

Why Does Your Toddler “Act Out”?

Your toddler will often do things you don't like. But there's usually a reason for why they're behaving the way they are:

- **Do they have the ability to do what you expect?** Or are you expecting too much? (See [Temperament](#))
- **Is the way they're acting a normal stage in their development?** It's natural for your toddler to see themselves as the centre of the world.
- **Are they trying to communicate how they feel?** Toddlers also have very big emotions, which they haven't yet figured out how to deal with or communicate. This can feel overwhelming. And often a toddler's behaviour is simply a way for them to assert their independence.
- **Are they feeling okay, or do they need something?** They may be hungry, tired or over-stimulated by too many activities.
- **Has something changed in their life?** Toddlers do best with routine. Knowing what to expect gives them a feeling of control and security.

- **Are they getting the connection they need?** You'll help them feel secure by responding to them warmly and consistently.
- **Is the setting suitable for them?** Some things – like a long sit-down meal or a crowded event – may require more control than they have.

Remember that all of us – parents, caregivers and children – feel all kinds of emotions, including anger, frustration, sadness and excitement. The key is to learn to handle our emotions in healthy ways.



KEY TAKEAWAY

When your toddler acts a certain way, they may be trying to tell you that they need something, like rest, food, comfort or connection with you. By watching them closely, you'll start to learn what each behaviour means, and how to respond in a way that builds your bond and helps them learn and grow.



Positive Discipline

Learning to be independent is an important part of your toddler's development. Sometimes this means they'll do things that you don't like. Rather than punishing them, though, you can use positive discipline to guide and teach them.



DID YOU KNOW?

Discipline doesn't need to be negative to be effective. By **showing rather than training** your child, you can help them learn to understand their feelings and act in healthy ways. At the same time, you'll build a strong and loving bond between you and your child.



Toddler's First Steps

Positive Discipline vs. Punishment

What is positive discipline?

A focus on **showing** your child how to act in positive ways.

Positive discipline:

- is built on love and trust
- shows respect for your child and their feelings
- is fair
- suits your child's age
- is consistent
- occurs right when the problem behaviour happens
- is explained in a way the child can understand

What is punishment?

A focus on **training** that uses harsh consequences to make a child obey. It may be physical (like spanking), verbal (like shouting) or emotional (like shaming). Punishment isn't effective and doesn't help your child develop healthy life skills.



STEP 1 Set the stage for positive behaviour

You can help set your child up to behave their best – and avoid problems before they start.

Communicate with your toddler:

- Get their attention before you speak.
- Get down to their level and make eye contact. Offer a gentle touch or nod.
- Make reasonable, clear rules, and tell your child why you have these rules. Keep them the same from day to day.
- Use simple words to tell them what you want them to do.
- Make only 1 request at a time.
- Listen to what they're saying.
- Help them name their feelings ("happy," "sad," "angry") and learn to express them.
- Tell them what to do instead of what not to do: "Please ride on the sidewalk," for example, instead of "don't ride on the street."



BRAIN BUILDER

By responding to your toddler's behaviour in a warm and consistent way, you'll help build their brain to handle big emotions and make healthy decisions (see Brain Development).

Provide a safe and stimulating environment:

- Spend lots of time with your toddler doing things they like.
- Offer interesting toys and activities. Remember – children learn when they play. (See [Play, Toys](#))
- Childproof your home so you can say “no” less often and your toddler will be more free to explore. (See [Childproofing Your Home](#))
- Give your child room to explore while supervising them closely.



TRY THIS

Set up play areas in the kitchen, living room and yard so you're always close by. Provide tools and toys for play cooking, office work and gardening. You don't need to buy fancy toys. Just use items that you have around the house.

Focus on routines:

- Keep to a schedule for naps and mealtimes.
- Follow a bedtime routine.
- Tell your toddler about any upcoming changes to the routine.
- Set limits and stick to them so they know what's expected.
- Put healthy limits on screen time. (See [Screen Time](#))

Set a good example:

- Model sharing, taking turns and using good manners, like saying “please” and “thank you.”
- Be calm and patient in dealing with your child and others. When you're upset, it can make your child more upset.
- Name your own feelings so that your toddler learns what to call them and sees how you handle them in a healthy way: “I'm feeling very frustrated. I'm going to take some deep breaths so I can calm down and think about what to do.”

Praise good behaviour:

- Focus on what they did, not on whether they're “good” or “bad”: “How wonderful that you went to pee in the potty!” for example, instead of “good for you.”
- Tell them right away when you see them behaving well: “Wow! You shared your toy with that child so nicely. That's hard to do and you did it!”

Use cooperation instead of control:

- Let them make simple choices, like which colour shirt to wear. Limit choices to 2, so you don't confuse them.
- When you say no, offer alternatives: “No, that paper is for Daddy, but you can play with this book.”
- Negotiate with them: “I'll read you a story after you've picked up the blocks.”
- Talk about conflicts so they can learn empathy and problem-solving skills (“I can see you're angry at Tim for taking the ball”), let them know that other children have needs, too (“Tim also wants to have a turn”), and offer solutions (“Maybe you can let them have a turn and then they'll give you a turn”).



BRAIN BUILDER

Allowing your toddler to make simple choices gives them some control and will help them learn to think for themselves.



FAMILY STORY

Once I started letting my toddler make some decisions (“Do you want to eat your carrots first or your tomatoes first?”), he was happier. And I knew I was helping him learn to be independent.



Deal positively with problem behaviour

When your child does misbehave, try using the positive discipline strategy that best suits the situation:

Strategy 1

Connect with them through a gentle nod or touch or a kind word or look. Let them see that you're calm, loving and there to help them.

Strategy 2

Help them name their emotions. When your toddler learns to understand their feelings, they'll be able to deal with them better. Instead of “What's wrong with you?” try, “I can see you're angry. It's normal to feel angry when we can't do what we want. But Mommy is trying to keep you safe.”

Strategy 3

Use a “time-in” to calmly comfort your toddler in a quiet space. Remove them from the situation, listen to them and help them name their emotions and figure out another way to react. When they’re ready to return, remind them of what you just talked about.

Strategy 4

Redirect them when they’re doing something that’s okay, but the way they’re doing it isn’t. If they’re throwing a ball in the kitchen, for example, offer them some safe utensils to play with, or give them a job to do.

Strategy 5

Distract them – with a toy or a book, for example – when they’re doing something you don’t want them to do.

Strategy 6

Explain the consequences of what they’re doing. If they’re pouring out their bubble-making soap, for example, tell them, “There won’t be any bubbles left if you pour that out.” If they decide to pour it out anyway, say, “That’s too bad – the bubbles are all gone now.” They may be upset (and it’s okay to comfort them), but they’ll have learned that choices have consequences.

Strategy 7

Find a compromise that works for both of you. Of course, some things – like playing with matches – are unsafe and aren’t open for compromise. Use those times to teach, too – “I can see you’re angry. But I can’t let you do that because I love you and I want to keep you safe.”

Positive Discipline by Age

As your child grows, you’ll need to adapt the way you discipline them.

6 to 12 months

At this age, your toddler isn’t trying to be naughty, and they’re not able to understand the consequences of their actions.

What works?

- routine – a regular schedule of rest, feeding and play
- connecting and redirecting
- distracting
- lots of quiet time spent together
- a comfort toy

What doesn’t?

- consequences

12 to 24 months

As they grow, your toddler will want to test limits, explore and have more control. They may seem demanding and be more easily frustrated, but they aren’t trying to misbehave. Safety is key. Toddlers at this age should be given space to explore, but shouldn’t be left alone.

What works?

- childproofing, so you won’t need to say no as often
- supervision
- offering choices
- connecting and redirecting
- distracting
- consequences: “If you throw your food off the table, then no more food.”

- communication and empathy – helping them name their emotions and understand how their actions affect others

What doesn’t?

- time-outs – which can increase separation anxiety or fear of being abandoned

24 to 36 months

At this age, your toddler is going between independence and dependence. They may be possessive and demanding and have outbursts and temper tantrums.

What works?

- connection and empathy – helping them name their emotions and understand how their actions affect others
- patience
- childproofing
- routine
- supervision
- setting limits
- offering choices
- connecting and redirecting
- consequences
- distracting
- time-ins that are short, boring and start right away



TRY THIS

Don’t try to reason with your toddler when they’re still very upset. Wait until they’ve calmed down enough to listen.

Dealing With Common Challenging Behaviours

Challenging behaviours can be stressful to deal with. As a parent or caregiver, you may feel that you've done something wrong. Or you may be reminded of a difficult situation you faced as a child.

But as your toddler grows and seeks more independence, it's normal for them to act out. They're learning about the world and what they can and can't do. Their behaviour is also their way of telling you that they need something, like rest, food, comfort or connection.

When your toddler's behaviour is difficult, your role is to assist them in recognizing their emotions and learning to manage them in a positive manner. This is an opportunity for you to respond in a way that shows understanding and strengthens a strong, respectful bond with them.



TRY THIS

You don't need to do something every time your child "acts out." If they're doing something minor that isn't putting them in danger or hurting anyone, you may want to overlook it. Don't overlook their good behaviour, though. Praising them regularly helps them learn how to express their feelings in a healthy way.

Biting

- ✓ State the limit clearly and simply: "No, please don't bite. It hurts." Then move on.
- ✓ If they bite while breastfeeding or chestfeeding, firmly say no, tell them it hurt and remove them from the breast or chest. Then try again. (See [Breastfeeding or Chestfeeding Your Toddler](#))
- ✗ Don't bite them back. It may frighten and confuse them, and it will tell them that biting is okay.
- ✗ Don't laugh.



DID YOU KNOW?

Most young children bite someone at least once, usually when they have a sore mouth or when they're excited, scared or frustrated.



KEY TAKEAWAY

Your toddler learns how to behave by watching you. If you're acting stressed, your child will, too. But if you deal respectfully with them and with others, they'll learn to do the same.

Tantrums

Before a tantrum happens:

- ✓ Keep to routines around rest, activity and meal and snack times. Take healthy snacks and water with you when you go out.
- ✓ Let them know ahead of time what's going to happen and what you want them to do: "We're going to the store for milk and fruit. You can help me choose the bananas."
- ✓ Find ways to help them deal with their feelings, like running fast or using words.
- ✓ Try not to say no to every request. Give them control over little things, like which shirt to wear.

If you see a tantrum coming on:

- ✓ Redirect them to an activity they're familiar with, try to change what's bothering them or distract them. If they don't want to go to bed, for example, tell them about something fun they'll enjoy the next day.
- ✓ Give them quiet time if they're tired.
- ✓ Give them food if they're hungry.

If they're having a tantrum:

- ✓ Take some deep breaths and stay calm. Don't scream or spank them.
- ✓ Try to comfort them: "I'm here and I love you." But don't try to talk about their feelings until later, when everyone is calm.

- ✓ Try holding them firmly but lovingly, but stop if it seems to make the tantrum worse.
- ✓ If you're in public, remember that most people will understand.
- ✓ Make sure that they won't get hurt, hurt others or damage anything.

When the tantrum is over:

- ✓ Cuddle and comfort them.
- ✓ Praise them for regaining control.
- ✓ Help them name the feelings they had before, during and after the tantrum.
- ✓ Let them know it's normal to feel upset, and talk about what they can do next time they feel bad – like telling you before the feelings get too big for them to handle.
- ✓ Talk to your health care provider if you have concerns.

What is a tantrum?

An explosion of anger and frustration. Your child may cry, scream, kick, fall down, run away, thrash around, arch their back, stiffen their arms and legs, hold their breath, break things or even vomit.



DID YOU KNOW?

Like many parents and caregivers, you may be uncomfortable when your child shows big emotions like anger or sadness. It might remind you of hard times in your life, or you may just be less comfortable sharing feelings. Understanding why you feel uncomfortable can help you respond to your child in a healthy and helpful way, instead of reacting out of your own sadness, anger or frustration.



BRAIN BUILDER

By staying calm when your child is having a tantrum, you're showing them how to respond to stressful situations.

Fighting With Other Children

- ✓ If you're worried about safety, step in right away.
- ✓ If safety's not an issue, stay back for a minute to see if they can solve the problem themselves.
- ✓ Suggest fair solutions, like sharing: "Amy really likes the truck you're playing with. When you're done with it, can you give them a turn?"
- ✓ Try to understand what led to the fight to help prevent it from happening again.



DID YOU KNOW?

Fighting is very common between siblings.

Whining

- ✓ Check if they're hungry, tired or uncomfortable.
- ✓ Offer a hug.
- ✓ Let them know you can't understand them when they whine, and help them find the words to express what's bothering them.
- ✓ Praise them when they're not whining.

Dawdling (Moving Slowly)

- ✓ Give them plenty of notice before changing activities.
- ✓ Build in extra time to do things, especially when you know that switching activities will be hard, like putting toys away to get ready for bed.
- ✓ Tell them what you need them to do clearly and simply: "Put on your coat now, please."
- ✓ Put away toys, turn off the TV and get rid of other distractions when you're in a hurry. And give them some control over the situation by giving them a job to do.



Staying Calm

Parenting is challenging, and staying calm can be hard for anyone. Remember that your toddler can sense when you're upset, and will learn how to handle stress by watching you. Learning to stay calm will be good for you and help your toddler develop in a healthy way.



DID YOU KNOW?

Staying calm as a parent or caregiver can be even harder if you grew up with a caregiver who had a temper or who was easily upset. Think about how your toddler's behaviour makes you feel and about how your parents and caregivers responded to you when you were little. This can help you understand your reactions and make it easier to stay calm and respond to your child in healthy ways.

What is Shaken Baby Syndrome?

The possible effects – brain damage, blindness or even death – of shaking a young child, even for a few seconds.



DANGER

Never shake your toddler. If you're feeling overwhelmed and afraid you might hurt your child, put them in a safe place and get help immediately. Call a family member, a friend, a public health or primary care nurse, your health care provider or HealthLink BC at 8-1-1.

What you can do:

- ✓ Stick to routines to help your toddler feel and act their best.
- ✓ Learn about what kinds of behaviour are typical at different ages. (See [Typical Child Development by Age](#))
- ✓ Get as much rest as you can.
- ✓ Eat well.
- ✓ Make time for yourself, even a moment here and there.
- ✓ Spend time outdoors.
- ✓ Accept that you may not always be able to soothe your child, and that letting them cry for a few minutes won't harm them.
- ✓ Talk with someone about your feelings, and to other parents and caregivers about your experiences.
- ✓ See the [Resources](#) section for services and supports.



HOW TO

React if you feel you're losing control

1. Gently put your toddler down in a safe place, like the crib.
2. Leave the room for a few minutes.
3. Take some deep breaths and count to 10, repeat calming phrases to yourself, cry into a pillow or run on the spot. Or call a friend or relative to ask for help.
4. Wait until you're calm to try comforting your child again.



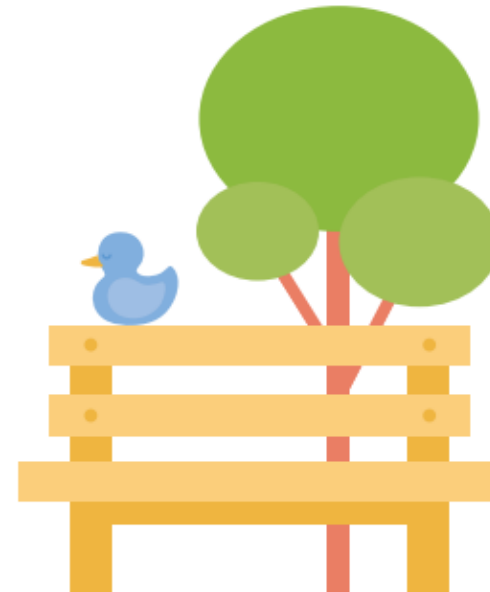
TRY THIS

No parent or caregiver stays calm all the time. If you lose your temper, apologize to your toddler. This will model the kind of behaviour you expect from them.



DID YOU KNOW?

Spanking is not a good option. It can hurt your toddler, cause them to be afraid of you and teach them that hitting others is okay.



Toddler's First Steps



**A Best Chance Guide to Parenting
Your 6- to 36-Month-Old**



BRITISH
COLUMBIA



Perinatal
Services BC
Provincial Health Services Authority

4th edition