

Harms of Removal Across Stages of Child Development

Toddlers (2-3 years old)

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.¹

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 Milestones²

Because of children’s growing desire to be independent, this stage is often called the “terrible twos.” However, this can be an exciting time for parents and toddlers. Toddlers will experience huge thinking, learning, social, and emotional changes that will help them to explore their new world, and make sense of it. During this stage, toddlers should be able to follow two- or three-step directions, sort objects by shape and color, imitate the actions of adults and playmates, and express a wide range of emotions.



Center for Disease Control (2021). *Positive Parenting Tips: Toddlers (2-3 years)*.
<https://www.cdc.gov/child-development/positive-parenting-tips/toddlers-2-3-years.html>

¹ RCW 13.34.065(5)(a)(ii)(B)(III)

² 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/child-development/positive-parenting-tips/toddlers-2-3-years.html)

Harms of Removal

Physical Development

Physical development during this age includes significant growth in gross and fine motor skills, coordination, and overall body control. Older toddlers are becoming more confident in their movements and are better able to explore and interact with their environment. Gross motor skills such as running, jumping, climbing, throwing, catching, and balancing continue to improve, as well as fine motor skills, including improvements in hand-eye coordination, manipulating small objects, and basic self-care tasks (e.g., brushing teeth). Older toddlers continue to refine their senses throughout this stage, including touch, taste, sight, hearing, and smell, which are crucial for exploring their environment and learning through play. They are better able to coordinate movements and use their senses together, such as catching a ball while looking at it or jumping in rhythm to music. At this stage, children's physical development is highly individual, and variations in skills and abilities are normal. 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 have profound and lasting effects on their overall development. Chronic activation of the body's stress response can impair brain areas responsible for learning, memory, and executive function, resulting in **delays in language acquisition, problem-solving skills, and attention.**¹ Additionally, toxic stress can **weaken the immune system, increase vulnerability to physical health issues, and heighten the risk of behavioral problems**, such as aggression or withdrawal. Without supportive relationships with known adults and a nurturing environment to buffer these stressors, the impact can extend into later childhood and adulthood, affecting mental health, educational outcomes, and overall well-being.

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.² 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.³
- Affects the child's **thinking, learning, and memory**, leading to behaviors perceived as negative and difficulty with controlling emotions.⁴
- 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.⁵
- Undermines progress in **eating, sleeping, and toilet training**, causing 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. During this age, the foundation is being set for one's relationship to these things (food, sleep, bathroom) and disruption of this process can have lifelong impacts.



Food & Eating Habits: The disruption of familiar routines and caregiving can have significant impacts on older toddlers' eating habits and nutritional intake. Older toddlers are often accustomed to specific foods, feeding routines, and the presence of familiar adults who know their preferences and dietary needs.⁶ **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 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

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.

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.⁷ It should be noted that this reporting included both reported and substantiated reports of abuse and/or neglect. Toddler age children are often unable to fully comprehend or verbalize that maltreatment is occurring, which increases their vulnerability to experiencing this type of abuse.

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. In unfamiliar settings, such as a new home, childcare facility, or outdoor space, young children may not recognize hazards like sharp objects, stairs, or open water sources, which they are less accustomed to navigating safely. Additionally, this developmental stage often involves exploring their surroundings without a full awareness of risks, leading to higher chances of falls, cuts, burns, or poisoning.

Emotional Development

Overall, emotional development in older toddlers involves learning to express and regulate their emotions, understanding and interacting with others, and developing a stronger sense of self. This growth is facilitated through supportive relationships with known adults where they feel safe to explore, express, and learn from their emotions. Older toddlers are capable of expressing a wide range of emotions and often move quickly from one feeling to another. They are still learning how to manage their emotions, which can lead to intense reactions, such as tantrums or crying when frustrated, disappointed, or overwhelmed. 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.⁸ 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 children 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.⁹

Ambiguity in Roles and Relationships: Older 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 appropriate boundaries, which can result in



them being at high risk of abuse or neglect and can often create challenges when they move between different households with different rules, expectations, communication styles, and relationship structures. Clear, consistent, developmentally appropriate language should be used to communicate and clarify roles and relationships with older 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).

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Emotional Regulation: The ability to regulate emotions is developing during this age period but may still be immature, requiring guidance and support from known adults. During the third year of life, children may begin to show early signs of self-control, however their ability to consistently manage impulses is limited and can vary widely. When older toddlers are placed into foster care, their emotional regulation development can be significantly disrupted due to the stress and trauma of separation from their parents. Older toddlers rely heavily on their relationships with trusted adults to develop secure attachments and learn to manage their emotions. Being removed from familiar environments can trigger intense feelings of fear, confusion, and insecurity, which are difficult for these young children to understand or express. They may struggle to soothe themselves, leading to increased anxiety, aggression, or withdrawal. The constant change and unpredictability of the foster care environment can further **impede their ability to develop healthy coping mechanisms, potentially resulting in long-term challenges in emotional regulation and an increased risk for behavioral issues as they grow older.**

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.

Independence & Self-Identity: Older toddlers often assert their independence by insisting on doing things by themselves (e.g., dressing, feeding). They start to recognize themselves as unique individuals with their own thoughts, feelings, and preferences.¹⁰ When toddlers are removed from their parents, their development of independence and



self-identity can be adversely affected due to the sudden loss of stability and continuity in their environment – regardless if the home environment is safe or not. At this stage of development, toddlers are beginning to develop a sense of self which is a process that relies on them *feeling safe*. Being placed in out-of-home care often involves multiple transitions between caregivers and settings which **can disrupt the ability of these toddlers to form secure attachments and inhibit their confidence in exploring new surroundings**. Additionally, without the consistent presence and support from familiar adults who know their individual needs and behaviors, older toddlers may become more anxious, dependent, or fearful, which further undermines their natural drive toward independence.

Early Moral Development: Children in this developmental stage are beginning to learn the concepts of right and wrong, empathy, and fairness. This learning occurs through close, consistent interactions with their parents and other known adults who help them understand social rules and expectations. Sudden changes in caregivers, environments, and specific rules of a household can create confusion and insecurity in older toddlers, making it difficult for to learn these foundational moral concepts. Additionally, the trauma of separation from their family causes emotional distress, often leading to behaviors driven by fear or anxiety rather than an understanding of social norms.¹¹ The absence of trusted relationships can impair the ability to develop empathy and understanding of others' feelings, potentially resulting in challenges with social behavior, self-control, and ethical decision-making.

Social Development

The social development of older toddlers involves navigating new social environments, forming simple friendships, learning key social skills, and beginning to understand the emotions and perspectives of others. At this age, children become more aware of other people's feelings and perspectives, and start to develop friendships with their peers. It is through these relationships that they learn important social skills such as sharing, cooperation, and communication. Providing opportunities for play with peers and offering guidance during conflicts can help support the social development of older toddlers. 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: 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. Older toddlers often seek comfort from their family when they are upset,

scared, or anxious.¹² As a result, they will show strong attachment behaviors, such as wanting to be near a parent or needing reassurance. They will often seek approval from known adults and show pride in their accomplishments (e.g., completing a puzzle, drawing a picture). Positive reinforcement from parents and other non-caregiving adults helps build their self-esteem and confidence in navigating relationships and defining social boundaries. These foundational relationships are critical for a child's future development, health, and well-being.¹³ The sudden absence of these foundational relationships can significantly impact older toddlers' 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.¹⁴

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, 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.

Peer Friendships: At this stage, children start to form simple friendships. They may have a "best friend" or a preferred playmate and show excitement or affection when seeing their friends. Toddlers need a stable and consistent setting to develop social skills and build trust with others, including peers. Removal and placement into out-of-home care can negatively impact a toddler's ability to form peer friendships due to the sudden change in their living environment and caregivers. When they are moved between multiple foster homes, **their ability to understand and navigate social interactions can be disrupted.** This instability can create anxiety and insecurity, making it harder for them to feel safe and open up to others. Additionally, out-of-home placement may **limit a toddler's opportunities to interact regularly with peers in their community of origin**, further hindering the development of lasting friendships. As a result, they may struggle with social skills like sharing, cooperation, and empathy, which are essential for building and maintaining friendships.



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

Cognitive development in older toddlers is marked by significant growth in thinking, reasoning, problem-solving, and understanding the world around them. As they enter the third year of life, they become more curious, ask many questions, and begin to think more symbolically and logically.¹⁵ Their cognitive abilities are rapidly expanding, allowing them to engage in more complex play, better understand cause-and-effect relationships, and start to grasp early concepts of numbers and language. Providing opportunities for play, exploration, and interaction with others helps support their cognitive development. The harms of removal to the cognitive development of toddlers may include, but are not limited to, the following:

Separation Anxiety: While separation anxiety may decrease compared to earlier years, some older toddlers are still developing an understanding of object permanence and experience significant distress when separated from parents or familiar caregivers, particularly in unfamiliar settings. The stress of repeated separation and transition at family time visits can be incredibly distressing for these toddlers.¹⁶

Court systems have 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.¹⁷

Racial Identity Formation: The formation of racial identity in children is a multifaceted journey shaped by several factors. By the age of three, children start to notice differences in skin color and other physical traits and can identify and categorize people based on these visible characteristics.¹⁸ 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 older 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: 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 older 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.**^{19,20}

Hair Care Routines: When a toddler enters foster care, their hair care routines can be disrupted if caregivers are unfamiliar with the specific needs of their hair type. Proper care of textured or curly hair often involves specialized products and techniques. If these needs are not met, it can lead to physical issues like dryness, breakage, or discomfort. Beyond physical effects, hair care is often tied to cultural identity and self-esteem.²¹ For a child of color, neglecting or mishandling their hair can impact their sense of belonging and pride in their heritage, contributing to confusion or insecurity about their self-identity as they grow. If a child of color needs to be removed, providing appropriate hair care in foster placements is crucial for supporting a child's emotional and cultural development.

Symbolic Thought: Removal and placement into foster care can disrupt an older toddler's development of symbolic thought, a critical stage where children begin to use symbols, such as words, images, or objects, to represent people, places, and events in their world. Older toddlers engage in imaginative play, storytelling, and the use of language to make sense of their experiences. However, the trauma of being removed from their home and family can create intense emotional distress, which may **limit a child's ability to engage in creative and symbolic play.** This disruption can affect how they process their feelings and experiences, as they may become preoccupied with feelings of fear, confusion, or loss rather than exploring their world symbolically.

Additionally, multiple placements may reduce opportunities for rich, interactive play experiences and nurturing conversations that promote symbolic thinking. As a result, the child **may struggle to develop important cognitive and social skills**, such as problem-solving, language use, and emotional regulation²², that are closely tied to symbolic thought.

Cause-and-Effect Understanding: At this age, children are still developing an understanding that their actions can lead to specific outcomes. Being suddenly removed from their home and placed in an unfamiliar environment can create confusion and anxiety, disrupting this developmental process.²³ The child may struggle to understand why they were removed or associate their own behavior with the separation from their parents, leading to feelings of guilt, fear, and shame. Furthermore, multiple placements or inconsistent caregiving can make it difficult for the child to establish a reliable sense of cause and effect, as the connections between their actions and what happens next seem unpredictable or arbitrary. This **uncertainty can delay their cognitive development and affect their ability to form a secure sense of self and predict their surroundings**, which is crucial for healthy emotional and psychological growth.

Understanding of Time: At this age, children begin to learn basic concepts related to daily routines but their understanding of time is still largely event-based (e.g., “after snack time”). A limited understanding of time can significantly affect their experience when being removed at this age. Older toddlers have little grasp of abstract concepts like the future or the duration of events, **making any separation from their primary caregivers feel immediate and permanent.**²⁴ Without a clear sense of when or if they will return home, the removal can cause intense fear, confusion, and anxiety. Furthermore, older toddlers cannot comprehend explanations about the temporary nature of the separation, leading to feelings of abandonment and insecurity.



Language Development

Language development in older toddlers is marked by significant growth in vocabulary, grammar, and conversational skills. During this stage of development children are rapidly expanding their ability to communicate and understand language, which plays a crucial role in their overall cognitive, social, and emotional development and self-expression. 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.** When these children return home to their families of origin, they may not sound the same (i.e., accent, vernacular, discussion norms, etc.) or speak the same language as those in their cultural community. The loss of familiar linguistic interactions can hinder their ability to expand vocabulary, grasp grammar, develop communication skills, and fully express themselves and their emotions.

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.

Vocabulary and Grammar: Children in this stage of development typically have a vocabulary of about 900 to 1,000 words²⁵, though this can vary widely among children.



They learn new words rapidly and often repeat them to reinforce their understanding. When a child is removed from their home, **they lose access to the consistent language input provided by their family**, which can disrupt this essential learning process. If placed in an environment where different language patterns or dialects, older toddlers may struggle to continue building on their existing language skills. When a child loses

access to culturally relevant language, they lose the opportunity to develop their relationship and understanding of it.

Conversational Skills: Older toddlers are starting to learn how to participate in conversations through back-and-forth exchanges which includes turn-taking and observing social cues. When an older toddler is removed from their home, they are suddenly cut off from these consistent interactions, which can disrupt their ability to practice and refine these essential skills. When they are placed in an unfamiliar environment, older toddlers may experience reduced opportunities for natural, supportive conversations, especially if the child feels too distressed to engage. Development is even further disrupted when a child is placed into a home outside of their culture, since conversational skills and norm differ across cultures.

Narrative Skills and Storytelling: A key aspect of early language learning in older toddlers is the development of narrative and storytelling skills. Older toddlers begin to use language to describe events, express thoughts, and build simple stories, often drawing from their daily experiences and interactions with their family. When a child is removed from their home, the disruption to their environment and the emotional distress that follows can greatly hinder their ability to engage in this kind of imaginative language use. Furthermore, many cultures have a traditional way of storytelling. This is disrupted when a child is placed in the home with caregivers of another culture.

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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