



One-track Minds Is Your Toddler's Obsession a Sign of Autism? *by Melinda Copp, ToddlersToday.com*

If you're like most toddler parents, you can probably recite your child's favorite movie line by line. You've probably fought with your child over a toy, or collection of toys, that he insists on taking everywhere you go. And you probably have his favorite book memorized word for word. Because once a toddler is hooked on something, anything, that's all they want to do, over and over again. These similar behaviors – obsessing about or fixating on one toy – can be completely normal, or they can be a sign of autism in some children.

"Among the many issues that signaled us that our son was not developing normally was a fixation on toy animals," says Mike Dawson, a dad from North Kingstown, R.I. "With many autistic kids, it's trains."

Dawson says the behavior started at age 2 1/2 with horses, progressed to elephants, and then by age 5 his son was completely manifest in dinosaurs. But with Dawson's son, the behavior was slightly different than other toddlers' fixations.

"Most kids show an interest in things, but his interest was exclusive," Dawson says. "He focused on the animals – he had to hang on to them, he made noises like them. He didn't make child-like dinosaur noises, but guttural, realistic sounds, which he incorporated into speech and used in response when someone spoke to him. Whenever we tried to go anywhere in the car or on foot, he had to have just the right assortment of these toys, and it was always just a little too much to carry, which inevitably created a tantrum of frustration over needing the objects but not being able to hold them all."

In the Dawsons' case, and for many parents, a toddler fixating on a particular toy is one of the many signs of autism.

What Is Autism?

Autism frightens parents because research has advanced dramatically, bringing the topic to the forefront of attention. And with better knowledge on the condition and its signs, diagnosis and frequency have increased as well – pulling developmentally disabled people from other diagnosis categories.

According to Jean Rutenberg, executive director of the Center for Autism in Philadelphia, Pa., autism occurs in about one out of every 166 kids. And of those, three out of four autistic children are boys.

"Autism is a complicated condition because you can have any range of behaviors, and autism can be very profound," Rutenberg says. Autism is a spectrum disorder, and an autistic child's behavior and abilities will range depending on where he or she falls on that spectrum. Sometimes signs of autism start to present at birth – the child is never affectionate and snuggly, for example – and sometimes the lights just go out on seemingly normal children. The signs can also be hard to discern from many normal toddler behaviors.

What Are the Signs?

"We remember our son was growing and developing like a typical child," says Katherine Alvarez, a mom from Las Vegas, Nev. "He was meeting and exceeding his milestones. Around 18 months things changed or I started to notice the changes."

Alvarez's son babbled less, and stopped saying the few words he knew. He sometimes appeared deaf, and didn't respond to other people or loud noises. But when Elmo came on the television, he'd run from the other room to watch. He also started lining up his toys, which seemed normal to the Alvarezes at first.

"I think that all children to some extent do that," Alvarez says. "However, now looking back he would become very upset if you tried to disrupt his pattern."

Because the signs of autism can be mistaken for normal toddler behaviors, parents, especially new ones, can overlook them, or justify them.

"The best way it was described to me, when my 2-year-old was going through the evaluations, was this: The behavioral red flags for autism spectrum disorders are the same behaviors exhibited by all typically developing kids," says Sam Butler, a dad from Seattle, Wash. "The difference is in the packaging and frequency."

Autism vs. Normal Toddler Antics

Taking a toddler's obsessive behaviors into consideration with a host of other behaviors is important for determining whether or not you should be worried.

"Autism is never one behavior in isolation; it's always a profile of characteristics," Ruttenberg says. In addition to fixating on toys or specific things, autistic children don't bond with their parents. They don't get a joyful expression when their parents try to interact, they don't look people in the eyes and they don't communicate. Autistic children may also have sensory sensitivities, making them unable to tolerate sounds and touch.

Autistic children don't engage in pretend play, and may fixate on one aspect of a toy, rather than the toy itself, such as the spinning wheel of a car. And when they become fixated on something, such as a toy, they cannot be distracted from it.

"Clinical obsession means it's destructive emotionally when the object is taken away," says Dr. Norman Hoffman, author of [Bad Children Can Happen to Good Parents](#) (VG Press, 2007). Having a security blanket or a favorite toy is a healthy behavior for a toddler, so you have to look at how long the behavior lasts and whether or not it can be interrupted.

"It's more than obsessing; a truly autistic child has a cluster of behaviors," Dr. Hoffman says. "But the more stimulation and direction you give that child, the better he or she will do later, which is why early diagnosis is important."

If you think, for whatever reason, that your child may be autistic, go with your instincts and have him or her checked. "Don't waste time, and don't delay a good intervention and treatment," says Ruttenberg, who often sees parents get talked out of dealing with the early signs of autism in their children. "I always think it's better to have concerns checked out by a specialist."

Just Normal Obsessive Behavior

When you can rule out autism as the reason behind your toddler's obsessive behavior, you may still be left with a little person who drives everyone in the house crazy with the same movies, the same toys and the same books. So what's going on?

"Toddlers get all caught up in things – a new toy or a new activity – because every time they do it they get better at it, and they feel good about doing it, and they feel good about themselves," says Dr. Carl Arinoldo, a psychologist and co-author of [Essentials of Smart Parenting](#) (Nova Science, 2007).

In other words, your little one is just trying to get the hang of whatever he or she seems obsessed with, which doesn't present a problem as long as your child can be distracted for a little while to learn something new or participate in another activity. Just keep in mind that your child will likely go right back to whatever he was fixated on before you distracted him.

"Give the child time to obsess with the new item, and then suggest a new activity," Arinoldo says. "And don't get mad – that could lead to manipulation if the child senses a way to gain control." Rest assured that your little one will grow out of this obsessing phase. According to Arinoldo, by 4 or 5, most kids stop obsessing and become more flexible.

Nothing is more frightening to parents than a warning sign – any warning sign, whether a probable concern or not. While some degree of obsessing over toys is normal for toddlers, when that behavior appears with other red flags, such as a lack of bonding, eye contact and communication, you should have your child checked. Noticing potential signs of autism and the uncertainty these signs cause are emotionally difficult for all parents.

"Be vigilant," Arinoldo says. "And if you have any doubts, understand that it never hurts to ask a professional." It only takes time and the confidence to trust your parenting instincts.

<http://www.toddlerstoday.com/articles/5420#>