



Center for Early Education and Development

Questions About Kids

Why Are the “Twos” So Terrible?

Has your sweet, cuddly baby turned into a green-eyed monster before your very eyes? Does he alternate between clinging to you and demanding to be on his own? Is every third word out of his mouth an emphatic “No?” Does he throw tantrums seemingly over nothing? If so, you are facing what commonly are called the “terrible twos,” although they actually may begin well before the child turns two and/or may continue into the threes. (Never fear, they do not go on forever!)

Your child is using one of the only tools he has—noncompliance in what he perceives as a battle for a sense of self and power.

While there is no magic cure for this annoying behavior, it may be easier to survive this stage if you understand that this behavior has a purpose in your child’s long-term development. Understanding the developmental meaning of the behavior may help you to deal with it in ways which will help you and your child come through it stronger, more confident, and with your loving relationship still intact.

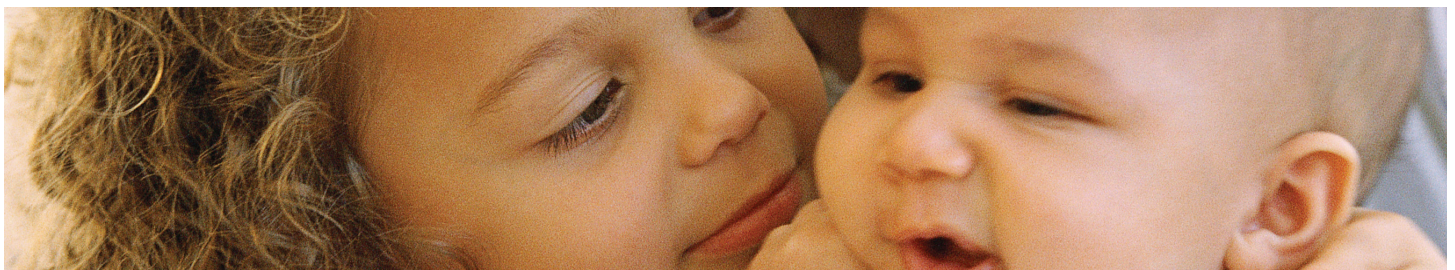
During the first few months of your baby’s life, you and she were almost as one. In fact, in your child’s mind you actually WERE one, for she did not yet have a sense of herself as a being separate from you. Later, as your baby became more mobile and began trying to say words, she became increasingly comfortable exploring the world on her own. Of course, she will need you for many things, but she gradually became less dependent, taking major steps in the long process of “individuation,” the process of becoming a separate, unique, autonomous person.

With words and mobility came the ability to follow simple directions and to obey social rules if you were there to tell him what they were. Then, somewhere in the toddler period your child may have learned that it’s OK to throw a ball but not his food, and he doesn’t need to be reminded of this at each meal. This means that he has developed the ability to remember a rule and to monitor his own behavior—big milestones in intellectual and social development.

Of course, you have discovered that he often still throws food, even though he “knows better.” This can lead to feelings of anger and frustration on your part and thoughts about what a naughty child you have or what a lousy parent you must be to have a child who is so willfully disobedient. Actually, your child is using one of the only tools he has—noncompliance—in what he perceives as a battle for a sense of self and power. The same cognitive changes which allow your child to remember rules and monitor himself also lead him to recognize for the first time his smallness and powerlessness relative to the adults in his life. Prior to this time, he has perceived himself as all-powerful and the center of the universe, so this is indeed a rude awakening! Since he lacks the size and skill of his parents, he will use negativism and disobedience as tools in the struggle for autonomy.

The challenge for you as a parent is to provide external control, and at the same time respect the child’s autonomy...

This struggle with power is going to create strong feelings and will be an emotional time for your child. It will be characterized by feelings of ambivalence and confusion. On one hand, the child is drawn to the



power he can have by just saying “no” to everything; on the other hand, his own negative behavior arouses his anxiety that he will lose his parents’ love. The challenge for you as a parent is to provide external control, and at the same time respect the child’s autonomy—to let him know that a particular behavior is not OK, but that you still love him even when he resists your will.

So how can you strike this balance between external control and respect for autonomy? You can set clear and consistent limits for your child’s behavior, giving directions in language your child can understand. Limits actually are reassuring to a two-year-old, for without external limits she will feel overwhelmed by her own unbridled urges. Whenever possible, you can show respect for your child’s autonomy by giving her a real choice: what food to eat, which shirt to wear, whether to take a nap with the light on or off. You can choose to fight only the battles that really are worth it, rather than turning every minor disagreement into a power struggle.

Be careful not to take this normal two-year-old behavior as a personal insult.

It also is important to allow your child to express her feelings, even angry ones, as long as she doesn’t damage property or hurt someone. When she is unable to put feelings into words, you can do it for her: “Yes, you’re really mad about that.” As she learns to express herself verbally, she will have less of a need to act out her feelings of anger, sadness, fear, and frustration.

Be patient, accept your child’s ambivalence, let her be clingy when she needs to and separate when she needs to. As she moves toward greater independence, it is important for her to know that she always can count on you for support and nurturance. You are like a gas station where she can be filled up so she can go back out and explore the world. And, perhaps most important of all, you can be careful not to take this normal two-year-old behavior as a personal insult. It does not mean that your child is bad or that you have failed as a parent. As tiring and trying as this period of development may be, it actually is a sign that your child is right on schedule, moving toward becoming a strong, independent person.

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