Baby and toddler nails: Tricks for managing your munchkin’s mani-pedi

The prom preparation aftermath

It’s not your imagination: baby and toddler nails are funky and warped. Now add the fact that babies and toddlers wiggle and squirm, and taking care of your young child’s nails will appear to be a daunting task.

Even soft newborn finger nails leave significant scratches on newborn faces. Newborns need their first “manicure” within days of birth. Although the nails are long enough to scratch,

most of the nail is adherent to underlying skin. A nail clipper can not get underneath the edge of the nail easily. We recommend using an emery board or nail file for the first few weeks of nail trimming. 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 three 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 rapidly as well and therefore need trims as often as two or three times a week. Toe nails grow quickly as well but because they do not cause self-injury, infants seem to be okay with less frequent toe nail trimming.

Once the nails are easier to grab, you can advance to using nails scissors or clippers. Dr. Kardos used to hold her babies in a nearly sitting position on her lap facing outward. Once you have a good hold, gently press the skin down away from the nails and then clip or cut carefully.

Unfortunately, no matter how careful you are, many well-intentioned parents end up cutting their child's skin at some point. Both Dr. Kardos and Dr. Lai have nicked their kids accidentaly. Dr. Kardos recalls snipping a bit of skin from one of her twins when he was a few months old. Picture a tiny benign paper-cut that seems to cause a disproportunate amount of bleeding. He wasn't even all that upset, but the guilt! If you accidentally cut your child, wash the cut with soap and running water to prevent infection and apply pressure for a few minutes with a clean wash cloth to stop the bleeding. Avoid band-aids: they are 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.

While Dr. Lai gave most of her kids manicures while they were sleeping, Dr. Kardos trimmed her kids' nails while awake to get them used to the feeling of a "home manicure." She likes to think this practice avoided some later toddler meltdowns

over nail trimming. However, as she found out in one of her three kids, some kids are just adverse to nail trimming, or have sensitive, ticklish feet and balk at trims. Yet, trim we must! Clip an uncooperative toddler's nails about 10-20 minutes after she has fallen asleep- this, or wait until you have another adult at home with you. Have your helper hold onto your child's hand or foot while distracting the toddler with singing, book reading, or watching a soothing video together. Then you can (quickly) trim nails.

However, even in infants, the sides of big toe nails grow into the skin. Luckily the nails are very soft, and with some soaking in warm water, you can pull the skin away from the nail and cut the nail to avoid having them dig in and result in infection, or paronychia.

While it's tempting to complete your child's mani-pedi with a coat of nail polish, keep in mind that a young children spend a lot of time with their hands, and their toes, in their mouths. We've seen kids as old as ten **years** bite on their toe nails. Unfortunately, the nail polish on your bureau may contain toxic hydrocarbons such as toluene and formaldehyde. Even non-toxic nail polishes will still contain dyes, and just because a manufacturer uses the term non-toxic, it doesn't necessarily mean a product is absolutely harmless. There are no specific standards for the use of the term non-toxic. Bottom line, the only route that avoids any chemicals is not to apply any polish in the first place. (If you are wondering about any cosmetic, the California department of public health keeps a database of cosmetics with " ingredients known or suspected to cause cancer, birth defects, or other reproductive harm.")

Who ever thought parental obligations would include cutting someone else's finger and toe nails? If you haven't perfected the process yet, take heart. You'll have plenty of practice over the years, and if you are lucky, you'll get a chance like Dr. Lai did last weekend to help prep nails for the prom.

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