
Top Ten Tips for Coping with Toddlers:

Taming the Toddler

Physical aggression peaks in the second year of life. The term, “toddler tantrums” and “terrible twos” begins to describe the difficulties for parents of toddlers and some of the aggressive behaviours, such as hitting, biting and spitting, that can be displayed.

So how does one “tame the toddler”? Vivamus Psychologists have shared their top ten tips for dealing with aggression in toddlers.

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During a Tantrum:

1. Safety

When a toddler becomes aggressive their aggression can be directed towards themselves (e.g. banging their head against the wall); other children (e.g. hitting/biting) or other adults (e.g. pulling mummy’s hair). A tantrum can very quickly start and appear to come out of the blue. The first thing to consider in the situation is whether you, your child, or others around your child are safe. Think about what is in reach of your child and remove anything that can cause potential harm. If your child is being aggressive to someone around them they need to be moved away from that person and placed somewhere where they can have more space. If your toddler has a tantrum in a public place (restaurant/supermarket) there is often added stress caused by social anxiety - fears about what other people are thinking. Leaving that environment may help you to deal more effectively with your toddler as your focus is not distracted by concerns about what others may be thinking.

2. Take a short break

Being with your child when they have a tantrum can provoke strong emotions in a parent. Being hit, spat at or kicked can quite quickly cause feelings of anger and frustration within you. If you feel that you are beginning to lose control then place your child in a safe environment (e.g. their cot/pram) and take a short break (couple of minutes) from them to regain your composure.

3. De-escalate

When a toddler is expressing a lot of frustration de-escalation techniques can help to try and reduce the level of anger. These techniques involve:

- Being aware of your own voice tone and level. Make sure your voice is calm and that you do not shout.
- Go to their level: if they are sitting or standing go down to their level so you are not towering over them.
- Give them space: don’t intrude on their space
- Use simple language and short sentences
- Show them that you are listening: reflect back on what they have said, nod and show interest.

4. Know the limits

Be consistent about what is acceptable and what is not. Repeatedly tell them that they can not hit or bite etc. Make sure that other people looking after your toddler are aware of the same limits and have the same boundaries, especially with less clear behaviours (e.g. pulling hair, shouting).

5. Show them a better way to express their feelings

Over time toddlers need to learn that communicating their frustration and anger by talking is more effective than by using aggression. They learn this by seeing other people (especially mummy or daddy) talk about their feelings rather than act on them, and by getting more success when they talk about how they are feeling rather than acting on their feelings. Toddlers may not understand some of the language used, but if when you feel upset you tell them in a calm manner rather than use aggression (e.g. not shouting) you are demonstrating to them that bad feelings do not need to be acted on aggressively. For example when they are having a tantrum, by reflecting back to them in a calm manner “when you hit mummy it upsets

her and makes her feel sad”, shows them that bad feelings can be tolerable and that they do not need to lead to aggression. This also teaches them the language of emotions.

Afterwards:

6. Move on

After the tantrum has ended it is important not to hold a grudge towards your child. This can be difficult. Often one can hold feelings of frustration, especially when you have spent all day caring for your child only to receive anger back. It is important to move on and to draw a line. This also teaches the important skill of forgiveness.

7. Learn from it

Once the situation has resolved try and look back at what happened and learn from it. What were the triggers? Could it have been prevented? Toddlers are full of energy and need an outlet. Giving your child activities to do that help channel some of that energy into positive avenues can help prevent the build up of frustration. Also think about whether the situation could have been dealt with in a better way. What could you do differently next time?

8. Reward the positive

It is important to let your toddler know that non-aggressive behaviour leads to more effective communication and gets them better results. When your toddler communicates in non-aggressive ways (e.g. telling you they are upset or by walking away) respond to them positively – ask them how you can help them feel better, make them feel listened to. For example, when they display gentle behaviour (e.g. stroking a pet lovingly or being caring towards a sibling), praise them for this.

9. Deal with your own emotions

When a toddler has a tantrum it can often feel like they have released all their negative feelings of anger and frustration and placed them into you. A parent’s role is often to suck up a child’s anxieties and anger. This often leads to the parent being left to manage some difficult emotions and feeling themselves angry and anxious. It is therefore important to learn how to manage this build up of emotions and to find healthy ways of releasing negative feelings.

10. Get support

Support from a valued friend or partner is irreplaceable. Sharing your experiences of raising a toddler really does help to put things into perspective and can help you think about other ways of approaching difficult situations. If your child’s behaviour becomes very challenging and begins to have a detrimental impact on your wellbeing and the wellbeing of other family members, you could consider getting professional help from a psychologist.

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