

Toddlers: Naughty? Or Nice and Normal?

In households across America, parents of one and two year olds are gritting their teeth as sweet and cooperative babies turn into demanding toddlers who fight diaper changes, refuse to sit still, fall apart emotionally, and openly defy direction.

The good news? *It's not you!*

Fortunately, these challenging behaviors are usually not a reflection of our competence or the child's nature. Many difficult and unpleasant behaviors actually demonstrate your toddler is developing on schedule, just as with other developmental milestones (walks around a year, puts two coherent words together around two, etc.).

Though developmentally appropriate, a toddler's behavior can rattle even the calmest and most collected adults. Why is she doing this? Why can't I get him to stop? Is she trying to drive me crazy? Why won't this kid listen!? Am I a bad parent? Adults can feel like failures when, despite our best efforts, toddlers still repeat the same undesirable behaviors. However this repetition actually happens because your toddler is *working*... on developing and growing new skills.



Here is a perfectly normal scenario:

- A one-year-old child throws food on the floor.
- The parent firmly says (with an "I mean business" look), "NO! Do NOT throw food on the floor."
- The child smiles and throws food on the floor again.

At this point, it is easy for adults to get frustrated, feel thwarted and view the toddler as naughty. Understandably, it appears the child is deliberately doing this to the adult. However, this interaction can be explained by toddler development. Toddlers are totally self-centered and respond to the world based on their own perception, growth, wants, needs, and development. Toddlers are driven to test and figure out the world around them. They are little scientists who are fascinated with how objects and people work. Furthermore, a toddler's impulse is generally to "DO IT!!" This is why toddlers constantly move from one activity to another and get into everything. Furthermore, when a parent says "don't" a toddler actually hears "do" and tends to repeat the behavior.

Another interesting fact is that toddlers are also just learning about feelings and do not attach negative or positive attributes to emotions. To the toddler, the angry adult in the above scenario probably even looks silly (hence the smile). Lastly, toddlers find any attention rewarding so they will repeat a behavior whether it gets a negative or positive reaction. Normal development and a toddler's approach to the world result in many challenging behaviors.

With this developmental picture in mind, read the scenario again. What was the one-year-old actually doing? For starters, this scientist experimented with gravity by dropping the food. She then identified a sequence of events: "Wow, when I drop the food, Daddy's face gets red and his voice loud." She thinks, "I wonder what will happen if I throw it on the floor again." Testing her theory, she drops the food again. The dog comes over and eats the food, Dad and Mom yell, and she thinks "I did it! I made it happen, just like I thought it would." This toddler is relishing her ability to impact the world and will be driven to test out her theories again, and again, and again.

Though these behaviors illustrate increased intellectual ability and development, in most households it is still not acceptable to throw food on the floor. So, how can adults stop unwanted behaviors while supporting a young child's growth and development? Using the following two basic premises can help.

1) Consider what your child may actually be doing and why. Think about his "job" and the future skills he is building. What is he learning? For example, your two-year-old begs for a cookie before dinner. His "job" and future skills? He is learning to listen to his body's cues and fulfill self care needs (i.e. get food and eat it when hungry.) Some day, he will become independent and make his own eating decisions. Why is he doing it? He is probably hungry and has not developed the ability to seek out healthy options or wait until a prescribed time to eat. Future skill to build? Becoming a healthy eater who prepares and eats food when hungry.

2) Teach the child what she or he can do. Adults really do want children to learn skills, grow and develop. In order to do so, children need to learn what choice they have in different scenarios. What option does the two-year-old who is begging for a cookie have? Can he choose between two healthy foods? "No cookie before dinner. But, would you like frozen peas or crackers with cheese?" One way the adult can help grow future skills and independence is to make healthy food available that the child can choose from when hungry. Stock plastic dishes and healthy snack supplies at your child's level and put common and acceptable foods in containers at child's height (milk, cereal, crackers, etc). An added benefit: as the child's drive to become independent is supported, the child will actually fight less and cooperate more on other less flexible limits.

Caring for toddlers is not easy. However, understanding a toddler's development will help you choose effective responses to many challenges. Focus on giving positive direction and supporting a toddler's need to grow independently and explore the world. Through positive interactions with loving and understanding adults, these little people will develop the skills and knowledge they need to be successful in school and in life.

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OTHER NORMAL DEVELOPMENT AND CHALLENGING BEHAVIORS

	Developmental Phase	Resulting Challenging Behaviors
1-Year-Olds	Developing an awareness of self as separate from parent and starts working toward independence. Struggles between wanting to be a baby and wanting to be a big boy or girl.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Shows more likes and dislikes: resists something s/ he does not want to do. Diaper changes become challenging. Begins to resist being rushed or confined: may fight being strapped into chair at table or car seat. May demand to be held one minute and then to "do it myself!" the next.
	Starts to experience huge emotions but lacks experience with and communication skills to understand or work through.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> May fall apart emotionally over little things. May push, hit, bite, cry, or scream to communicate. May throw things when frustrated or angry
	Has a short attention span.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Demands things right now Cannot sit for long periods
2-Year-Olds	Completely egocentric. Strong desire to own things and not share. Internal drive to become independent and learn self care.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Cannot stop or start a behavior based on other's feelings or needs. Believes everything belongs to her: takes items from others and insists "me" or "mine" in regards to toys and certain people. Insists on own way and may fight your help and insist "Me do it!" Choices are difficult – wants ALL items offered and cannot choose
	Experience big emotional swings, yet has not developed the capacity to calm self. Learning to separate actions from thoughts.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Strong emotions or desires erupt into tantrums. Hitting, biting, and yelling. Emotions and body do not respond separately so may fall on floor when upset or act out physically.
	Curious and impulsive – cannot stop from doing something just because someone else wants them to or it's dangerous.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Drive or impulse to do something is much stronger than the ability to listen. May run in the street or sneak out of bed. Does not listen to direction.
	Physical development increased to new level (strength, balance, etc.)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Seeks physical outlets and challenges: such as getting on table/counter or jumping off the couch.

WANT TO LEARN MORE?

These websites contain helpful information on parenting and child development:

- www.zerotothree.org – click on topics and then child development. They have numerous articles on development and developmental behaviors and strategies that really work.
- <http://www.parentsknow.state.mn.us> – helpful information on numerous topics related to raising young children and development.
- www.jstart.org – For parents with 2 ½ to 5 year olds. Click on "Early Education expertise" and then "Jump Start to Kindergarten". Once registered, you will receive an email with developmental milestones, activities, and other helpful information about your child's age.



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