

Common Questions for Parents of Toddlers

By Christine Hierlmaier Nelson ©2010

How do I avoid power struggles with my toddler?

There is **never** a reason to fight with a toddler. Think about that. They really don't wake up with a plan to ruin your day. The best way to avoid a power struggle — whether getting them to put on a diaper or eat their veggies — is to give them choices. The key is that you — the parent — create the choices. Think about what you want your child to do and offer two choices that lead to that conclusion. If you want him to put on a diaper, then give him the choice of putting it on in his bedroom or in the bathroom. If you want her to eat vegetables, give her a choice of carrots or corn. Either way, the child will wear a diaper and eat some vegetables. You will be amazed at the transformation in a toddler who gets to choose something in his carefully controlled world. Giving him a taste of independence is a wonderful way to guide his development. The bonus is that you and your child stay calm and get on with your day!

How do I get my toddler to listen to me?

Imagine a world of giants who stare down at you and talk about things you don't quite understand. Toddlers live low to the ground, so when you need to communicate something important you must get down on their level — literally. Bend down, make eye contact, and speak softly about what you need your child to do next. This will help her focus on your words and understand that this information is important. The other thing you should understand about toddlers is that they emit more theta brainwaves than adults. Between ages 2 and 5, children are off in dreamland. So it's important to get their attention physically. Hold their hands and ask them to look at you when you talk. Take time to communicate more directly with your toddler or preschooler and you will avoid repeating instructions over and over. Ask them if they understand and wait for their response. Smile and thank them for cooperating.

Is nanny care better for a toddler or is daycare?

Either situation works for your child as long as the routine and discipline are consistent with what you want for your child. There are advantages and challenges to each, of course. The advantage of a nanny is that the child remains in the familiar surroundings of home. The challenge is that your home can get a little messy depending on the nanny, and your child has fewer opportunities to socialize with other children. At a daycare, children socialize with their peers and get a taste of structured daily activities. They are also exposed to more germs and social conflict and competition for attention. The best way to make this decision is to visit daycare centers near your home or office and get a feel for their routines, discipline policies, activities, and teacher-child ratio. Consider your budget. Consider your child's temperament. A feisty, active child will adapt more readily to daycare than will a fearful child. But fearful children benefit from exposure to

other children to prepare them for school. Talk to other parents about their choices in childcare, but choose a situation that makes you feel confident that your child is in good hands. This will reduce your separation anxiety and allow both you and your child to have a good day.

Should I schedule three meals a day and snacks?

Like adults, children benefit from small meals every few hours. They burn through a lot of energy even during quiet play, so it's important to provide consistent, balanced meals supplemented with healthy snacks. Two or three hours after breakfast, set out a plate of apple slices and cheese. A few hours after lunch, offer crackers and baby carrots. If your child asks for a bedtime snack, offer a healthy option like a banana or yogurt. Each main meal should provide balanced choices from the four food groups: grains, dairy, fruits and vegetables, and protein. Try to get your child to drink a lot of liquids, too. Water, milk, and natural fruit juices are good choices. When they are young, have fun experimenting with new vegetable and fruit choices to broaden their tastes. Keep low pantry shelves and refrigerator drawers stocked with fresh fruit and healthy snacks for self-service. Because young children can get their nutritional allowances over several days, don't worry if they eat little one day and seem ravenous the next. They're growing!

When is my baby old enough to understand what "No" means?

Early. But they understand your body language and tone of voice sooner. Some experts believe you should reserve a sharp, loud "No!" for times of danger such as a hot stove or a busy street. A simple correction such as "tut, tut" can be used to teach them about playing nicely or getting them to pay attention to their food. This way, the word "no" keeps its intensity when the situation calls for immediate response from your child.

You might also avoid using "no" because it doesn't explain much to the child any more than it tells a dog to stay off the furniture. Removing them physically from something — like a tabletop — is more effective in correcting behavior than saying "no." As they get older, you can correct behavior more effectively by explaining what they did wrong and offering an alternative. For example, "We don't hit people; we hug them." "We put our shoes in the closet when we come home." "We don't throw food. You can eat it or leave the table." All of these examples are expressed to your child calmly because you want him to absorb the information and not your reaction. Remember that body language speaks louder than any word. A child who knows that she is getting a strong reaction from a parent may use this as a means of getting attention in the future — even if the attention is negative.

How can I encourage cooperation in my toddler?

Take advantage of the fact that toddlers enjoy interacting with a parent. The best ways to encourage cooperation are three-fold. First, model cooperative, patient behavior yourself. When your toddler requests your attention by using his words or grasping your arm, respond with a smile and show that you are listening by making eye contact. If your child is whining or screaming as an attention-getting device, it is appropriate to wait a minute before responding and then ask the child to calm down before you help.

The second way to encourage cooperation is to engage toddlers in activities around the house. Show them how to help with laundry, pick up toys, and set the table for meals. Praise them for helping. And finally, if the child shows resistance to cooperation — putting on her shoes, for example — offer her a choice that still accomplishes your result. Let her choose the shoes. Once she knows she has some control in the situation, she'll be happy to cooperate!

How do I handle temper tantrums?

C.I.S. your kids. This is my method for any stage and helps you maintain control at the same time. The acronym is appropriate because research shows that kissing creates feelings of calm by boosting serotonin in the brain. When you kiss or hug your children, it calms you and them. The C stands for consistent. When children know what to expect from a tantrum, they are less likely to throw one. It's best with toddlers to remove them from the source of their frustration (time-out), to redirect (kiss or hug) or give them an age-appropriate choice. (Keep in mind that tired toddlers don't care if you have more shopping to do, but they are also not trying to drive you crazy.) The I is for Immediate. Deal with the situation immediately for best results. Ignoring the tantrum completely is a form of punishment and does not teach children positive coping techniques such as using their words. The S is for sensitive. Again, figure out if your toddler is tired, hungry or overstimulated. Be sensitive to his needs and you'll avoid public embarrassment and frustration.

Should my toddler sleep on a schedule?

Toddlers need at least 12 hours of sleep a night and may also take afternoon naps of 1 to 2 hours. Deep sleep is required to trigger the human growth hormone and to help children focus during the day. Schedule naps right after lunch and maintain the routine, even if it means sitting by him the first few times. It's okay if your child doesn't sleep every time; having quiet time after lunch helps her re-group for more adventures.

If your schedule does not allow a regular nap, the bedtime routine should begin by 6 p.m. and bed by 7, earlier if your toddler shows signs of crankiness toward the end of the day. The nice thing about this age group is that they can't tell time, so you can set the routine! Keep the routine consistent: washing up, pajamas, books, a drink, kiss goodnight. If they resist bedtime, offer appropriate choices like what they will wear or which "lovie" they

want in bed. This shows them that it's still bedtime, but they get some control. While it may be hard for you to put your child to bed if you haven't seen her very much that day, remember that a rested, healthy child is most important — and you'll have more productive time together later.

When is it realistic to expect kids to share?

The skill of sharing begins sooner than you think because you can model it. During mealtime, let your toddler feed you and thank him for sharing. Practice the same technique with treats. Temperament plays a role here: Feisty, extroverted children will be less cooperative than Flexible or Fearful children when it comes to sharing with peers. When conflicts ensue at home or on the playground, you need to intervene at this stage to show children how to take turns or to redirect one child to another activity. If you know who had the toy first, allow that child the first turn and redirect the other child. This strategy also supports the skill of patience or delayed gratification as children learn to control their frustration through your guidance. Older children or siblings, age 5 and up, can support the process. Ask the sibling to be in charge of snacks and “share” with the younger child by counting out even portions. Praise them for sharing and it will become automatic. I was pleasantly surprised the other day when my 5-year-old shared a snack with her younger sister without a prompt.

When is my toddler old enough for a time-out?

Any toddler can have a time-out. Just don't expect the child to sit somewhere unattended! They won't understand the necessity of sitting in a corner or on a chair or in their room alone because they are often acting up from fatigue or to gain attention. The best time-out technique is either redirection or time-out with a parent. If an activity is frustrating for a child, move on to something else or give her an appropriate choice. For example, if your child is having a tantrum in a store, give her the choice of sitting in the cart or walking while holding your hand. If the child refuses to hold your hand, explain calmly that she will have to go back in the cart. She gets a choice and you get your shopping done. Keep snacks handy for long errands as a form of redirection and to boost your toddler's mental endurance.

If he is doing something inappropriate, such as throwing food at the table or hitting a sibling, be Consistent, Immediate, and Sensitive (C.I.S.). Take the child away from the table or sibling and sit with him; explain that the behavior is not appropriate and give him an alternative (e.g. eat, hug). Don't punish or redirect an older sibling when the younger one is at fault. Above all, stay calm. Modeling patience during conflict is the best way to control your toddler's behavior.

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