

# Harms of Removal Across Stages of Child Development

## Toddlers (1-2 years old)

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*The information provided below is intended to assist Washington State courts in identifying potential harms to children resulting from involuntary separation from their family of origin through the child welfare court system. This purpose is in alignment with current shelter care statute which acknowledges that removal from a parent is itself a traumatic event that can cause lasting harm (i.e., “harm of removal”), and requires courts to weigh that against the threat of the alleged abuse/neglect.<sup>1</sup>*

*Courts should use this material as general background to inform their understanding of the potential developmental impacts of family separation. It is essential, however, that this information be applied only in the context of each child’s unique circumstances and not as a substitute for fact-specific analysis. This guidance should not be used to assess an individual child’s developmental functioning, make assumptions about parental capacity or the safety of the child in a parent’s care, or justify delays in reunification or continued out-of-home placement absent case-specific evidence supporting such decisions.*

## Developmental Milestones<sup>2</sup>

During the second year, toddlers are moving around more, and are aware of themselves and their surroundings. Their desire to explore new objects and people is also increasing. During this stage, toddlers will show greater independence; begin to show defiant behavior; recognize themselves in pictures or a mirror; and imitate the behavior of others, especially adults and older children. Most toddlers are also able to recognize the names of familiar people and objects, form simple phrases and sentences, and follow simple instructions and directions.



Center for Disease Control (2021). *Positive Parenting Tips: Toddlers (1-2 years)*.  
<https://www.cdc.gov/child-development/positive-parenting-tips/toddlers-1-2-years.html>

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<sup>1</sup> RCW 13.34.065(5)(a)(ii)(B)(III)

<sup>2</sup> Developmental milestones are things most children can do by a certain age. Children reach milestones in how they play, learn, speak, behave, and move (like crawling, walking, or jumping). Developmental milestones are things most children (75% or more) can do by a certain age. [National Center on Birth Defects and Developmental Disabilities, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/developmentaldisabilities/)

# Harms of Removal

## Physical Development

Children at this age are learning important skills to move and control their bodies. They use these skills to explore and experience their world by walking, climbing, dancing, eating, and interacting with others. Toddlers need familiar adults around them to feel safe while exploring and trying new things. If they are suddenly taken away from their parents and put into foster care, it can seriously affect their physical development and might even cause them to lose some of the skills they have learned. Specific harms of removal to physical development that toddlers may experience include, but are not limited to, the following:

**Toxic Stress:** A sudden change in environment and primary caregiver is very stressful for toddlers because they have little control over what happens to them. Being separated from their family by child welfare can be unpredictable and confusing, which causes ongoing stress for the toddler. This constant high stress is called "toxic stress" and can change a child's brain chemistry, brain structure, and even gene expression.

Toxic stress in childhood is caused by severe, prolonged, or repetitive hardship without the needed care and support from a known caregiver to prevent an abnormal stress response. Children who face abuse and neglect not only deal with difficult situations but also suffer from the harmful effects of toxic stress. A toddler cannot adequately communicate or understand what is happening to them or why - which further adds to the overall stress they experience.



It should be noted that children involved with dependency courts have already experienced some kind of maltreatment that prompted their entry into the child welfare system. Growing up in a home where there is abuse or neglect can also result in toxic stress. **Unfortunately, the court system often recognizes the effects of abuse and neglect while underestimating the serious, cumulative impact of the toxic stress caused by parental loss and continued family separation.** Courts have historically been asked to only focus on the maltreatment experienced by the child, which has made it easy to wrongly assume a child's distress will be eliminated when they are removed from the home.<sup>1</sup> It is the responsibility of the entire dependency system to respond in developmentally appropriate, trauma-informed ways that maintain and support the relationships in the child's life that help buffer against the negative impacts of toxic stress (e.g., consistent, frequent family time visitation), regardless of the causes of the toxic stress. Here are some harmful effects of toxic stress on a toddler's developing brain and nervous system:

- Weakens the structure of the developing brain, which can lead to **lifelong physical and behavioral problems** like obesity, heart disease, COPD, diabetes, depression, anxiety, suicidal thoughts, and behavior issues.<sup>2</sup>

- Affects the child's **thinking, learning, and memory**, leading to behaviors perceived as negative and difficulty controlling emotions.<sup>3</sup>
- Increases sensitivity and reactivity to their surroundings, including **worsening behavioral issues** often seen during the "terrible twos." These issues are sometimes wrongly blamed on the parents or misdiagnosed as psychiatric conditions. If not addressed, the child may show more psychological stress, leading to more disruptions in their placements and additional problems.<sup>4</sup>
- Undermines progress in **eating, sleeping, and toilet training**, causing temporary setbacks and delays. The child might have trouble sleeping, lose their appetite, be overly alert, show inappropriate boundaries, and have issues with incontinence and toilet training.

**Food & Eating Habits:** The disruption of familiar routines and caregiving can have significant impacts on toddlers' eating habits and nutritional intake. Toddlers are often accustomed to specific foods, feeding routines, and the presence of familiar adults who know their preferences and dietary needs. **When they are placed in a new environment, such as foster care, they may encounter unfamiliar foods, different meal schedules and new eating utensils**, which can lead to a loss of appetite, picky eating, or even refusal to eat. Further, when the relationship with culturally-specific foods is disrupted, it can lead to a dislike of those tastes/textures simply because they're not as familiar with them as they grow. The emotional stress of separation can further affect their eating behavior, with some toddlers possibly eating less due to anxiety or confusion. Ensuring continuity and sensitivity around the toddler's diet is crucial to their physical and emotional well-being during this difficult transition.

**Breastfeeding:** Many young children continue to breastfeed beyond their first year of life. Breastfeeding has numerous health benefits for children's cognitive and physical development.<sup>5</sup> Removal creates significant barriers to breastfeeding and often results in toddlers having to transition to synthetic formula or solid foods sooner than they would have if they had remained with their family of origin. This sudden disruption in diet can cause toddlers to experience problems with their digestive and immune systems.<sup>6</sup> In addition, breastfeeding is more than just a method of getting nutrition. It is also a familiar source of closeness and comfort, which can make the sudden absence of it incredibly dysregulating for toddlers - especially during times of distress when they are seeking comfort. Even in cases where substance use exposure through breastmilk is a concern there are effective harm reduction strategies that can be taken to make breastfeeding safe.<sup>7</sup>

**Maltreatment in Foster Care:** Foster care is meant to provide a safe and caring environment for children who have been taken from their biological families because of abuse or neglect. However, it's important to recognize that abuse can and does still happen within the foster care system. This kind of abuse is especially harmful because it happens to children who are already vulnerable and in need of protection. Abuse in foster care can lead to long-term problems, affecting a child's behavior, emotional well-being, and ability to form healthy relationships. Toddlers are not able to fully comprehend or verbalize that maltreatment is occurring, which increases their vulnerability to experiencing this type of abuse.

While our understanding of the abuse and neglect that occurs in foster care is relatively limited, one prominent study of foster children in Oregon and Washington State found that nearly **one third reported experiencing maltreatment** by a foster parent or another adult in a foster home.<sup>8</sup> It should be noted that this reporting included both reported and substantiated reports of abuse and/or neglect.

**Likelihood of Injury:** The injuries that toddlers often experience are usually due to normal behaviors for their age, such as being curious, active, and interested in exploring their surroundings. At this age, their mobility increases, but their curiosity is greater than their ability to assess risks. The environments around infants and toddlers greatly affect what they do, how they feel, and how they interact with others. These environments influence young children more than older children and adults because they can't change their surroundings or move to another space.



When toddlers are placed in unfamiliar environments, like a foster home or a new daycare, they need time to explore and adjust. During this adjustment period, they may be more likely to have accidental injuries.

## Emotional Development

Toddlers rely on familiar adults to learn how to control their emotions, especially when they are tired or frustrated. They look to their parents for guidance and seek comfort from them when they are upset or scared. Because toddlers depend on these adults to help them manage their emotions, being separated from their family can severely disrupt their emotional development. Specific harms to emotional development that toddlers may experience as a result of removal include, but are not limited to, the following:



**Loss of Perceived Safety:** Toddlers rely on familiar people, environments, and routines to regulate their emotions. Their world depends on predictability, and any changes can make them feel insecure. **Sudden changes in environment and routine can make toddlers feel unsafe, even if they are actually safe.** When removed from their parents, toddlers lose their main source of comfort. They need familiar adults to feel secure, even in situations of abuse and neglect. When toddlers don't feel safe, their ability to use the higher functions of their brains, like learning, self-control, and abstract thinking, can be greatly affected.<sup>9</sup>

If a child needs to be removed, providing safe opportunities for frequent, meaningful family time visitation in the least-restrictive, most family-like setting possible is a major way that court systems can help support the emotional regulation of toddlers, along with encouraging and supporting consistent contact with other non-caregiving adults in the child's life. However, even the highest quality family time possible does NOT completely mitigate the harms of removal. The trauma of family separation is still likely to impact the ability of toddler age children to feel safe when visiting parents and the anticipation



of another separation (i.e., end of the visit) may cause significant distress in these young children.

**Developing Sense of Empathy:** During this period of development, toddlers also start to develop empathy. They react strongly to the emotions of their primary caregivers and might try to comfort them by patting, making sympathetic noises, or offering objects. Toddlers can feel their parents' distress, which makes removal and subsequent transitions to and from court-ordered family time visitations especially traumatic.

**Ambiguity in Roles and Relationships:** Toddlers are starting to understand how they fit into their family and community. This understanding helps them develop their view of the world and themselves. Being removed from their home disrupts this process and their sense of self. It can also make it hard for them to understand "stranger danger" and create challenges when they have to move between different households with different rules, expectations, communication styles, and relationship structures.

If a child needs to be removed, clear, consistent, developmentally appropriate language should be used to communicate and clarify roles and relationships with toddlers on a repeated basis throughout the life of the case, especially during times of transitions (e.g., removal; family time visits; trial return home).

**Maladaptive Internal Monologue:** During the early toddler years, children start developing their internal dialogue — the inner voice that accompanies them daily. This inner monologue is crucial for human thinking and awareness. As they learn language, children gain the ability to think and reflect internally, influencing their perceptions, attitudes, problem-solving, decision-making, and behavior.

However, experiences like removal from family and separation profoundly affect a child's inner voice. These disruptions can harm the development of basic cognitive skills and how they see the world. **Each time a child is moved to a new place due to foster care, feelings of loss, shame, grief, guilt, and rejection grow stronger, damaging their attachments and worsening their traumatic experiences.** Children in foster care often face these issues due to family disruptions and moving between multiple foster homes, leading to more mental and physical health challenges.



**External Locus of Control:** "Locus of control" refers to how individuals perceive the causes of their experiences and what influences their lives. Every child develops a perspective on the world. Those with an internal locus of control believe they can influence their own destiny. In contrast, those with an external locus of control think that outside forces and events shape their lives. Children who

go through traumatic separations may develop an external locus of control because of the unpredictability and lack of control in their situations. This means they are more likely to attribute what happens in their lives to fate or other people, rather than feeling they have significant personal agency or control over their circumstances. An external locus of control is associated with a wide variety of negative outcomes for children including decreased academic achievement and social competency.<sup>10</sup>

## Social Development

The relationships children form in their early years are crucial for their overall development, shaping strong brains that support well-being, learning, and behavior as they grow. Toddlers mainly develop social skills through play, often engaging in parallel play where they play near but not directly with other toddlers. This type of interaction is the starting point for learning how to cooperate with others. Specific harms to social development that toddlers may experience as a result of removal include, but are not limited to, the following:

**Disruption of Foundational Relationships:** For toddlers, early relationships are essential for laying the groundwork for lifelong learning and growth. **Every young child has an inherent need for the caregiving environment provided by their biological parent(s). When the environment is determined to be unsafe it is the system's responsibility to offer resources and supports to ensure the safety of the caregiving environment.** Foundational relationships are critical for a child's future development, health, and well-being.<sup>11</sup> In their early years, toddlers form multiple foundational relationships with all their caregivers, which provide stability and support for their health, development, and overall well-being.

The sudden absence of these foundational relationships during early childhood can significantly impact a child's social development and learning in the following ways:

**Parents:** The parent-child relationship is crucial in a child's early years, shaping their socio-emotional development, identity, sense of self, and opportunities for social interaction.<sup>12</sup>

**Siblings:** Removal from home due to abuse or neglect not only separates children from their parents but can also disrupt or end sibling relationships. Siblings play an important role in helping children understand others' emotions, thoughts, intentions, and beliefs.

**Secondary Relational Connections:** These are strong emotional bonds that children form with caregivers beyond their primary relationships. This includes extended family, close friends, pets, daycare staff, medical or dental providers, and other trusted adults. These secondary connections are vital for nurturing a child's sense of security and emotional stability in social interactions.

**Cultural & Community Fragmentation:** Cultural heritage plays a crucial role in binding communities together and shaping a child's sense of identity and belonging, which are key to their social development. **When children are taken away from their homes, they often leave behind their cultural roots**, entering new environments with unfamiliar values and traditions. This disruption can harm community unity by limiting children's chances for meaningful social interactions, involvement, and education within their own cultural community.



## Cognitive Development

During the toddler years, children experience rapid brain growth and neurocognitive development. They learn about their surroundings and how to engage with them, which helps shape their basic understanding of the world. Toddlers often spend time exploring objects and repeating actions that produce expected or desired outcomes, like stacking and knocking over blocks. At this stage, they also start recognizing themselves and using words like "I" and "mine" to refer to themselves.



Toddlers learn by imitating others, underscoring the significance of forming strong bonds with trusted adults. Mastering object permanence is a crucial achievement for toddlers as it advances their memory skills. Through play and exploration, toddlers realize that objects and people persist even when they're out of sight, sound, or touch. When toddlers lack access to known adults due to absence or disruption, it can greatly hinder their learning and the development of fundamental cognitive abilities. The harms of removal to the cognitive development of toddlers may include, but are not limited to, the following:

**Separation Anxiety:** Toddlers can remember their loved ones mentally even when they're not around physically, but they often feel anxious about how long the separation will last. When toddlers experience separation anxiety, **part of their fear comes from worrying that their family member might be gone forever and won't come back.** Separation anxiety makes transitions during family visitations especially hard for children this age, often causing them to feel upset before, during, and after visits.

**Court systems has historically struggled to recognize that this upset is due to separation anxiety, often mistakenly linking these "behaviors" to the trauma of abuse or neglect the child endured while with their parent(s).** Separation anxiety is NOT a valid reason for reducing the frequency or duration of family time visitation. In fact, the distress of young children experiencing separation anxiety is best alleviated through predictable, quality time with their family.

**Cause-and-Effect Understanding:** Toddlers start grasping the concept of cause-and-effect early in their development. In their exploration of the physical world, young toddlers intentionally try different actions and use trial and error to understand and interact with their environment. Understanding causality is a critical milestone in neuro-cognitive development and forms the foundation for children understanding that their actions lead to specific outcomes and make inferences about the world such as the intentions and behaviors of people around them. The unpredictability, frequent changes, and trauma of forcible family separation can interrupt this learning process which can impede the development of the cognitive structures responsible for understanding cause-and-effect relationships and contribute to the development of an external locus of control.

An incomplete understanding of causality is one of the reasons that toddlers struggle to understand and accept explanations of why they are in foster care. The **inability to fully grasp the concept of cause-and-effect can also result in young children**

**misattributing the reasons for removal and continued separation to their own behavior.**

**Racial Identity Formation:** The formation of racial identity in children is a multifaceted journey shaped by several factors. Around the age of two, children already show a preference for playmates who share their race and gender.<sup>13</sup> Through observing their surroundings, children recognize that race holds social importance and begin to identify their own racial group. When children are placed with caregivers from a different racial or ethnic background, it **disrupts their environment and complicates their understanding of social categories like race.** Since toddlers learn through modeling and will imitate the behaviors of the household they are living in, removal can result in the loss or abandonment of cultural heritage and traditions, and ultimately identity. This is especially impactful for children who have been in foster care for long periods of time, which is why it is crucial to support positive racial identity development and address internalized racism throughout the entire life of a case.

*Genetic mirroring* refers to the experience of seeing one's own physical and personality traits reflected in those around them, typically their biological family. **For toddlers placed in foster families of different cultural or ethnic backgrounds, the lack of genetic mirroring can complicate their understanding and acceptance of their own racial identity.** Young children look to their family members to understand who they are and provide a sense of continuity and stability - which further compounds the trauma of removal and continued separation. Seeing similar traits and behaviors helps toddlers develop a sense of identity and feel a sense of belonging. When they are forcibly removed from their family, **they can feel isolated or alienated, especially if they do not see themselves reflected in their foster family.**<sup>14,15</sup>

## Language Development

Toddlers pick up language by listening to and being spoken to by those around them. They start recognizing that certain sounds represent words that signify objects or actions, and they begin to say single words, often naming concrete items like "cookie." By the age of two, they may begin combining words to form simple sentences, such as "eat cookie" or "like cookie". The harms of removal to the language development of toddlers may include, but are not limited to, the following:



**Acquisition of Native Language:** Toddlers acquire their native language primarily through exposure and interaction with trusted adults, making parent-child interactions crucial for language development. Children learn language by imitating adults ("modeling") and engaging in conversations ("interaction"), where they receive feedback and corrections. When a child is placed in an out-of-home setting with caregivers who speak a different language, it significantly limits their chances to learn and develop proficiency in their native language.

It is important for professionals within the child dependency system to acknowledge the historical context of the impacts that child separation policies have had on inter-generational Native language acquisition. One of



the starkest examples of these policies is the U.S. government's purposeful separation of families to forcibly acculturate Native American children in state- or church-run boarding schools, which ultimately led to the disappearance of many Native American language groups and to radical changes in the groups that survived.

**Asking Questions:** Preschoolers are naturally curious and seek stability, so when they are placed into foster care, it is common for them to frequently and repeatedly ask when they will return to their biological family. **These questions typically stem from feelings of confusion, anxiety, and a desire for reassurance and security, as they may not fully understand why they were removed or the duration of their stay in foster care.**

Child dependency courts typically discourage parents from talking with their children about the open case which prevents parents from being able to respond to their preschooler's questions. While well-intentioned, this practice fails to acknowledge that **parental reassurance during times of family separation is a primary pathway for mitigating the negative impacts of the intense grief and loss that preschoolers experience when removed from their parents.** Rather than restricting access to information parents, caregivers, and professionals should respond with simple, consistent, honest, and age-appropriate answers that offer comfort while maintaining clarity about the uncertainty of their situation.

*This guide was created through the cross-system work of the [Family Well-Being Community Collaborative's \(FWCC\)](#) Harm of Removal Workgroup.*

## ENDNOTES

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- <sup>10</sup> Nowicki, S., Gregory, S., Iles-Caven, Y., Ellis, G., & Golding, J. (2018). Early Home-Life Antecedents of Children's Locus of Control. *Frontiers in psychology*, 9, 2032.
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