

What Parents, Educators, and Researchers Are Saying About Tovah Klein and *How Toddlers Thrive*

“Tovah taught me how to resist the temptation to fix everything, and instead give my children the opportunity to learn how to problem-solve for themselves.”

—Sarah Jessica Parker, from the foreword

“If only there was one single, sensible, sympathetic book that answered all your toddler questions. Well, there is. And you’re holding it: an easy-to-read source that explains what toddlers do, why they do it, and whether you have to jump in or not. The good news is: Often the answer is ‘not.’”

—Lenore Skenazy, author of *Free-Range Kids: How to Raise Safe, Self-Reliant Kids (Without Going Nuts with Worry)*

“In this wonderful book, Tovah Klein draws on her deep understanding of toddlers and their development to offer a treasure trove of wise and practical advice. Placing a special emphasis on seeing the world through toddlers’ eyes, Klein shows how we can help them meet life’s challenges with confidence and enthusiasm. *How Toddlers Thrive* will be cherished by parents and professionals alike.”

—William Crain, author of *Reclaiming Childhood: Letting Children Be Children in Our Achievement-Oriented Society*

“Dr. Klein’s wonderful book is a parenting milestone, unraveling the mysteries of your toddler while helping you create a clear path for his or her future happiness and success.”

—Harley A. Rotbart, MD, author of *No Regrets Parenting: Turning Long Days and Short Years into Cherished Memories with Your Kids*

“Rarely does someone with so much knowledge write in a way that is so accessible and heartwarming. What Tovah has created will help every parent stand on their own loving ground, assured that they are creating the foundations for their child to grow into an adult who will have a deep sense of purpose and the will to effect much needed change.”

—Kim John Payne, author of *Simplicity Parenting*, *Beyond Winning*, and *The Soul of Discipline*

“Dr. Klein has provided a critical resource for parents—she combines state-of-the-science research with examples of and practical guidelines for everyday toddler-parent interactions. Most important, Dr. Klein appreciates that every toddler and parent is unique and therefore, there is no single parenting ‘recipe.’”

—Nim Tottenham, PhD, developmental neuroscientist at UCLA

“Tovah Klein’s book is as much about parenting as it is about toddlers. Like a wise and practiced friend, she introduces us to the world of toddlers, helping us understand the wonder, worry, and bewilderment toddlers experience and the challenges and joys of parenting them. The book is filled with fabulous advice, informative anecdotes, and a point of view that teaches you to trust yourself no matter how demanding your little ones may seem to be.”

—Samuel J. Meisels, executive director of the Buffett Early Childhood Institute at the University of Nebraska

“*How Toddlers Thrive* is a delicious book overflowing with practical wisdom from the world of Toddlerdom. Dr. Tovah Klein, a noted child psychologist and educator extraordinaire, holds our hand as we jump into the minds of our toddlers and begin to see their adorable, delightful, confrontational, and sometimes annoying behavior in a whole new way. If you are interested in raising a self-confident, happy child bound for later success, this is a book you will want to keep by your bedside.”

—Kathy Hirsh-Pasek, professor of psychology at Temple University and author of *Einstein Never Used Flashcards*

“You survived your baby’s infancy and you’re about to give a sigh of relief (and maybe get some sleep) when toddlerhood hits you like a ton of bricks. Trust Tovah Klein to help you navigate those confusing—and sometimes infuriating—years from two to five. This is a compassionate book that helps parents see the world from a toddler’s point of view, which in turn leads to more successful and relaxed parenting.”

—Lawrence J. Cohen, PhD, author of *The Opposite of Worry* and *Playful Parenting*

“There are a lot of parenting books out there, but this one is unique—it’s told from the point of view of the child! Dr. Klein’s firsthand experience with young children provides parents an understanding of child development within the context of family dynamics. She doesn’t judge parents; instead she empowers them with knowledge about the whys behind their children’s behaviors.”

—Rosemarie T. Truglio, PhD, SVP of Curriculum
and Content for Sesame Workshop

“Child psychologist Klein, director of the Barnard Center for Toddler Development, has a keen understanding of what makes toddlers tick. . . . Parents of the 2–5 set will find plenty of practical ideas and strategies to make the preschool years less stressful, creating what Klein describes as a relaxed and loving ‘toddlerutopia.’”

—*Publishers Weekly*

“*How Toddlers Thrive* shares Tovah Klein’s truly unique perspective—a thorough knowledge of child development research and practical experience working effectively with hundreds of toddlers and their families. She illuminates how the world looks and feels to toddlers and shares practical advice, such as helping toddlers learn the life skill of taking on challenges. It is the wisdom we need to thrive as parents!”

—Ellen Galinsky, author of *Mind in the Making* and
president of the Families and Work Institute

“I learned a few fascinating philosophies about young kids that have already helped me better understand my child. I highly suggest you pick up a copy.”

—Popsugar

“With wisdom, sensitivity and humor, Dr. Klein describes the push-pull of children from two to five. . . . If you have a toddler in your life—or may have one soon—this is the book for you.”

—Work & Family Life blog

How Toddlers Thrive

*What Parents Can Do
for Children Age Two to Five to Plant
the Seeds of Lifelong Happiness*

Tovah P. Klein, PhD

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Foreword by Sarah Jessica Parker

I come from a big family. My childhood memories include plenty of playful days, and lots of siblings taking care of one another, serving as extra sets of hands for my parents. We were very loved but also allowed to be independent. I became a mother to a much smaller brood, and initially approached mothering my first child (and then the other two) with as much intensity and fierce determination as my mother had given all of her eight kids combined. All the while I was feeling—like many mothers—that I wasn’t doing enough. Then I met Tovah Klein and realized that my mother may have had it right all along. Tovah taught me that the space given to children raised in a big, bustling family may actually do a better job giving them a sense of self, of self-respect, and of confidence in their own accomplishments. Tovah taught me how to resist the temptation to fix everything, and instead give my children the opportunity to learn how to problem-solve for themselves.

My three children are all different, but my husband and I have the tools to parent each of them in ways that work for

Foreword by Sarah Jessica Parker

them. One is outgoing, another cried and cried whenever I left her at school, and another is cut-and-dried. Tovah taught me that there is no one right way to parent, and no right way for children to experience childhood. Judging myself or the child risks inadvertently imposing a feeling of shame that does more to set back than to help. Tovah's parenting approach enabled me to get inside the complicated mind of my then two-year-olds; to give choices, but not too many; to establish order and still give them freedom. I went from feeling overwhelmed to feeling confident, all while giving my children their own sense of confidence in themselves, which I see further developing as they grow. I hope the same for you and your children. Enjoy!

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I live in toddler-dom. As the director of the internationally renowned Barnard College Center for Toddler Development (known as the Toddler Center), I have the pleasure of living in a world of toddlers and seeing the world from their perspective. It is a different and often entertaining view of the world. I have now worked at this magical place for almost two decades and spend five days a week thinking about, observing, studying, and interacting with fifty individual toddlers.

I teach undergraduate and graduate students about them, help parents understand what is going on with them and why they do what they do. I also conduct studies on separation, play, sleep, and other important aspects of toddler development, and all the while I get to watch toddlers be toddlers. My work focuses on understanding what young children do and the role parents play in their development. Whether watching, researching, or interacting directly with children, I am asking myself the question—over and over—*what are they doing, and why are they doing it?*

• What Are They Doing? •

The first question—*what are they doing?*—is deceptively straightforward. It seems to many parents like toddlers are simply starting to practice the basic skills that they'll need for the future, whether that's learning how to brush their teeth, figuring out how to share, or understanding how to sit at a table and eat during a meal. Mastering these kinds of essential tasks is a big part of what these years are about. But as I've learned during my decades working with kids from ages two to five, there's a lot more going on in their brains than their behaviors lead us to believe.

The toddler years (which, for the purposes of this book, I'm defining as ages two to five) are among the least studied years in childhood. Compared to the numbers of studies of infants and school-aged kids, toddlers have historically gotten short shrift, which is alarming given the fact that during this time period, the brain and body are in a massive state of flux, growth, and change. Indeed, the toddler brain is enormously complex and dynamic, going through as much upheaval and adaptations as the teenage brain. Toddlers are not just learning how to use the toilet or tame a tantrum—they are actually learning some crucially important life skills that are the keys to their later success. It's during these intense toddler years that a child's brain lays down pathways needed for him or her to thrive throughout childhood and life.

I like to call the toddler years a “lab for later.” That's because many of the basic skills that parents are helping to nurture and teach their children during the toddler years are actually preparing those children's young brains to take on higher-level types of learning. For example, I always tell my families about the importance of establishing a bedtime ritual: taking a bath, brush-

ing the teeth, maybe reading a book, and then off to sleep. All these seemingly basic tasks are part of a network of skills that are crucial for toddlers to master. But there is also learning to be had in establishing the routine itself, and in varying it. What if one day, the parent decides to brush the child's teeth before the bath rather than after it? How will a toddler handle such a change? Will she have a tantrum (*That's NOT how we do it!*) or will she have the flexibility and resilience to accept a change in routine? Helping your child to develop this ability to adapt will not only make your life as a parent a little smoother, but it will also make your child ready to tackle the unforeseen changes she will most certainly face at school and in the world.

It's these types of higher-level skills—including resilience, cooperation, self-reliance, determination, perseverance, empathy, and more—that toddler brains are ready to start developing. In fact, the toddler brain is hardwired to learn these skills that are the foundation of self-regulation, and what's more, it's up to us as parents and educators to help them learn how to do so. But it takes time and practice to learn these skills. That's why the toddler years are a lab for later: the earlier kids become familiar and comfortable with these skills, the happier and more successful they will be. That's the promise of this book.

• Why Are They Doing It? •

The second question—*why are they doing it?*—often seems more complex than it really is. In other words, once you start to observe and understand your toddler, you'll be able to understand (and sometimes even anticipate) their reactions and their concerns. I call this “seeing the world through your toddler's eyes,” or your Parenting POV (point of view). It's when we as

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adults shift our view from seeing the world through an adult perspective to that of a child's perspective—a shift that can happen immediately or take some time. When this happens, we suddenly are in a position to support our children in a way that is clear and much, much easier to carry out. Why is seeing the world from a child's point of view so important? Because that's the best way to understand them, to guide them with love and encouragement, and to avoid shaming and controlling them. When we use this Parenting POV, we are able to be aware and compassionate to the needs of our young children; we are also able to give them the limits and boundaries they require to navigate this tumultuous time. We give them the love and limits without the fights!

My “Parenting POV” approach has been successful for the many hundreds of families I have come to know through both the Toddler Center and the parenting groups I meet with on an ongoing basis—and for individual parents who are facing a particular rough spot or challenge with their child. Some of these parents return long after their kids have left the Toddler Center. Why? Because even after a child has moved beyond the toddler years, challenges with changing behavior and needs still arise. Many parents come back knowing I can continue to help them understand who their child is and figure out what their child needs as they grow.

My parenting POV approach is based on the continually evolving body of psychological and neuroscience research on this age, combined with the research and observations I have done for more than twenty years. It's designed to maximize the emotional, social, and cognitive development of toddlers. My approach sits firmly at the intersection of knowing the science and applying it to support children in a way so that all parents and their children may benefit. No one brain study or

even a few can answer all of our questions about our child's development, and I caution you to be careful about jumping to conclusions from any single study or two. It takes many years of research to reveal what specific details mean more broadly about how children develop. What I've tried to do here is pull together the most consistent scientific findings and understandings about how to help your toddler thrive and succeed, today and in the future.

• Dealing with the Day-to-Day •

The parents I work with are an eclectic array of thoughtful, creative, and caring parents. There are two-parent families and single-parent families; there are families with working parents and some with one parent at home; some of the families have grandparents living with them and others have recently moved here from other countries. Some families are small, with one or two children, and some are large, with three or more children. But what they all have in common with one another, and with you, is an intense desire to parent in the best way they can so their children can be the best they can be! Parenting toddlers involves both “high-level” and “day-to-day” skills: we are trying to help our children develop resilience, manage their intense emotions, and figure out who they are in this world (the skills that set the foundation for self-regulation). At the same time, we are trying to help them with the everyday tasks such as getting up and out the door in the morning, going to bed without a fuss, and getting through mealtimes and transitions without tantrums and meltdowns. Of course, these high-level and day-to-day skills are deeply interconnected, as you will see. Every parent struggles at some point, and even at many points; there

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are also commonalities about what parents struggle with, even though every family is unique: sleep, eating, meltdowns, fears, sibling conflicts, not listening, being rude, talking back, regression, thumb sucking, throwing toys, nervous habits, hitting, biting, or kicking. In the end, we all grapple with what to do and how to help our child.

As is typical these days, many of the parents with whom I consult are stressed, doing their best to juggle all the aspects of their lives. They are also worried and self-doubting about decisions they have to make about their kids, wondering if they should pay attention to their gut about what's best or listen to an expert or a well-meaning friend or their own parents. A couple was struggling with how to get their child to sleep through the night. They came to see me and presented it this way, "He is four now. We've tried it all. The pediatrician said to use a sticker chart. That worked for a few nights, then stopped. We tried bribing with doughnuts for breakfast. My best friend suggested this special lullaby CD. We've locked his door. We've explained why he needs to sleep. Nothing works. I've read all kinds of things on the Web, and now I am worried he may have some serious problem causing the sleep issues." I asked what they thought, in their hearts, was the best solution. After a long pause, the father said, "We just don't know. We don't know who to trust." With unlimited information on the Web, I find parents are more self-doubting than ever. I do understand why. Parenting can feel like a competitive arena, rather than the very personal process that it is.

Is it okay that he uses a pacifier at night? How much sugar can she have each day? How much TV is too much? Is the iPad going to make my child smarter? What is the best type of pre-school for a three-year-old? How do I get her to eat a bigger variety of foods? Is it normal to tantrum as much as my child

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does? Why does he go crazy just because we are out of the cereal he wants? Is it normal for him to grab another child's toy and just walk away? Why doesn't she join in and play at birthday parties? How can I be sure she learns how to make friends? What is normal behavior at this age?

They have questions related to their children's behavior, their difficulty sticking to a routine, getting along with other kids, or turning into what the parents were hoping for: happy, engaged, thoughtful little people ready to conquer the world.

Like you, these parents always want what's best for their children. They are dedicated and devoted, smart and considerate. And once they begin to trust in this approach, their whole way of thinking about parenting shifts. They not only grasp how to handle the day-to-day toddler moments with ease; they also understand why parenting during the toddler years is so important to their children's later development. But perhaps most important of all, they come to understand how parents have a crucial role in the best possible outcome for their children, for now and for when they grow into bigger kids, teens, and eventually adults. Toddler-dom is indeed a marvelous opportunity—a true lab for later. As one mother, Jocelyn, said, “I learned how my daughter is thinking and why she is doing what she is doing—it used to be so easy for me to get frustrated before I understood the world through her eyes.”

Another parent, Martha Ann, said, “There is so much pressure to raise kids; I've learned that it's good for them to be bored, that it's best that they are not overscheduled and to give them a lot of downtime.” One mom revealed, “Sometimes it is so embarrassing what kids say, but it's better to say to yourself, ‘What's the best way to handle this situation?’ Instead of trying to shut down my child because she said someone smelled bad.” And another mom, Sally, put it, “It's so liberating! I don't over-

parent anymore! I don't feel the need to constantly interfere between siblings, and I can back off and let my kids be themselves!" Following an initial session with a couple, the father returned the next week and said, "You've saved us from ourselves. As first-time parents, we kept thinking our two-year-old should share and be nice. That is how we were raised. We felt so pressured. But now I see he can't share at this age. I am relieved and enjoying him more. And he is happier."

When parents shift their view and learn to understand the world through the eyes of the toddler, they are able to take the frustration and torment out of the daily challenges of toileting, eating, sleeping, transitions, and more. But they are doing so much more beyond these day-to-day moments, whether challenging or not. They are also helping their children lay down the foundation of lifelong skills that will help them succeed. Who doesn't want their child to become kind and compassionate, resilient and resourceful, able to manage her feelings and learn to persist and stay on task when things get tough?

• Parenting Is Not One-Size-Fits-All •

So in this book, we'll be talking about a range of different ways that you can turn everyday situations into moments that set up your child for future happiness and success. It's something I live every day, both in the classroom and at home. In addition to all the children at the Toddler Center, I have three children of my own.

When I tell people that I have three children, all boys, they often respond as if they must all be alike. Nothing could be further from the truth. Although they share many similarities, including being observant and social, enjoying listening to and

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playing music, excelling in school, and being passionate about their interests, compassionate, and kind, in my mind they are mostly different from one another. One takes his time to warm up, sits back and observes, always has one or two close friends, and shies away from large or crowded events. Another loves to have a good time, has a large group of friends, and jumps right into new social opportunities to meet people. The third is a mix of these two. He enjoys social situations, if he knows the people well (like his two dearest friends), knows what is going to happen, who will be there, and is apprised of any changes. Otherwise, he'd rather be home in a familiar routine and around those he knows intimately—namely, his family.

All three boys are voracious readers—one taught himself to read at age four; another struggled with reading through second grade but now can't put a book down. One reads fantasy books, another devours stories about World War II and history, and another digs into the latest book series. One read all of Harry Potter three times in a year; another could not get through book one. You get the point. Readers, yes, but their taste and approach to reading are different.

I have one son who is content looking out a car or train window for hours, which makes long-distance travel a pleasure; another who can handle about an hour in a car, and then is increasingly restless. As a toddler, he would nearly lose his mind after an hour strapped in a car seat, so we know most rest stops on most highways in the East. I have one who always ate most foods, and another who ate cereal every night for dinner for nine months (seriously!) as a toddler, but eats a full array of foods now.

My oldest needed one of us to stay with him every day during the separation period at preschool, even when other parents left. Kindergarten was similar, and we had his grandfather

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come and stay until he was comfortable staying alone at school. Hesitant to separate at four and five, he gradually turned into a confident leader among his peers. Our second child, on the second day of preschool, turned to me and said, “You can go now. You don’t have to stay. The teachers take care of us!” No issue whatsoever with separation. Same family? All boys? Yes, and yes. But they are remarkably different children, with different styles and different needs.

So what I’m saying here is this: Take the suggestions and guidelines I offer in this book, find what is useful to you and your family . . . and don’t be afraid to adapt and adjust it to work best with your own little one. I think of my approach to parenting as an orientation, or as one parent said, “a set of sensibilities.” That’s the beauty of seeing the world through your child’s eyes: it allows you to personalize your parenting style to fit what works best with your individual child, and for you. As I’ve watched each of my three boys grow over the past sixteen years, it becomes ever clearer to me that all children have some characteristics that stay with them for a lifetime, and others that they outgrow, or learn how to manage on their own. *Consistency* and *change* are always at play. What that means for us as parents is that we have to stay tuned into our children’s unique needs at a given moment, which will be different than they were a few days or months ago.

And even though my boys are well beyond their toddler years, I am still working with toddlers every day. Between home and work, I am constantly reminded of the challenges of being a parent, and of the complexity of each child. We have to see each child for who she is—in all pieces, even the pieces we don’t like or that challenge us. Usually those are pieces in our child that remind us of ourselves, the parts of self we don’t like! This is the challenge.

• How This Book Works •

The book is divided into two parts. Part I focuses on understanding the developing mind of your toddler—why their behavior is so paradoxical, what’s going on inside their complex (and confused) young minds, and how to use Parenting POV to get inside their heads so you can understand the world through their eyes. I’ve also included a chapter on what happens when we misunderstand our toddlers and inadvertently shame them and stunt their growth and developing sense of who they are. These chapters are focused on the “high-level” skills that lead to self-regulation.

Part II focuses more on “cracking the toddler code” of everyday behaviors that offer the opportunity to lay down a solid, successful foundation. I offer practical advice (“What to Do”) so that you can troubleshoot day-to-day challenges that all parents face with their toddlers. You will learn how to crack the code on tantrums, sleeping, eating, toilet training, playing with peers, and more. By the end of Part II, you’ll know how to use your Parenting POV in everyday moments as a way to help children develop good habits and skills not only for today, but for tomorrow as well.

Near the end of the book, you will find the Fifteen New Seeds for Success, which will help anchor you as you move through these toddler years and beyond. These Seeds echo all the lessons, advice, and examples that are woven throughout the book. They are the end result of my more than twenty years working with toddlers and their families.

As you read through the first and second parts of the book, you will find many examples from my years working with children that are intended to help you think about your own unique

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child (or children). It's important to keep in mind that children at this age are particularly robust, sensitive, and dynamic; they are charming, forceful, curious, loving, angry, and always engaging. But they are also quite challenging. Again, if these years are “done right,” not only will the years that follow be much more harmonious for all involved but they will also lay a fertile, supportive, endlessly nurturing foundation for a child to truly flourish throughout their life—intellectually, emotionally, socially, and even physically—by letting them become the children they are meant to be. One of the hardest parts of being a parent is truly being able to step back, look at our child, try to understand *his or her* experience of the world (which is very different from our experience as adults), and remember that it is our role to *guide* them, to *support* them into becoming the person they are meant to be, so they can be happy, resourceful, resilient, determined, caring, and yes, successful in life.