

Handling a toddler

Are there any parents who **haven't** felt complete and utter love for their toddler and, at the same time, frustration and anger?

Our beloved little ones test our nerves because they're testing boundaries all around them. Every day, little by little, they're mastering new abilities and accomplishing new feats, and are anxious and excited to use these skills.

Sometimes it's tough to reel in a toddler, but it can be done. And setting rules and limits now — when your child is learning what behaviors are acceptable — will help prevent bigger problems down the road.

Here are some ways to help you keep your youngster on the right track.

Be Consistent

When it comes to discipline, it's important to be consistent. Parents who don't stick to the rules and consequences they set up don't have kids who do either. For example, if you tell your toddler that a timeout is the repercussion for bad behavior, be sure to enforce it. Only issue warnings for things that you can follow through on. Empty threats undermine your authority.

And don't forget that kids learn by watching adults, particularly their parents. So make sure your own behavior is role-model material. When asking your child to pick up toys, you'll make a much stronger impression if you've put away your own belongings rather than leaving your stuff strewn around the room.

Eliminate Temptation

By now, you've figured out that your toddler wants to explore and investigate the world. Toddlers are naturally curious, so it's wise to eliminate temptations whenever possible. That means items like TVs, phones, and video equipment should be kept out of reach, as well as choking hazards like jewelry, buttons, and small items that kids can put in their mouths.

And always keep cleaning supplies and medications stored safely away where kids can't get to them.

Use Distraction

If your roving toddler does head toward an unacceptable or dangerous play object, calmly say "No" and either remove your child from the area or distract him or her with another activity.

It's important to not spank, hit, or slap your child. At this age, kids are unlikely to be able to make a connection between the behavior and physical punishment. The message you send when you spank is that it's OK to hit someone when you're angry. The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) discourages spanking, which is no more effective than other forms of discipline, such as timeouts.

Practice Timeout

If you need to take a harder line with your child, timeouts can be an effective form of discipline. A 2- or 3-year-old who has been hitting, biting, or throwing food, for example, should be told why the behavior is unacceptable and taken to a designated timeout area — a kitchen chair or bottom stair — for a minute or two to calm down.

As a general rule, about 1 minute per year of age is a good guide for timeouts. Shorter timeouts can be effective, but longer ones have no added benefit and can sometimes undermine your efforts if your child gets up (and refuses to return) before you signal that the timeout has ended.

How to Avoid Temper Tantrums

Even the most well-behaved toddler can have a tantrum from time to time. Tantrums are common during toddlerhood because kids can understand more than they can express and this often leads to frustration when they can't communicate their needs.

Toddlers get frustrated in other ways, too, like when they can't dress a doll or keep up with an older sibling. Power struggles can ensue when your toddler wants more independence and autonomy too soon.

The best way to deal with tantrums is to avoid them in the first place, whenever possible. Here are some strategies that may help:

- Make sure your child isn't acting up simply to get attention. Try to establish a habit of catching your child being good ("time-in"), which means rewarding your little one with attention for positive behavior.
- Give your toddler control over little things. This may fulfill the need for independence and ward off tantrums. Offer minor choices that you can live with, such as "Would you like an apple or banana with lunch?"
- When kids are playing or trying to master a new task, offer age-appropriate toys and games. Also, start with something simple before moving on to more challenging tasks.
- Consider the request carefully when your child wants something. Is it outrageous? Maybe it isn't. Choose your battles; accommodate when you can.
- Know your child's limits. If you know your toddler is tired, it's not the best time to go grocery shopping or try to squeeze in one more errand.

When Tempers Flare

If your child does throw a tantrum, keep your cool. Don't complicate the problem with your own frustration. Kids can sense when parents are becoming frazzled and this can just make their frustration worse. Try to understand where your child is coming from. For example, if your youngster has just had a great disappointment, you may need to provide comfort.

Ignoring the outburst is another way to handle it — if the tantrum poses no threat to your child or others. Continue your activities, paying no attention to your child but remaining within sight. Kids who are in danger of hurting themselves or others during a tantrum should be taken to a quiet, safe place to calm down.

Some kids will have a hard time stopping a tantrum. In these cases, it might help to say to say, "I'll help you settle down now." But whatever you do, do **not** reward your toddler by giving into desires. This will only prove that tantrums are an effective tactic for getting what he or she wants. Instead, verbally praise your child for regaining self-control.

As their language skills improve and they mature, kids become better at handling frustration and tantrums are less likely. If you're having difficulty handling you child's temper tantrums or have any questions about discipline, ask your pediatrician for advice.