



Coping with Defiance in the Early Years

It is a toddler's job to be defiant. This is the period in your child's development when she begins to understand that she is separate from you and is naturally eager to seek out more independence and control over her world. The problem, of course, is that while their desire to be their own person is coming into full gear, toddlers have not yet mastered self-control. They are still driven by their needs, wants, and impulses, *not* by logic and reason. For better or worse, toddlers' most frustrating behaviors are usually quite normal and developmentally appropriate.

It's important to keep in mind that some toddlers are simply, by nature, more likely to be defiant than others. Children whose emotional reactions are big and intense, as well as children who are more cautious and fearful, may be more oppositional than children who are easy going and flexible. They tend to have a more difficult time with change and therefore protest, especially at transition times (e.g., getting into the car seat, bedtime, or going to a new place), as these experiences can be quite stressful for them.

To Think About

No two children or families are alike. Thinking about the following questions can help you adapt and apply the information and strategies below to your unique child and family.

- What does your child tend to be most oppositional about? What do these things have in common? Why do you think this is? How can this understanding help you help your child cope better?
- How do you respond when your child is being defiant? What works? What doesn't? What can you learn from this?

What You Can Do

Read below about ways to respond to your toddler's defiant behavior so that your little one will begin to learn about limits and self-control.

Validate your child's feelings. "I know you don't want to put your pajamas on. It's hard to go from playtime to bedtime."

Set the limit. "But it's time for sleep so you can grow big and strong."

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Offer a few choices (all of which must be acceptable to you): “Do you want to put your PJs on before or after we read books?” You might also give your child a choice between two pairs of pajamas she wants to wear. Choices give children some control in positive ways and can reduce defiance.

Use humor. This is a great way to lighten up the moment. You might put your child’s PJ bottoms on your head, or see if they fit onto his favorite stuffed animal. Humor gives everyone a chance to cool off.

Encourage your child to use his imagination. For a child who refuses to go to bed: “Teddy is soooo tired. He wants you to cuddle with him to help him fall asleep.” Or, when a child refuses to clean up: “These cars want to go back in the basket with their friends. Let’s race to see who can get more cars in there the fastest!”

Enforce the limit without anger. If none of these strategies work, and your child is still digging in her heels, calmly and firmly implement the limit. “You can get into the car seat or I can put you in. You decide.” If she resists, then calmly but firmly (not angrily) pick her up and strap her in. In a soothing voice tell her you know that she hates getting in the car seat, but it keeps her safe—and that’s your number one job.

Help your child recover. Pay no attention to the tantrum. Just start talking about something totally unrelated: “Wow, look at that big doggie coming down the street.” Ignoring the behaviors you want to eliminate is the fastest way to be rid of them. (The exception to this rule is if your child is hurting himself or someone else—that is, hitting, slapping, punching, and so on. Then stop him from the aggressive behavior and calmly but sternly say, “No hitting. You can feel mad, but you cannot hit. Hitting hurts.”)

Avoid giving in. If you give into tantrums, your child learns that if she pushes hard enough, she’ll get what she wants. This will also make it more difficult the next time you try to enforce a limit.

For more information on challenging behavior from birth to three, visit:

www.zerotothree.org/challenges

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