The toddler years are a time when interactions with kids get a lot more fun for many parents and siblings (minus the outbursts). Growing vocabularies, budding personalities, more conversation and play . . . kids are developing and honing social skills, communicating their feelings and emotions, and forming deeper relationships with family and friends.

**Milestones galore!** Social communication skills in the toddler years include:

- Points to objects or pictures to show them to parents (by 18 months)
- Waves or says “bye-bye” (by 18 months)
- Responds to simple directions, like “come here” or “get your coat” (by 18 months)
- Goes to people for affection and comfort (by 24 months)
- Takes turns when talking (by 24 months)
- Asks for help (by 24 months)
- Plays pretend games or make believe (by 36 months)
- Shows emotions or uses feeling words, like “I love you” (by 36 months)
- Takes part in circle time or other group activities (by 4 years)
- Changes a message when not understood (by 4 years)
- Talks in different ways to different people, such as a baby versus an adult (by 5 years)
- Understands that others have different thoughts and feelings (by 5 years)

*Children do not develop social communication skills at the same rate. Social communication skills also may be influenced by a child’s cultural background.*

**Increasing Parental Concern:** This is also a time when parents start to feel more strongly that something is amiss. A child may seem to be in their own world. They may not relate to others. They may focus on only one topic, like trains. A child may have a social communication disorder, which involves trouble with social uses of language, or autism spectrum disorder, which involves social communication problems in addition to restricted, repetitive behaviors.

**Identify the Signs:** Signs of a **social communication disorder** include difficulty with:

- Sharing a common focus with another person about the same object/event (such as playing together with the same toy or reading the same book), called *joint attention*
- Understanding and using words, having conversations, and following directions
- Playing with others, understanding feelings, and making/keeping friends

Those signs, in addition to those below, are among the signs of **autism spectrum disorder**:

- Flapping hands, rocking, or spinning
- Difficulty changing from one activity to the next
- Having limited or unusual interests

**Don’t Delay—Get Help!** There is nothing to lose but a lot to gain from early diagnosis and treatment. **Speech-language pathologists are experts in social communication and treat children with these disorders.** They can help toddlers develop communication and social skills. For children who have trouble developing spoken language, speech-language pathologists may use augmentative and alternative communication (AAC), which includes sign language, electronic devices, and other alternatives to verbal speech.