

Understanding Key to Surviving “Terrible Twos”

by Sylvia W. Lee

Parents of children between the ages of two and three often find their children making bold expressions of their need to be self-sufficient, self-reliant, and autonomous.

In “Toddlers and Parents,” Dr. T. Berry Brazelton speaks to this issue: “In a culture which values individuality and open self-expression, it is during this time that the child must establish individual patterns of behavior partially independent from those of the parents.

“The child is now equipped for independent exploration with his new skills: walking, the capacity to manipulate objects with a refined skilled grasp, the burgeoning capacity to speak and express himself, and the new-found power of imitating and acquiring the behavior and the characteristics of the people around him.

“That the power given him by these skills must dawn on him all at once and overwhelm him should come as no surprise to anyone who has watched him acquire the precursors of these skills so painstakingly through the first year of life. But the suddenness of the struggle to control and assimilate this power does come as a shock to most parents of toddlers.”

And the struggle often leaves parents feeling intimidated, exasperated, outraged, and exhausted during this stage of development.

Often parents are warned by well-meaning friends about the “terrible twos” as though a dread disorder were soon to take over their child. And probably, when their even-tempered child changes to an assertive, opinionated one with fluctuating moods, parents think that this is exactly what has happened.

It is a time when a child has strong desires but limited powers, and her control over feelings is still weak. What the child responded to positively before is now met with “no!” Conflicts with parents may be frequent and extreme. The tiniest frustrations can produce screams and emotional meltdowns.

It is important that parents understand what their child is going through at this time in order to realize that they are not under attack by an incorrigible child. The main task at hand for child at this developmental stage is to acquire a firm sense of who he is as a person while learning at the same time to conform to what society (generally his parents) expects of him. He needs to resolve the struggle between learning to control himself and being controlled by someone else.

What her parents view as challenges and negative behavior are actually her methods of testing and adjusting to parental limits and then to her own. As she strives to sort out which results she wants to achieve with her skills and which results she doesn’t want, the child is establishing her own pattern of behavior. The more autonomy a child can achieve at this age, the more competent she will feel to move on to the next developmental task.

It is definitely a time of extremes. The child sets up his own opposites and by doing so learns about the world by exploring both of any two opposites in rapid succession. He needs to experience both alternatives to hopefully discover which is the right one. He may be the bossiest person in the house at this time. It may be helpful for parents to know that his bossy behavior occurs not because he is sure of himself, but because he is so insecure and feels a sense of security when he can have control over even the smallest part of her world.

Have you ever wondered why “no” is the most popular word at this time for a child? When a child says “no,” she is doing it to feel like a person in her own right. After all, since becoming mobile, she’s probably heard it a lot, too.

“Open negativism toward his parents is a toddler’s way of expressing his need for independence,” Brazelton says. “With his ‘no,’ he establishes himself as separate from his parents.

“Every time he says ‘no’ or acts out a negative response to a demand from those around him, he is learning about himself as a separate individual. He learns about his parents’ expectations, and he learns about how he will act in response to them.

“Although his immediate reaction may be an automatic ‘no,’ he will gradually learn from his environment’s reply to his ‘no’ that this is not a satisfactory way to respond. He then has a second chance to decide whether he must conform or can afford a second but more tentative refusal.

“The negativism quickly becomes a first line of defense in order to stall for time—time for inner decision and evaluation.”

As contradictory as this stage of development is, it is not surprising that the child also has a need for sameness—the order in which things are carried out, the way they are done, the place they occupy—because he needs the support of an environment that stays the same. By insisting on having things just so, the child satisfies his need for sameness and avoids the conflict inherent in making a choice.

The child’s need for consistency can certainly add different dimensions to this transitional stage. She may request to eat a specific food item but won’t eat it if it’s not the time when it’s supposed to be served (an egg for supper is rejected adamantly but eaten with gusto at breakfast). There also may be a bathing routine that can be totally disrupted if her favorite wash cloth isn’t used, and elaborate bedtime demands that usually express real needs, but seem to go on forever.

Although this is a stressful time, it reflects an extremely necessary and important developmental stage in order for the child to achieve the next set of tasks. What the child needs from his parents is support and patience. As Brazelton says, “One cannot like a child all the time through this period. One can admire the strength and depth of his conflicts, but watching him struggle calls up too many painful memories of just such unresolved struggles in most parents for them to remain constantly loving and uninvolved.”

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