Managing Munchkin Manicures: How to cut your baby and toddler's finger and toe nails

One parental job you probably did not anticipate is the upkeep of rapidly growing finger and toe nails. Questions first time parents often ask me include: Should I use clippers or scissors? How do I avoid accidently nicking the skin? How often should I trim? The only question I haven't heard so far is: Should the tips be rounded or squared?

When your newborn fingers her face, even her soft finger nails can cause scratches. Yes, newborns need their first "manicure" within days of birth. Although the nails are long enough to scratch, most of the nail is adherent to the underlying skin. I recommend using an emery board or nail file for the first weeks of nail trimming. This method is unlikely to go awry and is effective. File from the bottom up, not just across the nail, in order to shorten and dull the nail.

Babies gain weight rapidly in the first 3 months at a rate of about one ounce per day and they grow in length at a rate of about an inch per month. Their finger nails grow as rapidly as the rest of the body and therefore need trims as often as twice a week. Toe nails grow quickly as well but because they do not cause self-injury, infants tend to be okay with less frequent trimming.

Once the nails are easy to "grab," advance to using scissors or clippers. I honestly don't believe either method is superior to the other. The method I used was to hold my baby on my lap facing out and then gently press the skin down from his nails and clip or cut carefully.

Unfortunately, no matter how careful you are, it is possible to hurt your child while cutting his nails. I remember injuring one of my

twins when he was a few months old. Picture a benign tiny paper cut that seems to cause a disproportionate amount of bleeding. He wasn't even all that upset, but…oh, the guilt I felt! If you accidentally nick your child, wash the cut with soap and running water and apply pressure for a few minutes with a clean washcloth to stop the bleeding. Once the bleeding stops, band aids are not necessary and can actually be a choking hazard in babies who spend most of their waking moments with their fingers in their mouths. Thankfully, rapidly growing kids heal wounds rapidly.

I think it is a good idea to trim nails while babies are awake so that they get used to the feeling of a "home manicure." This practice can prevent the later toddler meltdowns over nail trimming. However, some kids are just adverse to nail trimming, or have sensitive, ticklish feet and balk at trims. Yet trim we must! Try clipping an uncooperative toddler's nails while she is sleeping. If your toddler sleeps lightly, then you may have to time your manicure/pedicure for when another adult caregiver is home with you. One adult holds the hand/foot or distracts the toddler with singing, book reading, or watching a soothing video together (Elmo to the rescue once again!). The other trims the nails.

So, now with the birth of your child you have added a new title – "Master Manicurist" of your home. This job does become more glamorous when your child is old enough to ask for nail polish. Until then, happy nail trimming!

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