

128

early childhood



taming toddlers

The shift from infancy to toddlerhood brings with it a raft of new challenges. Psychologists Terri Sheldon and Dr Peta Stapleton offer their advice on dealing with common problems

toddlers are children aged between one and three years and if you have one you know they are very active and curious. They like to explore, touch, open, shut, throw and empty, all the while learning who they are and how things work. Toddlers long to feel safe but want to be free and in charge of themselves at the same time, learning to walk, talk, feed themselves and toilet train.

You may have experienced them trying out their wills and skills, attempting to become separate, independent little people. Within a short space of time they can move from being independent and 'I do myself' to being very needy and dependent again. At this age, they are beginning to learn about feelings and about living with others; starting to learn how to show love, how not to hurt others, how to share and how to take turns.

Toddlers are not able to understand our adult reasoning. They cannot understand why we want them to do one thing and not another, particularly when the other seems much more interesting. They cannot easily sit still, wait, share or control their feelings. Although they can't do these things well, they will learn all of them with time and consistent management.

Toddlers often experience strong emotions but do not have the cognitive ability to understand these feelings and what they should do with them. Nor do they possess the language to explain them so they use their behaviour to tell you how they are feeling (such as tantrums when they are frustrated or angry).

Finally, toddlers cannot stop themselves from doing what we know is the wrong thing but what they may feel is the fun or interesting thing; they still need adults to remind them and to help keep them safe.

COMMON PROBLEMS

These are some common toddler problems:

- whinging/whining
- tantrums (see over page for management ideas)
- hurting others – biting, hitting, pushing
- difficulties sharing
- bedtime hassles – going to bed or staying in their own bed
- toilet training troubles
- eating/mealtime difficulties.

TODDLER TIPS

Here are some ideas to help keep you sane and increase positive outcomes:

1 Make your statements or requests to toddlers in the positive rather than the negative as the toddler often won't process the whole sentence. Rather than saying, 'Don't go over to the door' say 'Come over here.' This is much easier for

4 Give them your positive attention when they are doing what you require of them.

5 When dealing with difficult behaviour, stay calm and minimise the attention they get.

6 Tell them firmly what you require and help them to carry this out. Perhaps model what is required. Say, 'We pat the puppy gently' then take their hand and show them how to do it.

7 Be persistent and consistent.

8 Help children learn about feelings and how to express them:

- Give names to feelings for your young child so they learn that feelings are something you can talk about and start to manage. For example you could say, 'You're feeling sad because Daddy had to go to work' or 'I can see you're angry.'
- Separate feelings from behaviour. You might say, 'I know you feel angry but you must not hit. When you are angry, you can come and tell me.'

Toddlers often experience strong emotions but do not have the cognitive ability to understand them

their brains to understand and you will be more likely to get compliance.

2 If your child does not follow your directions make sure you have their attention. Go closer to them, get their eye contact and possibly touch them rather than call out across the room.

3 If the issue is not negotiable and the child doesn't have a choice don't give them a choice. For example, don't say, 'Would you like to pick up the toys for Mummy?' as you will likely get a 'no' response and you have given them the choice and set yourself up for a battle. Just say firmly and calmly, 'Let's pick up the toys then we can play with something else.' Start picking them up and encourage your toddler to join you in this.

• Begin to help your child understand the difference between their own feelings and the feelings of others. For example you could say, 'It hurts the kitty when you hit him. Let's pat him very gently and make him feel better.'

• Read stories that provide examples of children with different kinds of feelings – angry, happy, sad, afraid etc.

9 Plan ahead for outings you know may be a problem, like shopping, visiting friends or having friends visit you:

- Try to make sure they are not over tired and don't over stay their tolerance
- Prepare them for any trips and tell them what is going to happen

DEALING WITH TANTRUMS

It is normal for young children to go through a period of throwing tantrums. It is most common at around two years of age, which is where the "terrible twos" saying comes from. In most children, tantrums have become infrequent or ceased by the ages of three or four but in some circumstances they can continue until a child is much older. This will depend on the child's personality and on how the behaviour has been managed.

Tantrums can range from crying through to rolling around on the floor and kicking and screaming, and can last anywhere from 20 to 30 seconds through to an hour or so. They can be very stressful for the parent dealing with them.

Tantrums usually occur in young children in circumstances when they are:

- Frustrated
- Angry
- Things don't go the way they wanted or had expected
- Told 'no'
- Unable to manage difficult tasks
- Don't have the words to communicate what they want or feel
- Over tired.

MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES

Try these helpful tips:

1 Be prepared for situations that you know may spark a tantrum. For example, don't take them to a busy shopping centre when you know they are over tired.

2 With young kids use "planned ignoring". This is when you walk away and do not look or speak to the child until they have quietened down. Once they have quietened, praise them and look for something positive to do together. This technique only works when you can control the environment (such as at home). So it may be hard to use when you are out shopping or have visitors.

3 Give an instruction to, 'Stop screaming and

speak nicely' or 'Stop screaming and speak in a quiet voice.' Praise them if they do and look for a positive activity to involve them in.

Instructions should be made in a calm, firm voice, not by yelling or losing control yourself. It is also a good idea to squat and look at your child directly in the eyes, rather than standing over them. This helps the child feel they are on the same level as you and avoids the power stance of being smaller than you are.

4 If they do not stop, follow up with an instruction to go to time-out or quiet time. Be calm and firm: 'You are not quiet so you must go to time-out now.' Time-out should be a quiet, safe space away from your attention, either the corner of a room facing the wall or a quiet, not very interesting room. Some children will take themselves to time-out but most at this early stage will require the adult to take them. Do not make a fuss or talk to the child further as they go to time-out. Tell them they must be quiet for one minute before they can come out.

5 Once quiet they can rejoin a positive activity with you. Avoid fighting about them coming out at the end of this time if they want to stay and sulk. Let them come out when they are ready after the minute is up.

6 If they start another tantrum repeat the above steps calmly.

COPING WHEN IN PUBLIC

It's worthwhile being prepared:

- Try planned ignoring first.
- If this doesn't work find somewhere quiet, away from any busy stimuli, such as your car. Tell them to sit quietly and once they are quiet return to what you were doing.
- If the child persists, be prepared to leave immediately and return home, placing them in time-out once you get home. Following through with your plan and being consistent will be the most important step here.

- If you plan on giving them a reward for good behaviour tell them what is expected and what they will get

- Take a toy to give them something to do
- When you go shopping, involve them by giving them little tasks to do like holding things for you or pointing out various items.

10 If you try a new behavioural strategy, be prepared to apply it for a good week consistently before you can evaluate whether it is working. Be aware that the behaviour you are trying to change usually worsens initially (increases in frequency or severity) as the child can be confused about the change and needs to learn that you are going to stick to the strategy consistently. If, after a week, you are not seeing any improvement then it is time to try a new strategy.

SEEKING HELP

If you are unsure how to manage a particular problem you can seek advice from a child psychologist or attend a parenting group. ● The Lakeside Rooms has a number of experienced child psychologists and runs parenting groups. For details go to lakesiderooms.com.au or call 07 5562 0466.

RESOURCES USEFUL CONTACTS

- childhoodcharts.com Positive resources to aid parents to reinforce appropriate childhood behaviours.

- familiesaustralia.org.au An independent, not-for-profit organisation that promotes the needs and interests of families.

- familyrelationships.gov.au For support with family relationship issues.

- kidscount.com.au Ideas on raising happy, confident children from the Australian Childhood Foundation.

- parenting.sa.gov.au For Parent Easy Guides that contain detailed behaviour management advice and tip sheets.

- parentlink.act.gov.au/index This site offers a network of information, ideas and community services.

- positiveparenting.com Provides a host of information to make parenting more rewarding and effective.