

Tantrums, Defiance, Aggression, Oh My!: Understanding and Managing Challenging Behaviors

Toddlers are charming, but also challenging. They are becoming increasingly aware that they are separate individuals from their parents and caregivers. This means that they are driven to assert themselves, to communicate their likes and dislikes, and to act independently (as much as they can!). Toddlers are also developing the language skills that help them express their ideas, wants, and needs.

At the same time, toddlers don't understand logic—they are driven by their feelings. They also are just at the very beginning stage of developing self-control and therefore have a hard time waiting and coping with strong emotions like frustration and disappointment. Demands like, "No!" and "Me do it" and "No diaper change!" are par for the course. So are behaviors such as:

- Having a meltdown when you tell him iPad time is over.
- Making specific demands and not accepting a substitute. If the purple pajamas are in the wash, she is inconsolable (even though you have offered the pink ones, the polka dot ones, the ones with the cupcake patch on the front, etc.).
- Losing it when frustrated—many toddlers will give up or get angry when they can't figure out how to make the jack-in-the-box work.

WHAT YOU CAN DO:

- **Stay calm.** Remind yourself that young children are not purposefully misbehaving and that they need your empathy and help to learn to cope with their strong feelings at this young age. Getting emotional and angry often increases toddlers' distress, rather than helping them calm. When your child is having a meltdown, he needs you to be his rock—calm and steady. This makes him feel safe and helps him regroup more quickly.
- **Think about the meaning of the behavior.** Think about: What is he struggling with? (Is he tired, hungry, overwhelmed, scared, frustrated, angry?) What does he need from me to cope with these feelings? What do I want him to learn from this situation? Thinking it through rather than reacting will help you respond in a calm and effective way.
- **Empathize with your child's feelings.** Feelings are not the problem—it's what children (and we!) do with our feelings that can become problematic. Validating your child's feelings helps her learn to understand and make sense of them, which is a critical step toward learning to manage feelings in acceptable ways. "It's time to take you to Ms. Kelly's house. I know you want to stay home with Daddy. You miss me and I miss you during the day. But staying home is not a choice. Daddy and Mommy have to go to work. But when we get home, you and I will finish the puzzle we started. Do you want to get into the car seat yourself or do you want me to help you in?"
- **Be consistent.** Consistency with rules is key to helping children learn to make good choices. If a parent puts the toy train away every time a toddler throws it, he quickly learns not to throw toys. But when the rules keep changing it is hard for young children to understand which rules are "for real."
- **Don't fear the push-back.** It can help to keep reminding yourself that just because your child doesn't like your rule, doesn't mean it's not good for her! It's a toddler's job to dislike your rules (it's practice for the teen years). Staying calm and allowing your child the space to be angry lets her know you can handle her most difficult feelings and that you are confident she can manage and move on from the disappointment.

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- **Look for patterns in your child's behavior.** Anticipating what situations might be challenging for your child can help you head them off. For example, if you notice your child has a hard time coping with transitions, such as going from lunch to nap, you can give him a warning 5 minutes before or even hand him an object, like the stuffed animal he sleeps with, as a visual reminder of the change that is coming. Transition rituals can also be helpful—such as reading a few page of a book or starting a drawing together that you finish together when he wakes up.
- **Offer alternatives.** Help toddlers achieve their goals in acceptable ways. Always let them know what they can do, and not just what they can't: "It's not okay to throw blocks. Someone might get hurt. Let's throw these pillows instead." Offering an alternative is important because most toddlers are not yet able to identify more appropriate activities on their own.
- **Give choices that head off misbehavior.** For example: "You have a decision to make. You can choose to take turns with the ball or I will have to put the ball away and you can choose another toy to share." Keep your language positive (not angry), simple, and at your child's level. Help her understand she has choices, and that every choice has a consequence.
- **Help your child practice self-control.** Play lots of turn-taking games that require children to wait and control their impulses. Take turns placing blocks on the tower, or banging on the drum. Using timers can be a helpful tool—children can see the time elapsing which makes them feel more in control.
- **Make feelings a part of your everyday discussions.** Read books and talk about how the characters are feeling: "The dog is really happy that he got a bone." Label your child's feelings: "You are so angry that we have to leave Joey's house. You will miss him." And share your own feelings: "I spilled the milk! Ugh—that is so frustrating!" Identifying feelings is the first step in helping children gain control over their emotions and communicate them effectively to others.
- **Teach positive ways to express emotions.** Rather than offering a quick reassurance ("You'll be fine!"), recognize the important role that adults play in helping young children deal with big feelings like anger, sadness, and frustration. If your child is sad because his grandparents just left after a 2-week visit, you can suggest looking at photos of them or drawing them a picture. If your child is angry and throwing things, give him something safe to throw like a soft ball into a basket on the floor. What's important is to teach your child that there are many ways to express his feelings in healthy, non-hurtful ways.