

Especially for parents of toddlers! 

Up, Down, All Around

Talking and Listening

An important step in your toddler's language development is understanding the physical relationships between different objects. For example, what does it mean when the ball is "next to," "under," or "over" the table? You can help your toddler with this by using these terms in your everyday routines in fun and meaningful ways.

What is the practice?

Using specific spatial terms (*over, under, next to*) with your toddler and showing him what they mean is important. It helps him make some important cognitive connections and develops his listening skills. You can use these terms in your everyday life. "Wait for me *beside* the door." "Put your ball *under* the table." You can use them in games like *Simon Says* and *Hot and Cold*.



What does the practice look like?

There are many opportunities in your daily routine to use spatial terms. When your toddler is looking for a toy or helping put things away, use terms like *above* or *beside*. This familiarizes him with the words and describes what is going on around him. Using these terms regularly helps toddlers start to talk about and understand their environments. It also leads to understanding other concepts like comparisons (*big, bigger, biggest*) and opposites (*big* and *little*).

How do you do the practice?

You probably already use these terms in your daily life with your toddler. Here are a few other ways you can help him pay more attention to spatial terms. You can start by incorporating them into any game or activity he particularly enjoys.

- Many toddlers enjoy "helping" mom or dad in the kitchen, yard, or around the house. You can build on this interest by using these terms in your instructions. You can say, "Please put the empty container *into* the trash can," or "The rake goes *next to* the wheelbarrow." If your toddler isn't sure what these words mean yet, help him until he becomes more confident.
- Ask your toddler where things are using these terms: "Where's your dinosaur puzzle? Is it *next to* the bug puzzle? Is it *under* your bed?" Being as specific as possible helps your toddler get a clear idea of what these words mean.
- At bath time, encourage your toddler to wash *under* his arms, *behind* his ears, and *between* his toes.
- Toddlers often enjoy games that involve following simple directions, like *Follow the Leader*, *Simon Says*, and *Hot and Cold*. You can easily incorporate spatial concepts into these games. Describe what "the leader" is doing. "You're going *up* the hill and climbing *over* the big rock!" Play "spatial Simon Says." "Put your hands *up over* your head! Clap your hands *next to* your knees!" Hide a favorite toy and describe your child's progress in finding it. "Oh, *beside* the couch is cold! Now you're getting warmer, looking *under* the rug." Be sure to let your toddler take the lead in these games as soon as he can. They are good turn-taking opportunities.

How do you know the practice worked?

- Does your toddler understand the spatial terms you use in daily life?
- Does he use these words to describe where things are?
- Does your toddler enjoy games that involve spatial terms, like being "the leader" or "Simon" and giving directions?

Take a look at more using spatial words

Using Directions

Two-year old Anami likes to help her mom in the kitchen—unpacking groceries and cooking. Her mom uses lots of spatial terms to help Anami figure out where things are. “Bring me the heart-shaped cookie cutter, please,” Mom says. “It’s next to the sink.” When Anami finds it and holds it up, Mom says “Great! Can you put it *on the kitchen table*?” Anami has started using these words too to help her mom understand what she wants. When she can’t reach a toy car, for example, she says, “Go *under couch!*,” and Mom gets it for her.



Follow Along

Toby, who is almost three, loves playing Follow the Leader with his twin sister. They take turns being the leader and running around their backyard, all the while talking about what they are doing. “Let’s go *under* the picnic table!” Toby yells, leading the way. “And *over* the tree trunk.” “Let’s go *along* the driveway and *behind* the garage,” his sister answers. This game lets Toby build on his love of climbing and running around to practice using important spatial terms. He asks his sister to play *Follow the Leader* regularly, and has started using these words in other contexts too.

Where in the World?

Nineteen-month-old Gideon has a moderate visual impairment that sometimes causes him trouble knowing exactly where things are. His dad helps him learn the meaning of important spatial terms during one of Gideon’s favorite activities: finger painting. Gideon loves bright colors, and he picks out a few favorite ones each time. As he paints with his fingers, he and Dad talk about where the paint is going. “You put yellow *on top of* red,” Dad says. “Now you have paint on the *backs of* your hands.” Gideon has fun mixing and spreading the colors. His dad introduces him to the spatial words that help him understand what he is doing. Dad knows that Gideon has learned some of these words, because Gideon uses them in other situations besides painting.

