

Parent's Job Easy at First—Until Baby's A Toddler

by Juvata Rusch

What is more curious than a cat, busier than a bee, and faster than a speeding bullet? Many parents of a toddler will answer with amusement and frustration, “My child!” Infants can be demanding, but unlike toddlers, they are not mobile; they cannot walk, climb or hide.

Parental attitudes toward an infant are usually accepting throughout most of the first year. Even though parents get exasperated, they realize that the baby's lack of control is age-appropriate, and they are consequently neither moralistic nor critical of the baby's actions and moods. During the two years between the first and third birthdays, there are several factors that can make parents wonder where their “easy” infant has disappeared to, and where the remains of their own patience have gone.

The helpless infant's behavior did not interfere as much with the rights and property of others. As an active, exploring toddler, however, the child's behavior constantly intrudes on parents' privacy and space and needs supervision. With a baby, parents tend to say, “Oh, he or she's just a baby and doesn't know any better” but with a toddler, parents tend to be more moralistic. Most toddlers seem to have endless energy and drive; their curiosity is probably greater than at any succeeding time in life. Toddlers can move out into the world to explore on their own, while the infant has to depend on others to bring the fascinations of the world close.

Toddlers can become quite heady with this newfound independence and action. These factors—energy, curiosity, mobility, and independence—combine to make toddlers fascinating and frustrating little beings to the parent and to themselves. Toddlers are struggling to become their own person, and are caught between the comfort and predictability of dependence and the excitement and fear of independence. Many of us adults continue to struggle with that dilemma ourselves, with many more resources than the toddler has.

Remembering some limitations that toddlers have can help parents have more compassion during this period:

- 1. They do not know much language.** We need to be as concrete as possible and show them what we want as well as tell them.
- 2. They do not have an adult sense of time.** They live very much in the present; “soon” and “hurry” don't mean much. The pleasant side of this is that toddlers don't hold grudges.
- 3. They are very small, and want to be big.** Get down on the toddler's level to see what the world (and adult faces) look like. No wonder they like to climb on chairs, tables, and counters!
- 4. They do not have much physical control.** Their ideas are often far beyond their abilities. While their attempted activities and the results make great stories later, at the time parent and toddler can be quite upset.

5. They do not have an adult idea of right and wrong. Right (good) is what parents smile at, and wrong (bad) is what parents frown at, and that can change according to time of day, mood, and which parent. It can be downright confusing to a toddler to get praise for digging in the garden one moment and punishment a few minutes later for digging up a potted plant in the living room.

Here are some common questions from parents of toddlers:

Question: “My child seems to be saying “NO” all the time; sometimes even when I know she means “yes.” When will this end, and what should I do?”

Answer: This is a normal stage that most children go through between 18 months and 3 years of age. If a parent doesn’t take it too seriously or too personally, it doesn’t usually last more than a few months at its strongest. Look at it as crucial to the development of independence and identity.

Think about it. “Yes” says, “We’re together” while “No” says, “We’re separate.” Which is the more “independent” response? Toddlers may mean many things—“Do you really mean it?” “Do I have any choice?” “I’m ME!”—when they say “No.” Try not to argue. Sometimes overlooking it, just going on with what’s necessary in the situation, works.

Give your toddler choices when you can, since this increases his or her sense of freedom and control. You might let the toddler choose which book to read, what juice to drink, or which clothes to wear. Having some choice in an undesirable task, like diaper changing, can help, whether it be where to do it, what song to sing, or whether to go slow or fast. However, don’t give a choice when there is none, as in “Do you want to go to bed now?” when you mean “It’s time to go to bed.” Simplify your rules and your environment, allowing fewer opportunities for conflict and more opportunities for positive experiences.

Question: “What about hitting? My toddler doesn’t like to share. When another child grabs his toy, my son hits him. Should I punish him?”

Answer: Hitting is what toddlers do because they’re more physical than verbal at this point, and they haven’t learned another way, like using words, to get what they want. Also, they aren’t strong on empathy, understanding another’s viewpoint. This is an opportunity for parents to begin teaching that hitting hurts and won’t be allowed and what to do instead. But what do you want your child to do instead? To use words, to get adult help, hit something else, what? Once you have decided, get good eye contact, speak slowly, and use words that are simple, and direct. Be very clear. “It’s OK to get mad, but no hitting. Hitting hurts. Say MINE instead.”

If it happens again, separate the child, saying, “You haven’t learned yet—no hitting. We’ll try again in a minute.” The emphasis is on learning something—the next more mature behavior—rather than that the child is “bad” or needs punishment.

Whenever toddlers “misbehave,” the adult has the opportunity to ask, “What do I want my child to learn to do in this situation? Is what I’m doing teaching that to my child? Is there a negative side effect in what I’m doing (usually in the form of fear or shame)?” Asking these three questions can help parents feel less emotional about situations and more like the teachers and friendly guides to their children that they want to be. Figuring out what we want our children to do and showing them is harder than the familiar “Stop, quit, don’t” but works better in the long run.

With toddlers it is easy to be focused on the problems and the frustrations. However, it is very important to share their joy in life, in their adventures and discoveries, and in their accomplishments. The child is learning so much so quickly, and yet it is so easy for parents to miss that if they're tired and discouraged themselves.

It is crucial that parents take care of themselves; otherwise, they become bogged down and miss out on the special, magical time that toddlerhood is. Worse yet, they can imagine that their toddler is "out to get them" and begin an adversarial relationship that neither wants. Toddlers can be terrific and so can toddler parents.

Juvata Rusch is a family counselor in private practice in Eugene, is on staff with Birth To Three as Program Manager: *First 3 Years*.

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