

Effective Discipline for Headstrong Toddlers



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“NO!” “I WON’T” or “ME DO IT!” are common phrases that come out of the mouths of toddlers, who are notorious for resisting reason from adults. One minute your toddler is still your baby, cuddling up and being a little angel - and the next she is a raging tyrant, screaming and kicking and throwing herself on the floor!

They call the toddler years “The Terrible Two’s” or the “Terrible Three’s” and sometimes it may feel as though these years will last right into the “Terrible Thirties”!

Many parents tell me that they feel like failures because of the ‘bad’ behavior of their toddlers. Others are afraid that they will damage their children due to either spoiling or harsh discipline.

What I would like to do in this E-booklet is to give you the positive side of the stage your toddler is going through, as well as some tips that will help you to avoid conflict while still setting firm limits and boundaries for your toddler. I use the term ‘discipline’ in its broadest sense - not as a synonym for punishment, but as a method of guiding and nurturing your child through a stage of his life which can be difficult for both of you. This is a stage of development during which you as a parent can do both great harm and great good - so the more that you inform and equip yourself the better!

So, let us first look at what is going on with your child during this stage of development.

What is happening with my baby?

Well, your baby is beginning to grow up! For the first time in his life, he has begun to realize that he is a separate individual. Small babies have no sense of self. They believe that they are one person with their mothers. At around age two or three, children begin to have a sense of self, but they need to ‘test’ this and establish their independence and their ‘difference’ from you in whichever way they can. This is perfectly healthy and normal. If you fight it too much or make your child feel ‘bad’, guilty or scared about asserting independence, you may have a ‘good’ toddler, but your child may later have a difficult adolescence and even problems in her relationships later on in life. When I counsel parents or take children into therapy, I always find out what the child was like during the toddler years. If the child was an ‘angel’ or a ‘perfect child’, I get worried!

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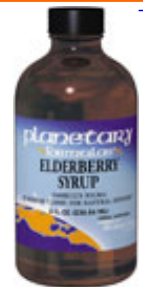


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So try and see your child's toddler years as 'practice' for adolescence and even an independent adulthood. It is a healthy stage and your toddler needs to feel supported and accepted in her developing independence. After all, learning to say 'No' is a very important life skill - and who better for your child to practice on than you!

Prevention is better than Cure!

It is much easier to prevent a tantrum than it is to try and reason with a child who is already having one!

Remember, your child is trying to establish his new independence from you. If you fight him and prevent him from doing this, he will become frustrated. Toddlers have a very low threshold for frustration and limited ability to reason, so it is always best to try and avoid putting obstacles in your toddler's way if possible. Here are some things you can do which will help to prevent frustration and [Tantrums](#).

Try and be one step ahead of your toddler.

For example, if you know that she hates to stop playing and will resist getting into the bath, don't suddenly tell her to come and bath without any warning. Rather tell her that she has five more minutes left to play and then she is going to have a bath. This will help to prepare her. When it is time for her bath, try and make bath time fun and an extension of the game that she is already playing. Instead of saying "Come and bath now", rather say "Do you want to take the pink duck or the blue duck to play with in the bath?" or "Let's watch the Mummy duck teach the baby ducks to swim in the water, OK?"

Similarly, try and be one step ahead in being aware of your toddler's 'difficult' times of the day - when frustration and [Tantrums](#) are more likely. If he is too tired, your toddler will become unreasonable and it is unlikely that anything will work with him. Learn to put him down for a nap BEFORE he gets overtired, not after he and you are both a wreck!

Be aware also that his blood sugar levels will vary according to when he has last eaten and the amount of sugar he is consuming. If he is hungry, he will easily become unreasonable, so make sure that you give him regular healthy snacks throughout the day. Toddlers need at least five small meals a day - not three like adults. Too many sweet things to eat and drink, will be bad for your toddler's health and his mood and are to be avoided, except on special occasions.

A consistent routine, together with regular naps and healthy meals will help your toddler to feel more secure and prevent many [Tantrums](#).

Be reasonable in your expectations

Remember that your toddler has a very short memory and little understanding of why certain things are not allowed. Don't become angry and expect that she behave like an older child. Lots of patience and plenty of repetition is what works, not scolding and spanking when your toddler does not 'listen'.

I have counseled parents who expect their toddler to tidy up his room or who demand that their 3 year old child refrain from making a mess when he eats. This is unreasonable and ill informed behavior from adults and will place too much stress on a



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child. Be aware of what your child can or cannot do and make allowances for his age.

If your child is big for her age, be especially careful that you do not treat her as an older child. Many people make this mistake without realizing it - this includes teachers and parents. Remember that size does not necessarily relate to maturity levels - have age appropriate expectations from your toddler!

Give lots of controlled choices

Give your toddler things to choose from. This helps him to feel more in control of his life and prevents oppositional behavior.

For example - many toddlers fight about the clothes they have to put on in the morning, often insisting on putting on summer clothes in the depths of winter and vice versa! Prevent this by taking out two or three winter outfits and asking your child which one she prefers. This gives her the feeling of independence, without compromising your need to have her warmly dressed.

'Don't [Sweat](#) the small stuff'

This well-known phrase could have been written especially for parents of toddlers! Don't get into a battle of wills over things that are not important. There is no need whatsoever to establish who is 'boss'! If it doesn't really matter, don't fight about it. Save the conflict for things which are non-negotiable - there will be enough of them!

For example, if your child wants to go to [Nursery](#) school with one blue sock and one pink one, chalk it up to creativity and an artistic spirit! Even if he wants to wear a different shoe on each foot, that is fine! Don't stifle his experiments with clothes or his expression of himself in terms of how he wants to dress. He doesn't need to be color coordinated! If anyone thinks that you are a bad parent for allowing your child to wear a pink dress over red trousers, one blue shoe and one [Black](#) shoe - that is their problem!

Don't fight over unnecessary things. Eventually one of your child's friends will make a remark about his color sense and he will likely modify his choice of clothes accordingly! Then it will have been a valuable lesson for him, rather than a source of conflict which might emerge again in adolescence in the form of green hair and eyebrow rings!

Save the conflict for bigger and more important things - like whether or not it is OK to play in the traffic!

Save NO for important things!

Speaking of traffic, there are some occasions when NO must be NO! Do not allow your toddler to play with sharp scissors, just because you do not want to stifle his spirit. He is not yet able to judge danger for himself and therefore you must do it for him. There must be some things which are non-negotiable under all circumstances. In cases like these, say "NO" very firmly and follow this up by removing either the object or your toddler from the scene. Be consistent about this.

Distraction is your most powerful tool!

Toddlers have a very short attention span and are interested in everything! This means that they are easily distracted, so make sure that you use this to your advantage when

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trying to prevent conflict.

For example, if you see your toddler making a beeline for your five year old's coloring book, don't say 'NO' and take her away from her object of interest. She will invariably start screaming blue murder! Rather say 'Oh - Look at the lovely bird outside! Let's go and see!'

Keep your child busy.

Boredom will create bad moods. Your toddler is developing fast and needs lots of learning opportunities. This need not be an expensive or time-consuming pastime. Provide empty containers, sand and water and help her to make mud pies. Go for walks in the park. Join a mothers and toddlers group. Read her storybooks. Make sure that her day is varied and interesting.

Do not park your toddler in front of the TV for hours for convenience sake. A short age appropriate program every day is no problem, but excessive TV viewing causes developmental problems and frustrated, bad tempered children! Don't make TV a habit you will find hard to break in a few years time.

Don't use harsh discipline.

Spanking and yelling should be avoided, especially with toddlers who have little ability to understand this form of discipline and who can easily become angry and begin to bully other children and small animals as a way of coping with the harsh discipline. Rather use one of the preventative or guiding techniques above - they will be much more effective in any case!

Model good behavior

Children learn by example! Don't yell or swear if you don't want them to do the same! Don't expect your toddler not to hit his sister if you hit him. Don't bite your child to show her that biting is wrong! Model reasonable and kind behavior at all times. Rather say, "We don't bite each other, because it hurts. Look - poor Sally feels very sore because you bit her. If you bite again, I am going to pick you up and take you out of the room, until you can stop biting" You will have to do this a few times - even many times! But eventually your child will learn.

Give lots of praise and encouragement!

Plenty of positive reinforcement is essential for young children. Praise his growing independence ("Look how clever you are to undress yourself!" "You finished your food all by yourself - what a big girl!") Too often we reprimand and criticize, rather than building our children's self esteem and confidence.

Be aware of what you have learned from your parents

Don't repeat bad parenting patterns! If your parents spanked you when you cried, you may find yourself becoming angry with your child when he cries. If this means that you have difficulty in controlling an impulse to hit him, even if you know it is wrong, rather consult a therapist who will help you to work through these feelings from your past.

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Make sure that you look after yourself. Toddlers can be tiring and draining as well as a source of great pleasure. At the very least they are challenging and you need to be on the ball all the time. In order to maintain a sense of perspective and patience, you need to take time out to recharge your batteries. There is no sense in both of you being tired and unreasonable!

Share the parenting load with your partner. Take time to be with your friends and to get out for exercise, entertainment and relaxation. Enlist the help of a grandparent, babysitter or join a supportive mothers' group. Do this regularly, not just when you are at the end of your tether! Your child needs you to be rested, happy and relaxed - not resentful, tired and ratty!

Learn to identify problem areas early.

Having said that some conflict and opposition from your toddler is healthy and normal, also be aware when this becomes excessive as it may be a sign that something is wrong. If your child is always crying and screaming, make sure that it is not a warning signal.

Is there someone bullying him at school? Are there marital problems at home? Are you being too strict with your child? Do you pay him enough attention and prevent him from being bored? Is he eating too much junk food?

Learn to know your child and identify when something is wrong. If you are not sure, you are welcome to consult me for more detailed information and counseling.

Some children go through a stage of being extremely oppositional and find it very difficult to control their tempers. It is true that children differ in their ability to tolerate frustration - often despite their parents doing all the 'right' things! If this is so, your child may benefit from a course of natural, [Homeopathic Medicine](#) to calm him and help him to be more reasonable.

Good luck and be well!

Michele Carelse is a Registered Clinical Psychologist and Licensed Counselor with more than 15 years experience running her own private practice.

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