appealed to him again, saying that he needed to share and Meg wanted a breadstick. Jack shook his head. His mum threatened to take a breadstick away if he did not give one to Meg. Jack clutched the last breadstick more tightly and stuffed it into his mouth. I said "perhaps Jack can share next time". The group assistant fetched more breadsticks for Meg. Jack left his chair and walked to his mother. He laid his head on her lap and remained immobile. His mother touched his hair and said in a soft tone "Yes Jack, I am not pleased with you". Jack remained there a while, before starting to play.

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

## 8. Play

- is fun and allows learning
- creative way of mastering anxiety through actions
- child becomes the master instead of the subject
- helps child come to terms with the past
- elaborate fantasies and imagination
- gives the right shape to the future: allows a "happy ending"

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

### Typical play of toddlers

- sensory and manipulative eg water or sand: allows messiness
- blocks and towers: mastery and control
- hide and seek: reassure self that things do not disappear when out of sight
- entice parent to chase: ensure that parent wants child
- medical kit: overcome fears of visit to doctor
- dressing up: experiment with roles

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

Observation of mastery through play:  
Jim (2y 2m) and his mum

Jim got on the tricycle and pushed himself forwards. He turned the handlebars sharply and toppled onto the floor. Mother called "are you OK". Jim seemed shocked, but did not cry. He mounted the tricycle again and drove more slowly across the room. He turned and rode across the room again. When he reached the place where he had fallen, he rolled off the tricycle, flinging his arms in the air. This fall seemed intentional. Mother called "are you OK!" Jim got up smiling and said "fine". He mounted the tricycle again and drove around the room, this time a little faster. When he got to the place of the "accident", he flung himself off the tricycle again, this time more dramatically. Jim got up and laughed. Many were watching Jim and laughing with him. His mother called out again and he reassured her that he was "fine". He repeated this game of simulating an accident, for more than 20 min.

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---