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# Understanding Children

## *Disciplining your toddler*



No doubt about it, toddlers are a handful! At times, it will seem like they can be in two places at the same time, and be headed for trouble in a third one yet. Many a parent can recite nerve-racking stories of toddlers perched on top of the bookcase, or of a fall that resulted in an emergency room visit.

Setting limits and maintaining some kind of control are difficult tasks with toddlers because they are so independent, yet have so few skills to communicate and solve problems. The key to disciplining your toddler includes love, understanding, and quick thinking!

### ■ Understanding toddlers

#### **Toddlers are limited in their ability to communicate**

Toddlers are interesting little people. Like babies, they still like to be held, talked to, and comforted. And they still often express themselves by crying, shrieking, jabber-

ing, grunting, and pointing. Unlike babies, however, toddlers can say a few words, which can mean many things. "Cup!" may mean "Hand me my cup," "I want more milk," "The cup just fell off the table," or "The dog just stole my cup!" A toddler, with this limited capacity to communicate, is therefore very hard to understand.

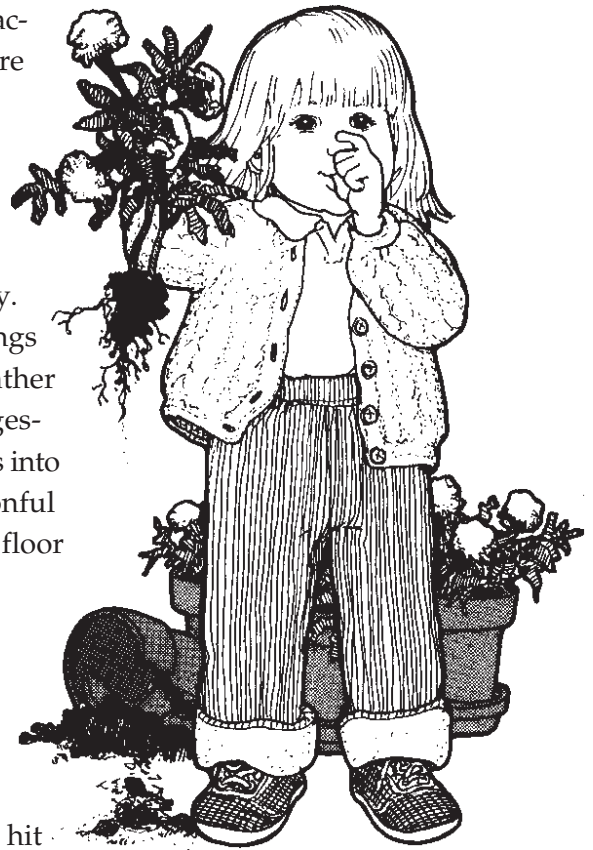
#### **Toddlers can try your patience**

Sometimes, toddlers do things that drive parents crazy. They reach out and grab things (like eyeglasses). They are rather clumsy and awkward with gestures; a loving pat often turns into an accidental whack. A spoonful of peas may wind up on the floor rather than in the mouth.

#### **Toddlers cannot share**

Toddlers are also very possessive. "No," and "Mine," are favorite words and they are quite willing to hit

or bite to get (or keep) a favorite toy. In fact, toddlers may spend as much time carrying around and protecting toys as they do playing with them.



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## Toddlers cannot plan their own day

Toddlers are always “on the go” and often play until they “run out of gas.” They have very little skill at pacing themselves and can be happy one minute and cranky the next. Much of this behavior depends on the new skills they are developing. The same toddler who screams for an unreachable cookie may lead or drag you to the jar and point at another time. Learning to do things in a socially acceptable way is a big step for a toddler.

## ■ How parents can help

### Set up a safe environment

One of the most important things a parent can do is to establish a safe environment. “Toddler-proof” your home by locking up dangerous chemicals and medicines, covering electrical outlets, and storing breakable objects up high, especially if your toddler is a climber!

You also may want to take a close look at toys and how your toddler uses them. Getting hit accidentally on the head with a foam block is no big deal, but a “bonk” on the head with a hard wooden block is more serious. A safe place to play and appropriate toys to play with will save you from saying “No” and make your job as parent much easier.

## Establish a routine

Toddlers need naps and reasonable bedtimes. Small stomachs need nutritious snacks and meals frequently. Growing bodies need time to run, jump, and play every day. Riding around all day in a car seat, sleeping in a stroller, and eating fast food is OK once in a while, but if it’s happening often you may want to rethink your schedule. Taking care of basic needs can go a long way in preventing a cranky, whiny child.

## Remove or isolate

When a child is running out into the street or about to get into the household bleach, there is no time for negotiation. Parents MUST remove a child from a dangerous situation. Picking up, holding, or putting a child in the crib for a few minutes until things can be made safe is perfectly OK. Your child may protest loudly, but your primary responsibility is to keep him or her safe.

## Distract

This works especially well with very young children. When a child is doing something unacceptable, try to call attention to another activity—perhaps playing with another toy or reading a book together. The goal is to temporarily distract the child from the current problem. For example, if a child wants to play with break-

able knickknacks at a friend’s home, perhaps you can distract him or her with a stuffed toy. Since young children’s attention spans are so short, distraction is often effective.

## Redirect

If your toddler is throwing blocks, hammering on tables, or drawing on books, remove the materials while saying something like “Blocks are for building, not throwing.” At the same time substitute another

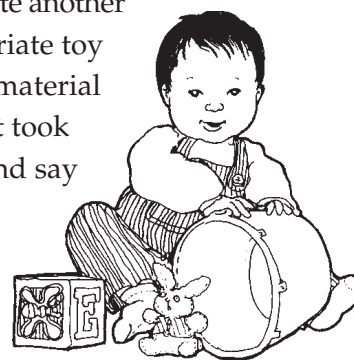
appropriate toy for the material you just took away and say

“If you want to throw something,

throw the bean bag into the basket.” By redirecting the activity into a more acceptable situation, you let children know you accept them and their play, and you channel a problem activity into a more acceptable activity.

## Ignore

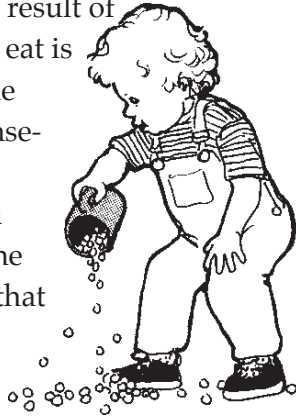
The goal in this strategy is to have the child stop the undesirable behavior by not paying attention to it. This can be effective in some situations with older toddlers. Withhold all attention, praise, and support. Without the desired attention, children eventually quit whatever they’re doing. This takes patience.



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## Use natural or logical consequences

Natural consequences are results that naturally happen after a child's behavior. For example, the natural result of refusing to eat is hunger. The natural consequence of dropping a cookie in the bathtub is that it becomes soggy.



Natural consequences can be very effective for teaching children what happens when they do certain things.

Logical consequences should be used whenever natural consequences are dangerous or impractical. For example, it would be dangerous for a child to experience the natural consequence of running into the street and being hit by a car! Logical consequences should be logically connected to a child's behavior and should teach responsible behavior.

For example, if a child persistently flings peas across the kitchen or spills milk over the edge of the table, you may want to use logical consequences. First remove the peas or milk until they can be used in an appropriate manner. Second, provide an opportunity for your toddler to "clean-up." Peas that are dropped must be picked up; milk that is spilled must be wiped up. Using

logical consequences teaches toddlers to help with the cleaning and to understand that cleaning up our mess is a part of growing up.

## Set a good example

Toddlers love to imitate their parents. If you want your toddler to treat the dog kindly or have good eating habits, be sure to demonstrate how to do it. Remember also to talk about what you do. Even though toddlers may not fully understand everything you say, they will begin to understand that there are reasons for doing things a certain way.

## Help your toddler understand "sharing"

As was mentioned earlier, sharing is not something that toddlers do very well. They aren't able to understand the process yet. Toddlers do enjoy playing next to other children, but are not very good at playing with other children.

If you have several young children, it is better (and easier) to provide several similar toys than to require sharing. Two toy telephones can prevent many squabbles and may even encourage children to cooperate and communicate better.

Toddlers usually find it difficult to share because they don't really understand what ownership means. They may think sharing a toy is the same as giving it away.

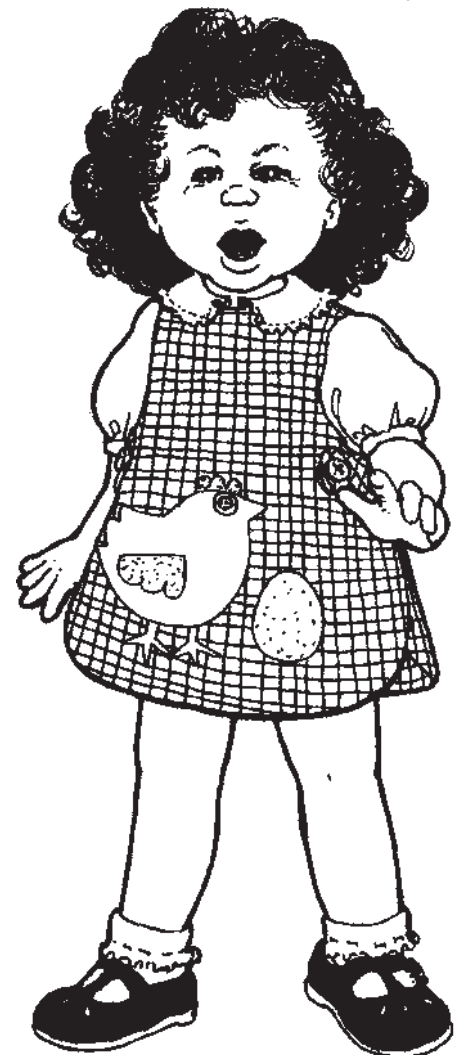
It is very common for a toddler to give someone a toy, but expect it to be given right back. Older

brothers and sisters sometimes have trouble understanding this. Sometimes it helps to explain that your toddler is just "showing" her brother the toy. If your toddler does share, give praise, but respect the need to protect treasures.

## Is it ever OK to spank?

Toddlers often respond well to physical action when you need to discipline them. Touching them on the arm, taking them by the hand, picking them up, holding, or restraining them are all good ways to get their attention.

Spanking will also get their attention, but doesn't do a very



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good job of teaching them how to behave. In fact, it generally distresses children so much that they can't pay attention to your explanations or directions. It's hard to reason with a screaming, crying child.

Some parents who frequently slap a toddler's hand are dismayed to find their toddler slapping back. Or worse yet, slapping and hitting others.

Spanking and slapping can quickly get out-of-hand for both parents and children. Most reported cases of abuse involve loving, well-meaning parents who just lost control. Studies show that children who experience or witness a great deal of spanking, slapping, or hitting are much more likely to become physically aggressive themselves.

Toddlers love to imitate. Most parents find it more successful to teach a child *what to do* rather than *what not to do*. It may help to think of behavior problems as opportunities to teach your child new skills. After all, the word discipline comes from the word disciple, which means "to teach."

### ■ A final note

Disciplining toddlers is not easy. And you won't always feel good about how you handled a situation. It's important to recognize that you are human. After all, it's hard to be calm when your toddler tries to drown the cat with orange juice or smack you in the face with a banana. You can respond quickly when your

toddler needs guidance if you understand the reasons for his or her behavior and know your options. Good luck!

### ■ Read more about it!

For more information about children and families contact your county extension office and ask for the following.

*Understanding Children: Temper tantrums*, PM 1529J

*Understanding Children: Toilet training*, PM 1529K

*Understanding Children: Biting*, PM 1529A

*Understanding Children: Fears*, PM 1529D

Also visit the ISU Extension Store at [store.extension.iastate.edu](http://store.extension.iastate.edu)

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