

DIFFICULT TODDLERS

The Terrible Twos and Threes
And The Freaken Fours and Fives



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Is Your Toddler Driving You Crazy?

If you answered, "Yes!", then congratulations, you're a normal parent. The fact is that most toddler's are difficult because they are entering a time in their life when they are trying to gain some independence. That's not to say they don't need discipline as well. Children may seem like they want to run loose, but they actually thrive on reinforcement whether be positive or negative. Keep the reinforcement positive and follow the ten guidelines below to help you keep your sanity when dealing with your toddler.

1. **Keep them busy.** There is nothing more scary than a bored toddler. Coloring, reading, painting, listening to music and dancing are just a few things they can do with or without you.
2. **Get them outside.** Even the weather is unappealing to you, there is nothing better to a toddler than jumping in puddles and getting dirty. Suck it up, Mom, and get out your rain boots! You don't have to stay outside for hours, go out in twenty-minute intervals to make it more manageable for you.
3. **Assign chores.** It's never too late for your child to learn responsibility, just don't expect them to do it exactly like you would. Start with something simple like putting their dishes in the sink and build up to feeding the family pet.
4. **Let them be.** Sometimes children, just like adults, need alone time. If they are content to pick at their toes for ten minutes let them do it.
5. **Listen.** Treat your child as an equal member of the family. Acknowledge when they are talking, even if they are telling you the sky is blue. We all want to feel important.
6. **Let them decide.** A couple nights a week let your child decide what the family will have for dinner. Unless it's something you're allergic to, just go with it. One of our families best meals consisted of soy beans, olives, cheese and crackers, and hummus and carrots.
7. **Cook together.** There are so many things a child can do in the kitchen. Measure out the ingredients beforehand and allow them to mix, pour and even crack the eggs.
8. **Play games.** To a toddler almost anything can be considered a game. Write the letter 'A' on five different index cards and hide them in your living room. Have your toddler find them and reward them with a prize. They don't know they're learning, take advantage of that!
9. **Laundry anyone?** Who doesn't like to stuff clothes in the washer and then in the dryer? It's rare to find a toddler who won't help with that.
10. **Laugh...**so that you don't cry. There's just some days when you can't win. Realize that you're child will grow out of this stage and you'll never get it back. Appreciate even the most difficult times because soon they'll be a teenager and will pretend they don't know you.



The Spirited Child

Living with a toddler can be like sharing a house with Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. If your child is "spirited," the toddler years can be especially trying.

What defines a spirited child? "All toddlers are busy: They're climbing and jumping and throwing things," says Mary Sheedy Kurcinka, author of the popular books *Raising Your Spirited Child* and *Kids, Parents, and Power Struggles: Winning for a Lifetime*. "But the high-energy kid is the one who can get to the top of the refrigerator. All toddlers say 'no,' too, but a spirited child's 'no's!' are louder and more frequent, his tantrums longer lasting and more intense. You gradually realize that as a parent you're working harder than your neighbor, whose child is simply not as intense, persistent, and emphatic as yours. Your child is still normal, he's just more of everything."

Spirited kids are definitely a challenge, but there are ways to defuse daily battles and teach your toddler to learn to control himself. Here are Kurcinka's top strategies:

Let him know what's coming. All toddlers become anxious when they can't predict what's coming next, but most spirited children need events spelled out to a degree that you might not expect. When it's time to leave the playground and your 2-year-old throws himself on the ground howling, it's probably because he's insecure about what's coming next. Tell him in detail: You'll go to the car, we'll drive straight home, find Sis and Dad there, and have spaghetti for dinner.

Remember that with toddlers, words aren't always enough. You might tell him "Daddy will pick you up from daycare this afternoon," for example, but he may well have trouble remembering it all day. In this case, you might ask his daycare provider to remind him later in the day that Daddy's handling pick-up duties.

Sometimes visual cues can help. If Grandma and Grandpa are coming for an annual visit, show him photos ahead of time. You might even make a picture book outlining his bedtime ritual: bath, pajamas, story, bed. You can't cut all the surprises out of your toddler's life, of course, but you can minimize the stress by giving him a heads-up when you can.



Be clear and consistent. Spirited children need the security and consistency of clear rules, so it's important to set limits. If nap time is always after lunch and your spirited 3-year-old puts up a fuss, be firm and confident as you enforce his rest period. If videos aren't allowed after dinner but you let him watch "just this one" tonight so you can make a phone call, he'll test you and demand one - forcefully - every night for the rest of the week.

Maintain physical contact. "As toddlers move toward independence, they still very much need connection," says Kurcinka. Maybe your toddler would like a backrub before bed. Or he might enjoy cuddling with you in a rocking chair in the morning. Have him bring toys into your room so he can play near you while you dress for work. At daycare, sit with him on the floor until he moves into the group on his own.

These tactics may seem to slow you down initially, but they'll actually save you time in avoided tantrums and battles. "Toddlers need to know they can trust you to be there for them. That way they'll ultimately be more independent," says Kurcinka.

Create a "yes" environment. "Me do!" are a toddler's favorite words, says Kurcinka. Let your child pour his own juice out of a little pitcher, use a fork at dinner, and put on his own shoes. Even if everything is a little messier and takes a little longer, his increased independence and cooperation are worth it.

Also, look at how your house is organized. Is there a low cupboard in the kitchen filled with pots and plastic containers that he can play with? Are his toys and books easy to reach? Is there a bed, couch, or floor pillow that he's allowed to jump on? The more child-friendly your home is, the less you'll be fighting with him to keep away from special things and places.

Avoid danger spots. If your highly energetic child can't sit still at the table, choose restaurants wisely - or plan a family picnic in the park instead. If he's slow to adapt to new people, don't plop him on Santa's lap. Stay with him and approach Santa gradually - or wait until next year. And if you find yourself in an overly stimulating situation, such as a playmate's big birthday party, don't be shy about leaving early - before your toddler loses it.



Soothe his senses. Help your spirited child wind down when the intensity level starts to rise. Water can be especially soothing: Give him a warm bath on a cold night, put a cool washcloth on his forehead on a summer afternoon, or let him play with his rubber ducks in the kitchen sink while you're cooking.

For older toddlers, finger paints and modeling clay are also calming sensory activities. For younger toddlers (under 2), it feels good to spread sand, cornmeal, or shaving cream on a play surface.

Acknowledge feelings. Talk to your spirited toddler about why he's starting to melt down and let him know he's not the only one who is overcome by difficult emotions sometimes. Try saying "The people and the noise are bothering you. They're bothering me too. We'll leave the mall as soon as we've paid for these shoes."

Even if he doesn't seem to learn much from what you say at this age, explain it to him anyway. (Just don't become angry with him when your perfectly logical explanations don't result in his quick compliance.) Toddlers usually aren't able to change their behavior in response to verbal reasoning, but this exercise will help you empathize with your child. And eventually he'll learn to recognize what winds him up before he goes over the edge.

Reward good behavior. Don't worry that your spirited toddler will get a big head if you praise him. Reinforce his efforts with positive messages: "Good job getting out of the tub when I asked you to" or "You really used your quiet voice at Peter's house today." Try to never pass up a chance to praise the behavior you're trying to teach.

Set realistic expectations. The many daily transitions adults take for granted - getting out of the house, in and out of the car, to daycare, to the store, home again, going to bed - are especially hard on a spirited toddler, who needs extra time to cope with change and who may become overwhelmed by people and noise.

"The average 2-year-old has spent 500 hours in a car," says Kurcinka. "Ask yourself, 'Can I expect my toddler to handle this?'" And when possible, skip unnecessary transitions and demands: Do you really have to make that last stop or could it wait?



Try not to label. Most important of all, examine the way you describe your toddler. The "wild child" who is "stubborn," "exhausting," and a "crybaby" is also a spirited child who is persistent, energetic, and sensitive — all traits that are admired in adults. Use positive labels when discussing your child with relatives and teachers, and they'll come to see his wonderful attributes too.

And with increased self-esteem, your spirited child will want to learn to behave well. You'll know you're on the right track when your 3-year-old announces to Grandma, "I had lots of energy today!" instead of saying, "I was a bad boy." When you focus on your child's positive features and strengths, it changes your behavior, and that in turn changes your child's behavior.

Take care of yourself. You may find it difficult, if not impossible, to announce that you need more time for yourself. But the house doesn't have to look perfect and the dinners don't have to be gourmet. If it's already midnight and you're exhausted, leave the dishes in the sink. Rest or take a bubble bath when your child naps instead of vacuuming the living room. Take full advantage of your time at night after your toddler goes to sleep to connect with your partner or a friend, or to do some relaxing activity on your own.

Most important of all, says Kurcinka: "Build a support system. You can't do this seven days a week, 24 hours a day." Your child will benefit when you're revitalized, and so will you. Whether it's your spouse, a friend, a relative, or a babysitter, find a consistent caregiver whom you and your child can trust and let them help out.

Resources

There are many books available to help you understand and work with your spirited toddler. They include:

Raising Your Spirited Child, by Mary Sheedy Kurcinka (HarperPerennial)

The Difficult Child: A Guide for Parents, by Stanley Turecki and Leslie Tonner (Bantam)

Living With the Active, Alert Child, by Linda Budd (Parenting Press)

The Fussy Baby Book: Parenting Your High-Need Child From Birth to Age Five, by William and Martha Sears (Little Brown)

Your Child Is a Person, by Herbert Birch, Stella Chess, and Alexander Thomas (Penguin)



Difficult Toddler Troubles

Shortly after your child begins to walk, an amazing chapter unfolds - toddlerhood! This time of transition for parents and children can often lead to frustration. But don't panic! Here are some of the more difficult toddler troubles, with solutions to help you through these sometimes trying times.

Are you the parent of a toddler? If so, chances are you understand the many ways these youngsters can get themselves into trouble. Whether it's harassing the dog or the baby sister, toddlers crave attention - and they want it now! Here are some of the more common toddler troubles, with information on why these behaviors happen and what you can do to stop them.

Refusing to Sleep

Toddlers are just learning how to do things on their own. Now they can walk, talk, and eat by themselves - and they love to express their newfound independence. So when your little one doesn't want to go to bed, he will probably let you know!

"Many toddlers refuse sleep because of separation anxiety," says Dr. Mary Muscari, PhD, RN, professor of pediatric nursing at the University of Scranton in Pennsylvania, and author of the *Not My Kid* parenting books. Children of this age are just getting used to sleeping alone, so it's important to make a ritual of bedtime. For example, develop a set before-bed routine: Your child takes a bath, puts on his pajamas and brushes his teeth, you then read him a story, and so on. Once these rituals are in place, bedtime usually becomes much easier. A self-soothing transitional object may also be in order, says Dr. Muscari. This can be a blanket, teddy bear, or another soft object your child loves.

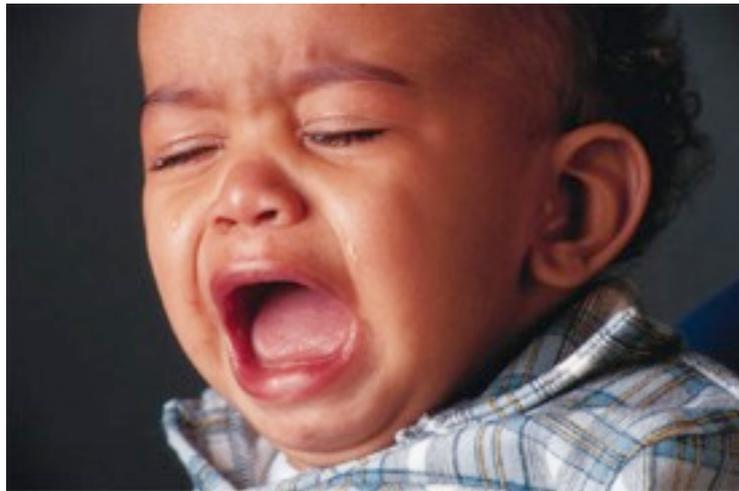


Refusing to Eat

Toddlers often refuse to eat because they aren't growing as quickly as they did during infancy; they are hungry less and eat smaller portions. Many toddlers are also picky eaters, says Dr. Muscari. As a result, you may find the need to provide more mealtime encouragement. "Don't make it a battle because it's no contest," advises Dr. Muscari. "Toddlers always win." Instead, try to make your foods more toddler-friendly. Serve finger foods and put meals in sectioned plates. Instead of giving your child three large meals, give her several smaller ones, suggests Dr. Muscari. And every time she tries a new food, "heap on the praise," adds Dr. Kenneth Haller, MD, assistant professor of pediatrics at Saint Louis University School of Medicine. And don't forget to always reward your child's positive behavior.

Sibling Rivalry

Most sibling rivalry is caused by jealousy. Your toddler may believe that a younger sibling is receiving more attention than he or she really is, and consequently act out to gain more of your attention. To avoid this common trap, ensure that all of your children receive equal time and attention. Dr. Muscari suggests that if your toddler is the eldest in your family, give him praise for being the big brother and try to ignore negative behavior. Dr. Haller explains, "Your child soon will figure out that he gets more attention from you when he sits quietly reading a book than when he throws it at his little sister."



Excessive Crying

Children typically cry for a reason, whether they're seeking attention or experiencing legitimate fears or worries. But excessive crying is something parents must address. "Figure out why the child is crying and deal with the underlying cause," says Dr. Muscari. You can do this by simply asking, adds Dr. Haller. Even if it sounds silly, their reasons are very real. If your little one is afraid of being alone in her room at night, or is afraid of "monsters" under the bed, talk with her about her feelings. Make these emotionally-charged situations fun - get out the flashlight and search in the closets and under the bed together.

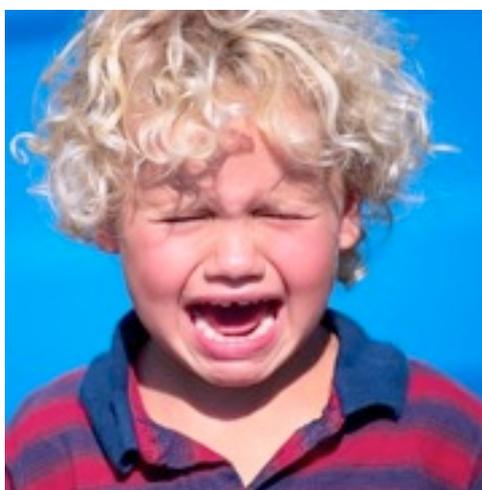
Temper Tantrums

They come as if from nowhere - and often at the most inopportune times, such as in the middle of the grocery store or at a friend's house. For many toddlers, the world seems to end when they don't get their way. How should you deal with these outbursts? "Ignore them," says Dr. Muscari. Your child is screaming and yelling because he or she wants your attention. You're only encouraging more tantrums in the future if you react to them now. Try distracting your toddler - mentioning that it is almost mealtime or asking her where a favorite toy is can take her out of a difficult situation and help her move on.

Most toddlers throw temper tantrums. It's a typical stage of child development. To understand why your toddler throws a fit, put yourself in his place. A toddler has an intense desire to do things, but his mental and motor skills have developed more quickly than his ability to communicate. Because he doesn't yet have the verbal skills to express his frustration, he does so by throwing tantrums. But you should know that tantrums often come in two flavors: manipulative tantrums and frustration tantrums.

Manipulative Tantrums. If you feel that your child is using tantrums as a tool to get his own way, give him verbal cues and use body language that says you don't do tantrums. Be aware that toddlers know how to push their parents' buttons. If you are a volatile person, it'll be easy for your child to trigger an explosion from you, ending in a screaming match with no winners. You send a clear message when you ignore his fits or walk away. This teaches him that tantrums are not acceptable. This is part of toddler discipline.

Frustration tantrums, on the other hand, require empathy. Take these emotional outbursts as an opportunity to bond with your child. Offer a helping hand, a comforting "it's okay." Help him out where he feels frustrated at not being able to accomplish a task. This way you establish your authority and build your child's trust. Direct his efforts toward a more manageable part of a task. For example, if he throws one of the common "I'll do it myself" fits about putting on his sock, you slip it halfway onto the foot, and he can pull it on the rest of the way. Sit down with him at eye level and caringly say, "Tell mommy what you want." That encourages him to use words or body language to communicate his feelings and needs so that he doesn't have to act them out in displays of anger.



Identify the trigger. Tantrums are usually at the worst time for parents: when they are on the phone, at the supermarket, or busy in some other way. Think about it. The very circumstances that make a tantrum inconvenient for you are what set your toddler up for an outburst. Keep a tantrum diary, noting what incites your child. Is she bored, tired, sick, hungry, or overstimulated? Watch for pre-tantrum signs. If you notice a few moments before the flare-up that your baby is starting to whine or grumble, intervene before the little volcano erupts.

Don't take it personally. You are neither responsible for his tantrums nor for stopping them. The "goodness" of your baby is not a reflection on your parenting ability. Tantrums are common when a baby starts to strive for independence.

Stay cool. Temper tantrums in public places are embarrassing, often making it difficult to consider a child's feelings. Your first thought is more likely to be "what will people think of me as a parent?" If you feel trapped and embarrassed when your child is throwing a fit in a supermarket, don't lash out. She is already out of control and needs you to stay in control. Just calmly carry her (even if she's kicking and screaming) to a private place, like the bathroom or your car, where she can blow off steam, after which you can quietly settle her down.

Plan ahead. To expect a curious toddler to be the model of obedience in a supermarket when he is tired and hungry is an unrealistic expectation. Shop when you both are rested and fed, and let him be your helper from the safety of his belted shopping-cart seat. The morning is usually the best time for toddler behavior; in the afternoon he's more likely to be tired and hungry.

To help parents gain perspective on the tantrum stage, we've divided fits into "**biggies**" and "**smallies**." Staying in the carseat is a biggie. It is non-negotiable and all the theatrics in the world will not free the safety-contained protester. But whether she should wear a red shirt rather than a blue one is a smallie. A clothing mismatch isn't worth a fight.

Occasionally, a very strong-willed child will lose control of himself during a tantrum. It often helps to simply hold him firmly, but lovingly, and say, "You're angry, and you have lost control. I'm holding you because I love you." You may find that after a minute or more of struggle, he melts in your arms as if to thank you for rescuing him from himself.

In general, don't ignore a frustration tantrum. Turning away from her behavioral problems deprives her of a valuable support resource, while you lose the chance to improve your rapport with your tantrmer. Once your toddler develops the language skills to express her needs in words, you'll be able to close the book on the tantrum stage. This usually happens between two and two-and-a-half-years-of-age, depending on your child's language development.



Supermarket tantrums

The worst and most embarrassing tantrums are those that take place in public, often the supermarket. If you know your child doesn't enjoy shopping, try to arrange these outings without your child in tow. If this is unavoidable, try to make it easier on you both by thinking about the following:

- **Keep trips as short as possible** - be organised about exactly what you need to buy and stick to it.
- **Use distraction** - take a toy for your child to play with or a book for her to browse. It can also help to have a drink and snack handy.
- **Let your child help** - ask your child to get cereal, teabags, bin liners and other (light, non-breakable) items within her reach. Let her put the items in the trolley or on the checkout, too.
- **If a tantrum does threaten, remain calm** - talk quietly to your child, explaining that the behaviour isn't acceptable. You may find you have to leave the shop and go back later, even if this means you leaving your shopping behind. You won't be the first parent to have to do this!

Discipline Means to Teach

With all the conflicting advice parents receive about discipline, it's easy to forget that the word "discipline" means "to teach." Many situations requiring discipline at this age can be turned into learning experiences for both you and your child. Approaching difficult situations with that concept firmly in mind can help you discipline even the most difficult preschooler.

For example, **the dreaded word "no"** causes automatic tension in most parents of two-year-olds. Your instinct may be to engage in a battle of wills or simply pick up the child and make them do what is required. However, if you allow the child to say "no" to your request, you will often get a "yes" if you ask again in a few minutes. Allowing a child to say "no" once in awhile shows them that you respect their growing independence.

Another opportunity to teach proper behavior arises when your child deliberately makes a mess for you to clean up. Most parents can tell the difference between a genuine accident and willful misbehavior. For the latter, parents can use the incident as an example of cause and effect. If your child deliberately colors on the walls after you have told him not to, having him help you clean up the mess can teach a valuable lesson about responsibility and consequences.

The most important tool in your discipline toolbox is **consistency**. By imposing the same discipline every time your preschooler misbehaves, you're teaching them that their actions have predictable consequences. If you allow a behavior one day and punish it the next day, your child will be very confused. Children at this age are too young to understand special exceptions so you should stick carefully to your routines as much as possible each and every day.

Finally, if all else fails, preschoolers are generally very receptive to **redirection**. If your child does not want to go to bed, instead of arguing with her and insisting that it's time for bed, change the subject and ask what doll she wants to take to bed with her or which bedtime story she wants to hear. This teaches children that some behavior is not negotiable and shows them acceptable alternatives.



Remember, teaching accountability by giving **consequences** can start at the beginning, when your child is still small-in fact, it's one of the most important things you could ever teach them. The key is to do it as effectively as possible!

Here is one simple rule of thumb: When instructing your child, use a matter-of-fact tone. It's hard for children to pay attention to exactly what you're saying when they sense that you're upset or angry. Besides, you want to model the behavior you want them to learn. Give instructions in such a way that it tells the child that you expect them to master self-control at some point. Experiencing a consequence in the moment is important for this age, but take time to calm down first if you're feeling frustrated.

If you find yourself at odds with your child a lot, maybe scratching your head and wondering where they're coming from, take a minute to consider their **temperament**. It may be different from yours. Notice your child's attention span, activity level, how they react toward people or any sensitivity to their environment, and pay attention to their moods and the intensity of their emotional responses. Here are some examples of things to look for:

- * Really **energetic kids** may have a hard time stopping themselves, could be more impulsive and will need a lot of "hands-on" coaching from parents.

- * **Children who are withdrawn** may need more encouragement and time to respond, and might rebel if pushed. They may also need tasks broken down for them: "Here's what to do first. Now do this."

- * **Emotionally sensitive kids** may feel too responsible or overwhelmed. Make sure you're focusing on behavior and skills and not "why" they did something inappropriate.

- * **Environmentally sensitive kids** need to have the over-stimulation reduced. When they're over-stimulated, they might not hear you when you're talking to them. They might do best after taking a calming time-out.

- * **Those with short attention spans** might have trouble carrying out a request with a lot of steps. Break the request down to one instruction at a time for them.



It's very important to understand your child's temperament along with their skill level. James Lehman says, "Start where your child is at and coach them forward." This means you should try to **understand their capacities and challenge them to do just a little bit better**. For example, one of the best ways to help them learn skills is to do tasks with them. Also, it's important to realize that it's not necessary at this age to require a child to do their "chore" on their own.

Most of the time, when your young child is acting out or behaving inappropriately, just redirecting them will be enough. If the child clearly understands that the behavior is not acceptable and yet does it anyway, try to keep the consequence directly related to the behavior. Consequences that are too harsh or that take away an unrelated possession or privilege will not help your child understand the connection between what he has done and the consequence.

To increase your child's understanding, connect his behavior to a result or a consequence with the words you use when correcting him. "If you keep throwing that toy, it will break and you won't have it to play with anymore." [Consequence: time-out the toy.] Here are some other examples of appropriate consequences-and how to give them:

* "If you can't calm yourself down, you're going to have to go to your room and rest for awhile. You can calm down in there."

* "If you don't help clean up, it will take longer and we won't have as much time to play."

* "You could get hurt. I'm going to stop you from doing that."

Giving consequences to a young child and holding them accountable takes a lot of energy and patience, because your child will need a lot of rehearsal and repetition at this young age to learn to cope with his feelings and master skills. But take heart-you will eventually be rewarded with better behavior! *Giving Consequences To Young Kids and Toddlers from Empowering Parents.*



What you can do about defiance

Be understanding. When your child screams and cries because she doesn't want to leave the playground, give her a hug and tell her you know it's hard to go home when she's having so much fun. The idea is to show her that instead of being part of the problem, you're actually on her side.

Try not to get angry (even if you feel embarrassed in front of the other parents). Be kind but firm about making her leave when she must.

Set limits. Young children need - and even want - limits, so set them and make sure your 2-year-old knows what they are. Spell it out for her: "We don't hit. If you're angry, use your words to tell Adam that you want the toy back" or "Remember, you always have to hold my hand in the parking lot."

If your youngster has problems abiding by the rules (as every 2-year-old will), **work on solutions.** If she hits her baby brother because she's feeling left out, for instance, let her help you feed or bathe him, then find a way for her to have her own special time with you. If she gets out of bed because she's afraid of the dark, give her a flashlight to keep on her nightstand.

Reinforce good behavior. Rather than paying attention to your child only when she's misbehaving, try to catch her acting appropriately: "Thanks for playing with Charlie while I change his diaper. That's very helpful!"

And though you may be sorely tempted to give your child a verbal lashing when she engages in undesirable antics, hold your tongue. "When a child behaves badly, she already feels terrible," says Jane Nelsen, author of the Positive Discipline series of books. "Where did we ever get the idea that in order to make children do better, we first have to make them feel worse?" In fact, doing so may only produce more negative behavior.

Remember, too, that disciplining your child doesn't mean controlling her - it means teaching her to control herself. Punishment might get her to behave, but only because she's afraid not to. It's best for your toddler to do the right thing because she wants to - because it makes the day more fun for her or makes her feel good.



Use time-outs - positively. When your child is at the end of her rope, ready to bust a gasket because she isn't getting her way, help her cool off. Rather than a punitive time-out ("Go to your room!"), take her to a comfy sofa in the den or to a favorite corner of her bedroom.

Maybe your child would even like to design a "calm-down place" for herself — with a big pillow, a soft blanket, and a few favorite books. If she refuses to go, offer to go along with her and read a story.

If she still refuses, go yourself - just to chill out. You'll not only set a good example, you might get a much-needed break. Once you both feel better, that's the time to talk about appropriate behavior.

Be consistent with positive discipline. One wise mother reports that she uses the "special quiet place" as opposed to "time out" to deal with a tantrum. This puts a positive, nurturing focus on discipline. Positive time out is designed to encourage children and teach them self-control and self-discipline. It also teaches them the value of taking some quiet time to calm down to enable them to feel better. It is respectful because children are involved in the process (by helping to create a space that will be encouraging) and focuses on the fact that children do better when they feel better.

If your child is very young this technique is not recommended unless you have a great attitude and accompany your child to their quiet place. Your "special quiet place" may have a comfortable cushion and a special book. It could include a favorite teddy, or a blanket - something which is comforting to your child. In public do the same. Remember to take a calming item with you and sit with your child on a bench for five minutes or take them to the car until they calm down.



Empower your child. Providing opportunities for your child to make her own choices allows her to try out some of her newfound autonomy in a controlled environment. Instead of demanding that she put on the jeans you've selected, for instance, let her choose one of the two pairs you've laid out. Ask if she'd like peas or green beans with dinner, and which of two stories at bedtime.

Another way to help your youngster feel more in control is to tell her what she *can* do instead of what she can't. Rather than saying, "No! Don't throw that ball in the house!" say, "Let's go outside and throw the ball together." If she wants an ice-cream cone before dinner, tell her she can choose between a slice of cheese and a banana.

Choose your battles. If your fashion-savvy 2-year-old wants to wear her striped turtleneck with her pink, polka-dot leggings, what do you care? If she wants waffles for lunch and peanut butter and jelly for breakfast, what's the harm? Sometimes it's easier to look the other way - when she splashes in a mud puddle on the way home, for example, or stuffs her puppet under her bed instead of putting it on the proper shelf.



10 Tips from Experts and Parents to Tame Your Kid's Tantrums

Ignore the Kid. The reason this works is fascinating: "During a tantrum, your child is literally out of his mind. His emotions take over - overriding the frontal cortex of the brain, the area that makes decisions and judgments," says Jay Hoecker, MD, a Rochester, Minnesota, pediatrician. "That's why reasoning doesn't help - the reasoning part of his brain isn't working." Says Alan Kazdin, PhD, author of *The Kazdin Method for Parenting the Defiant Child*, "Once you're in a situation where someone's drowning, you can't teach them to swim -- and it's the same with tantrums. There's nothing to do in the moment that will make things better. In fact, almost anything you try will make it worse. Once he chills out, then you can talk."

Give Your Child Some Space. "Sometimes a kid just needs to get his anger out. So let him!" says Linda Pearson, a nurse practitioner and author of *The Discipline Miracle*. (Just make sure there's nothing in tantrum's way that could hurt him.) "I'm a big believer in this approach because it helps children learn how to vent in a nondestructive way. They're able to get their feelings out, pull themselves together, and regain self-control - without engaging in a yelling match or battle of wills with you." This trick can work on its own or in tandem with the whole ignoring bit.

Distraction. This is all about a deft mental switcheroo - getting your kid engaged and interested in something else so she forgets about the meltdown she was just having. "My purse is filled with all sorts of distractions, like toys - ones my kids haven't seen in a while, books, and yummy snacks," says Alisa Fitzgerald, a mom of two from Boxford, Massachusetts. Whenever a tantrum happens, she busts 'em out, one at a time, until something gets the kids' attention. "I've also found that distraction can help ward off a major meltdown before it happens, if you catch it in time," she adds. If your kid is about to go off the deep end at the supermarket because you won't buy the super-frosted sugar-bomb cereal, try quickly switching gears and enthusiastically saying something like, "Hey, we need some ice cream. Want to help me pick a flavor?" or "Ooh, check out the lobster tank over there!" Explains Levy: "Children have pretty short attention spans - which means they're usually easy to divert. And it always helps if you sound really, really psyched when you do it. It gets their mind off the meltdown and on to the next thing that much faster." Fitzgerald agrees: "You have to channel your inner actress and be an entertainer - one with props!"



Offer Food or Suggest a Little R&R. "Being tired and hungry are the two biggest tantrum triggers," says Levy. Physically, the kid is already on the brink, so it won't take much emotionally to send him over. "Parents often come to me wondering why their child is having daily meltdowns. And it turns out they're happening around the same time each day - before lunch or naptime and in the early evening. It's no coincidence! My advice: feed them, water them, and let them veg - whether that means putting them to bed or letting them watch a little TV." Think how cranky you get when you miss out on sleep or your blood sugar hits rock bottom, he says. With young kids, who have greater sleep and food needs, the effect is magnified tenfold.

Find Out What's Really Frustrating Your Kid. This trick is for tantrums among the under-2-and-a-half set, says Dr. Hoecker. "Children this age usually have a vocabulary of only about 50 words and can't link more than two together at a time. Their communication is limited, yet they have all these thoughts and wishes and needs to be met. When you don't get the message or misunderstand, they freak out to release their frustration." One solution, he says: sign language. Teaching your child how to sign a few key words - such as more, food, milk, and tired - can work wonders.

Another approach is to empathize with your kid, which helps take some of the edge off the tantrum, and then play detective. "My 22-month-old throws tantrums that can last up to - yikes! - 20 minutes," says Melanie Pelosi, a mom of three from West Windsor, New Jersey. "We've taught her some words in sign language, but if she wants something like a movie, she won't know how to ask for it - and still freaks out. So I say, 'Show me what you want,' and then I see if she'll point to it. It's not always obvious, but with a little time and practice you begin to communicate better. If she points to her older brother, for example, that usually means that he's snatched something away from her, and I can ask him to give it back. I can't tell you how many awful, drawn-out meltdowns we've avoided this way!"



Hugs. "This may feel like the last thing you want to do when your kid is freaking out, but it really can help her settle down," Levy says. "I'm talking about a big, firm hug, not a supercuddly one. And don't say a word when you do it - again, you'd just be entering into a futile battle of wills. Hugs make kids feel secure and let them know that you care about them, even if you don't agree with their behavior." Cartwright Holecko, of Neenah, Wisconsin, finds that it helps: "Sometimes I think they just need a safe place to get their emotions out."

Give Your Kid an Incentive to Behave. Certain situations are trying for kids. Maybe it's sitting through a long meal at a restaurant or staying quiet in church. Whatever the hissy hot button, this is the trick: "It's about recognizing when you're asking a lot of your child and offering him a little preemptive bribe," Pearson says. "While you're on your way to the restaurant, for example, tell him, 'Alex, Mommy is asking you to sit and eat your dinner nicely tonight. I really think you can do it! And if you can behave, then when we get home I'll let you watch a video.'" For the record, Pearson says this kind of bribery is perfectly fine, as long as it's done on your terms and ahead of time - not under duress in the middle of a tantrum. If your kid starts to lose it at any point, gently remind him about the "treat" you discussed. "It's amazing how this can instantly whip them back into shape," says Pearson.

Speak Calmly. This is a biggie - and is much easier said than done. But experts insist you must keep your cool during a child's tantrum. "Otherwise, you'll get into a power struggle and make the whole thing escalate. Plus, part of the reason kids resort to tantrums is to get attention," Dr. Hoecker says. "They don't care if it's positive or negative attention they're getting. All they care about is that you're giving them 100 percent of it." Levy agrees, and adds: "Talking in a soothing voice shows your child that you're not going to let her behavior get to you. It also helps you stay relaxed - when what you really want to do is yell right back. In fact, the calm tone is as much for the parent as the child! If you're tense, your kid will pick up on it, and it's going to amp her up even more."



Laugh It Off. Every parent dreads public tantrums, for obvious reasons. You worry other parents will think you're a bad mom - that you've raised an out-of-control demon child. But that, says Kazdin, can tempt you to make choices that will only lead to more fits. "Kids, even very young ones, are smart," he says. "If you get angry or stressed or cave in and let him get his way just to end the meltdown before more people start staring, he'll learn that - aha! - it works." Your best bet, Kazdin says, is to suck it up, plaster a little Mona Lisa smile on your face, and pretend everything is just peachy. And what are others thinking? "We know from studies that the only thing people judge is your reaction to the meltdown," says Levy. "If you look calm and like you've got it under control - yes, even though you're not doing anything to stop the fit - they think, Now that's a good mom."

Respect her age and stage. Try to avoid situations that are sure to send your child into a meltdown. Why risk taking her to a fancy restaurant when you could just meet your sister for a picnic in the park? How realistic is it to expect your youngster to behave in a clothing store or sit quietly during an hour-long community meeting?

If you find yourself in a tricky situation, use distraction to avoid a head-on collision with your tot. When your child spots a lovely flower arrangement in the lobby, for instance, quickly show her how the numbers by the elevator shift as the elevator changes floors.

Finally, respect the unique world your toddler lives in, especially the way she perceives time (or doesn't). So rather than expecting her to jump up from a game at daycare to rush home with you, give her a few minutes' notice to help her switch gears ("Amy, we'll leaving in five minutes, so please finish up").

There's no guarantee that your child will break away from her fun without complaint. (In fact, it's a good bet she'll raise the hairs on the back of your neck with her bellowing.) But as long as you're patient and consistent, your youngster will eventually learn that defiance isn't the way to get what she wants.



Get Out of There. Getting kids away from the scene of the tantrum can snap them out of it. "It's also a great strategy when you're out and about," says Levy. "If your child starts melting down over a toy or candy bar he wants, pick him up and take him either to a different area of the store or outside until he calms down. Changing the venue really can change the behavior."