



Guide to Dealing with a Challenging Toddler

Every parent knows the frustration and feelings of helplessness that can come from an unruly child throwing a tantrum in public. The resulting punching, biting, inconsolable crying, and screaming can leave you with no other choice than to head home for a long time out.

And while many mothers and fathers will experience the embarrassment that can come from this situation at least a couple of times in their child's formative years, some toddlers can be a bit harder to handle than others. After all, every child is different.

Equipping yourself with the knowledge of what causes these outbursts and how to effectively handle them is the best way to not only manage your child's raucous personality, but also enrich their personal development at the same time.

What Happened to My Happy Baby?

This is a common question among couples new to parenting. Your giggling, cuddly, adorable baby has somehow transformed into a self-centered, moody, over-emotional bundle of frustration. So, what happened?

The stage of development that your once-delightful toddler is now experiencing is fraught with new emotions, thoughts, and desires that your child has never felt before. Guilt, pride, embarrassment, and independence are all new to your toddler around this age and, as such, are difficult for them to understand and to control.

Beyond that, your child's ability to communicate through language is still in its early stages. Imagine the frustration that would come from not knowing how to describe what's bothering you, let alone what you need to fix it. This is the problem your toddler faces every single day.

As a parent, it's up to you to understand these limitations and create reasonable expectations for what your toddler can and can't handle. Surprisingly, many parents don't know what their toddlers are actually capable of developmentally. For example, a national poll conducted by the parenting organization ZERO TO THREE found that the majority of parents expected a degree of self-control in their toddler "[one to two years earlier than brain science indicates is possible.](#)"

Knowing what toddlers are developmentally capable of is the foundation for being able to deal with your challenging toddler's frustrations before they become full-blown tantrums. Take a look at the resource below to become better acquainted with what kinds of emotions and thought processes a child can have at different ages.

- [Medline Plus](#) – developmental milestones and guides

For parents who think their child might be behind developmentally, it is crucial to familiarize yourselves with the warning signs of Pervasive Developmental Disorders (PDDs) and speech/language/hearing disorders. The earlier you are able to detect a problem, the better equipped you'll be to deal with it effectively and find your child the help he or she needs. Take a look at the resources below for more information.

- [CHADD](#) – The National Resource on ADHD
- [First Signs – list of and warning signs for other PDDs](#)
- [Mom 2 Mom](#) – 24/7 Hotline: 877-914-6662 - organization for supporting parents of special needs children
- [ASHA](#) – American Speech-Language-Hearing Association – helps to identify preschool language disorders

Helping Your Child Understand Their New Emotions

Having to deal with a variety of complex, new emotions for the first time is one of the main reasons your toddler may be acting out. What you can do as a parent is help them understand these new feelings by making a conscious effort to communicate with them about these emotions.

One of the best ways to do this is by making the feelings and emotions of daily activities a topic of discussion. For instance, if you are reading your toddler a bedtime story, point out the different feelings that some of the main characters might be going through. It's especially important to give these feelings a name like "sad", "angry", "worried", and "excited". Doing so will not only give your toddler a specific word for certain emotions, it'll also help them tie these words to real world examples by seeing them played out in the story.

Also remember to be empathetic when your child is having an especially hard time. Tantrums often result from an inability to fully express emotions. As such, acknowledging your child's feelings and letting them know you truly understand what they are going through can help diffuse a potentially stressful situation. Teaching your child just how to communicate his or her feelings with specific names of emotions can make it easier for you to empathize and solve whatever problem they may be facing.

Another strategy that can help your toddler to understand his or her emotions a bit better is helping to build up their empathy for others. This one takes a bit of work, as children at this age have a hard time conceptualizing anything outside of their own wants and needs, but if you start talking to them about how their actions emotionally affect others, they'll better understand their own feelings as well.

Help Them Assert Their Independence

When your child becomes a toddler, they will typically be more concerned with doing things themselves. When that independence is constrained, however, they may react by throwing a tantrum.

You can foster healthy development in your child by letting them do things on their own. Of course, this applies only to reasonable tasks like pouring juice or watering the garden—but the more you let them engage in activities on their own, the better adapted they'll be to handle unfamiliar situations calmly. Be sure to stay close by, as they may look for your help if they get overwhelmed.

Another way to help them assert their independence is by letting them choose how to perform daily activities like what to eat for lunch or what they would like to wear to preschool. Be careful though—giving them free reign when it comes to every choice can be a disaster. Instead, give them options (e.g. “do you want hot dogs, macaroni, or potatoes for lunch?”). This will keep their choices realistic and give them a sense of control as well.

Also, if your toddler asks to do something that simply isn't a good idea, give them an alternative option. So rather than telling your three-year-old he can't hold his baby sister, tell him he can sit on the couch and cuddle with her instead.

Disciplining Your Challenging Toddler

Figuring out how to discipline your child is one of parenting's great stressors. Putting your foot down and controlling the behavior of a person you love can be incredibly difficult. But no matter how much it may hurt you to do so, disciplining your toddler is crucial in order to stop bad behavior and foster healthy development.

Outlined below are a few things that you can do to ensure your spirited child gets the most out of your disciplinary strategies.

- ❑ **Be Specific** – Be sure to tell your toddler exactly why they are being disciplined, what rules they broke, and what they should do in the future differently.
- ❑ **Use Non-physical Discipline Techniques** – Time outs can be used with a limit of about 1 minute per year of age. Also, if a toddler is abusing a privilege (throwing toys in anger), you can take the privilege away for a period of time.
- ❑ **Don't Cave!** – You've heard it before: “children crave boundaries.” And it's true. Sticking to these boundaries is the best way to show your child you are serious about his or her limitations.
- ❑ **Don't Lose Your Cool** – Try not to respond to your toddler's heightened emotional state with anger or frustration. Doing so might make their tantrum even worse.
- ❑ **Follow Through with Consequences** – Don't tell your toddler that they won't get to go to the park if they continue behaving badly, if you don't intend to follow through. Otherwise, they won't take you seriously and learn about the consequences for their actions.

- **Reinforce Good Behavior** – One of the most important discipline tips—be sure to tell your toddler when they are acting mature and helpful as much as you can.

Be Smart About What Situations to Put Your Toddler In

Being realistic in terms of what types of situations your toddler can handle is one of the best ways to limit their temper tantrums. Walking through a crowded mall, for example, might make it harder for your child to keep it together than a quiet grocery store.

If you do have to bring your challenging child to a place where he or she is likely to act up, prepare them for the situation beforehand and remind them of the rules. Just like all people, your toddler will react better to an unfamiliar situation if he knows what's coming.

It's also important to realize that when your toddler acts out, he might be reacting to a more long-term situational change rather than an immediate one. Moving to a new home, having or adopting another child, dealing with a sick family member, and other big changes around the house can affect the way your child acts elsewhere. In these situations, empathizing and encouraging communication with your little one is especially important.

Finding More Information

If you are having a particularly hard time with your troublesome toddler, you can find more information by conducting an online search for terms such as “parental support toddler,” “preschool parent help,” or “disciplining toddlers.”

Alternatively, you can call either of these hotlines for direct help:

- [National Parent Helpline](#) – 1-855-4A PARENT (1-855-427-2736)
- [Information Children](#) – 778-782-3548

Many local communities also host parenting workshops where you can learn even more skills and strategies for dealing with particularly difficult children. You can find these by using the resources below.

- [Active Parenting Publishers](#)
- [National Parenting Education Network \(NPEEN\)](#)

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