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Tips: How to improve toddler behavior

Life can be frustrating for toddlers. Though often eager to show their independence, toddlers may not be able to move as swiftly as they'd like or effectively communicate their needs. This combination can easily lead to tantrums and misbehavior. But you can teach your toddler to behave well by providing love, attention, praise, encouragement and a degree of routine. Consider these practical parenting tips.

Show your love:

Positive attention tops the list of parenting tips for toddlers. Make sure your displays of affection for your child outnumber any consequences or punishments. Hugs, kisses and good-natured roughhousing reassure your child of your love. Frequent praise and attention also can motivate your toddler to follow the rules.

Accept your child:

As your child grows, he or she will display certain personality traits. Some of these are learned, others genetic. Respect your child's developing individuality and don't expect him or her to be just like you. While you're likely to notice certain features of your child's temperament, avoid labeling these features — which can encourage bad behavior. Instead, nurture your child's personality by finding ways to help him or her feel confident. A strong-willed child, for instance, has perseverance. Build on your child's strength by encouraging him or her to play with a challenging toy.

Prevent tantrums:

It's normal for a toddler to have temper tantrums. But you may be able to reduce the frequency, duration or intensity of your child's tantrums by following these parenting tips:

Know your child's limits. Your child may misbehave because he or she doesn't understand or can't do what you're asking.

Explain how to follow the rules. Instead of saying, "Stop hitting," offer suggestions for how to make play go more smoothly, such as "Why don't you two take turns?"

Take 'no' in stride. Don't overreact when your toddler says no. Instead, calmly repeat your request.

Pick your battles. Only say no when it's absolutely necessary.

Offer choices, when possible. Encourage your child's independence by letting him or her pick out a pair of pajamas or a bedtime story.

Avoid situations that may trigger frustration or tantrums. If your child always seems to have tantrums at the grocery store, hire a sitter the next time you go shopping. Also know that children are more likely to act out when they're tired, hungry, sick or in an unfamiliar setting.

Make it fun. Distract your child or make a game out of good behavior. Your child will be more likely to do what you want if you make an activity fun.

Stick to the schedule. Keep a daily routine as much as possible so that your child will know what to expect.

Encourage good communication. Remind your child to use words to express his or her feelings. If your child isn't speaking yet, consider teaching him or her baby sign language.

If your child has a tantrum, remain calm and distract him or her. Ignore minor displays of anger, such as crying — but if your child hits, kicks or screams for a prolonged period, remove him or her from the situation. Hold your child or give him or her time alone to cool down.

Enforce consequences:

Despite your best efforts, at some point your toddler will break the rules. Consider using these parenting tips to encourage your child to cooperate:

Natural consequences. Let your child see the consequences of his or her actions — as long as they're not dangerous. If your child throws and breaks a toy, he or she won't have the toy to play with anymore.

Logical consequences. Create a consequence for your child's actions. Tell your child if he or she doesn't pick up his or her toys, you will take the toys away for a day. Help your child with the task, if necessary. If your child doesn't cooperate, follow through with the consequence.

Withholding privileges. If your child doesn't behave, respond by taking away something that your child values — such as a favorite toy — or something that's related to his or her misbehavior. Don't take away something your child needs, such as a meal.

Timeout. When your child acts out, give a warning. If the poor behavior continues, guide your child to a designated timeout spot — ideally a quiet place with no distractions. Enforce the timeout for one minute for every year of your child's age. If your child resists, hold him or her gently but firmly by the shoulders or in your lap. Make sure your child knows why he or she is in the timeout. Afterward, guide your child to a positive activity. If all else fails, tell your child that you are taking a timeout away from him or her for a few minutes because of a specific behavior. Be sure to explain the behavior you'd like to see.

Whatever consequences you choose, be consistent. Make sure that every adult who cares for your child observes the same rules and discipline guidelines. This reduces your child's confusion and need to test you. Also, be careful to criticize your child's behavior — not your child. Instead of saying, "You're a bad boy," try, "Don't run into the street." Never resort to punishments that emotionally or physically harm your child. Spanking, slapping and screaming at a child do more harm than good.

Set a good example:

Children learn how to act by watching their parents. The best way to show your child how to behave is to set a positive example for him or her to follow