

“Terrible Twos” Can Be a Time of Exciting Growth

by Sylvia W. Lee

What can you, as a parent, do to help your child through the difficult period sometimes called the “terrible twos”?

First of all, understand that there is no one correct approach. You can start by recognizing your child’s increased need to participate in making decisions. Even though it’s probably the worst age for making choices, show your child that you understand his need to be his own person by giving him choices (please keep the choices simple!). When he knows he has some input in how his life is run, he can’t help but achieve an attitude of independence.

If your child insists on doing things herself, allow for extra time and be encouraging. Let her assume other responsibilities, not just those you want to relinquish. Also avoid those that would require more than about 10 minutes to complete, as that is her attention span right now.

Compliment your child often, and because he may not do a job perfectly, be prepared to do it again—but when he’s not around. Self-confidence at this age is a fragile commodity. When choices can’t be offered, it’s important to be loving but firm and do what needs to be done. When possible, arrange the situation so he doesn’t have a chance to refuse; for example, it is helpful to rephrase a question so that it doesn’t require a “yes” or “no” answer.

If at all possible, avoid a contest of wills. By demonstrating acceptance, focusing on contributions, assets, and appreciation and saying things in a positive and encouraging way to your child, you will be amazed at how much difference it can make in her behavior and the way she responds to you. “Big wheels are ridden over here—this is an unsafe place” is far more positive and useful to her than, “Don’t ride your big wheel there!”

Other useful guidelines include:

- Give a two-year-old a choice only when you intend to leave the decision up to him.
- Choose words and a tone of voice that make her feel confident and reassured, not guilty and ashamed; for example, “Sand is for digging—if you throw it, it might blow in your eyes” instead of “You’re a bad girl for throwing sand!”
- Help your child to develop insight by pointing out the motivations within the situation; for example, “Sometimes when people are tired, they are easily upset.”
- Avoid comparisons between one child and another, but use individual recognition for achievement or growth; for example, “That was much better than last time. Next time will be even easier.”

Firm limits must be established. Support given in the form of understanding and tolerance is more helpful to your child than total permissiveness. Excusing inappropriate behavior by thinking, “It’s just the terrible twos,” doesn’t help him. Being out of control creates a feeling of anxiety for your child. Recurring situations with controls from his parents provides opportunities for your child to know how and when to control himself.

“Unless parents can accept responsibility for limiting the child and for using appropriate limits or consequences where it is necessary, they are deserting the child,” says Dr. T. Berry Brazelton, an expert on early childhood development.

It is important to help your child find specific words to express her feelings. She can gain knowledge about herself by recognizing her various emotions. It will help her feel less frustrated if she can explain her problems, feelings, and needs, especially at this time when she is likely to develop anxieties. Do not ridicule or belittle her. It is not the presence of the “monsters” or “boogie men” in her life that need concern you, but how she solves what Selma Fraiberg in “The Magic Years” calls the “ogre problem.”

Finally, a two-year-old does have feelings. It is important to distinguish between his feelings and his actions, for they are not necessarily related. “This is the time to use a low voice, a kiss, and even more praise for his goodness,” Marguerite Kelly and Elia Parsons suggest in “The Mother’s Almanac.” And a sense of humor will help on even the worst days.

This is an important period for you to assess yourself as well as your child by being aware of the kinds of conflicts her behavior evokes. It is important to understand your own reaction to your child as well as her behavior; for example, when you feel angry toward your child, ask yourself why you feel this way. Is it because you only had five hours of sleep last night when you need eight solid ones to feel sane? Or did your child just do something that reminded you of something you don’t like about yourself?

Living with a child at this age may seem explosive at times, but it can also be a time of excitement and growth for parents as well as children. With their restless curiosity and drive to learn, two-year-olds are showing their parents what matters most to them, and they need their parents’ love, support, and encouragement in order to reach a higher, more mature developmental stage.

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