TODDLER
Mood Management

Easy Tips for Turning the Terrible Twos into the Terrific Twos!

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Toddler Mood Management:

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eBook designed by LoudNoises
INTRODUCTION

Many of the emotional meltdowns children experience between about 9 and 30 months old bubble up from the frustration of not being able to communicate. Their ideas far outstrip their language skills.

The “terrible twos” are less terrible the more children learn how to get across their intense and conflicting thoughts.

This is a quick e-guide to help you become a “toddler whisperer” and ease this stress of this developmental phase for both you and your child! Turn the “terrible twos” into the “terrific twos”!
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TRANSITION INTO TODDLERHOOD

In this Chapter:

• Where did my sweet baby go?
• My child isn’t even two yet. How long will this last?
Although children are each born with a unique personality, their early experiences are profoundly influenced by their physical states and by their environments (primarily their parents).

Thus, early on, your child’s desires tended to be either responses to physical needs (he was hungry and wanted to eat, he was sleepy and wanted to sleep, or he had a soiled diaper and wanted you to change it) or reflections of your desires.

He wanted things that made you happy, that engaged your attention. When you smiled, he smiled. When you became tense, he became emotionally agitated.

Through that first year a wonderful dance between parent and child developed as your child mirrored your moods. Because his moods were usually in synch with yours, he was a “good boy.” Gradually, though, sometime after he had mastered walking, an
irresistible urge to make his own choices began to well up inside him. This is an exciting development, but the difficulty with his making an independent choice is that he must disagree with you in order for the choice to be his own.

Now, when you ask him to do something, he refuses.

This phase is difficult for parents but it’s also hard for children. When children take a stand that opposes their parents, they experience intense emotions. Although they are driven to become their own unique persons, they also long to please their parents.

Even now, when I do something that my parents disagree with, I feel very conflicted. I am an adult, living in a different city, with well-thought-out choices, and it is still quite difficult.

For a child who is tentatively learning to make choices, who is dependent on his parents for food, shelter, and emotional support, it’s even more intense. Dissolving into tears is an appropriate expression of the inner turmoil that is so real for children who are in the midst of this process.

This season of emotional outbursts in children is reminiscent of labor – a series of intense spasms (psychological labor pains) that usher in a whole new phase of life.
Children of perfect parents (if there were such a thing!) would still need to go through the developmental phase your child is going through. Ideal children do NOT always agree with their parents. Ideal parenting does not prevent the “Terrible Twos” -- it helps children navigate them.

Your sweet baby is still there (and always will be!), he’s simply developing more layers of personality.

Q: My child isn’t even two yet. How long will this last?

Many people call this important phase of development the “Terrible Twos.” I prefer to call it “The First Adolescence.” This period begins long before age two and actually continues long afterwards, but in the majority of children, it is most intensely focused around the period from one-and-a-half to three years of age.
In this Chapter:

- Why is “No” my child’s favorite word?
- I’ve heard of baby sign language, even with hearing kids. Does it work?
- Should I be concerned if my daughters speech seems delayed?
Why is “No” my child’s favorite word?

The hallmark of this stage is oppositional behavior. Our wonderful children instinctively want to do exactly the opposite of what we want. We have nice, reasonable expectations and they say, “NO!” or they simply dissolve into tears.

Suppose you have some place to get to in a hurry. Your child has been in a great mood all day... until you say, “I need you to get into the car right now.” He will, of course, want to do anything except get into the car.

As if this weren’t enough, children in this phase of development have a great deal of difficulty making the choices they so desperately want to make. You ask your child what he would like for dinner, and he says macaroni.

You lovingly prepare it for him, and then as soon as it’s made he says, “I don’t want that!” It is perfectly normal for him to reverse a
decision as soon as he has made it, because at this stage, he even disagrees with himself.

His task is to gain skill at making appropriate choices. To help him accomplish this, offer your child limited choices at every opportunity. He will be demonstratively frustrated when he is given direct commands with no options. He will decompensate if he has too many alternatives. Two or three options generally works best.

Your child still needs the security of knowing that he’s not calling all the shots. When it’s time to eat, say something like, “Would you rather have a slice of apple or a banana?” He feels both the reassuring limits that you set and the freedom to exercise his power within those limits. If there are two things he needs to do, let him decide which to do first, when appropriate.

SANITY SAVER!

In this stage of development, children have a great deal of difficulty making the choices they so desperately want to make, not only defying you, but also reversing their own decisions. Make it easier by offering limited choices at every opportunity.
Many of the emotional melt-downs children experience between about 9 and 30 months old bubble up from the frustration of not being able to communicate. Their ideas far outstrip their language skills.

The “terrible twos” are less terrible the more children learn how to get across their intense and conflicting thoughts.

Baby signs are a wonderful way to do this. Shaking the head or moving the hand is far easier to learn than the intricate manipulation of the lips, jaw, and tongue necessary for each new word.

Large muscle coordination is learned before small muscle coordination - at about the same time kids want to express themselves.
Before their first birthdays, most babies are interested in learning a few high impact words: “No,” “bye-bye,” and the names of the important people and animals in their lives. Parents waving with each goodbye, shaking the head with each “no,” and petting the back of the hand when talking about the kitty will make this much easier.

You may also want to pick out signs to indicate each of the other family members. The signs used by your family don’t need to match anyone else’s.

Each sign is most effective if it is natural, simple to perform, and if everyone in the family uses both the word and the sign every time. In other words, don’t say “kitty” without petting the hand and don’t pet the hand without saying “kitty.”
If you want to select new signs over the next several months, it will be important to watch and observe what your child seems to want to communicate about.

Most children would like simple ways to express basic requests next, such as “I’m hungry”; “I’m thirsty”; “change me”; “pick me up”; “put me down”; or “take me outside”.

They might simply begin to touch the hand to the mouth whenever they say “eat,” tilt the head back when they say “drink,” and pat their bottoms when they say “diaper.”

Transitions can also be tough for children at this age, so a simple sign for “all done” can be very useful (perhaps outstretched palms or tapping the wristwatch).

These very simple maneuvers create rewarding ways for parents to connect with their children. They make an already magical time even richer, deepening family bonds.

The book *Baby Signs*, by Linda Acredolo and Susan Goodwyn, is a terrific resource for parents with children under 3. For children who attend schools that use American Sign Language (ASL), ASL can afford the same benefits as baby signs as long as the signs are simple.
My son won’t listen! We’ve tried time out, yelling, everything! What do you suggest?

Sometimes when we talk to our children, it feels like a surrealistic play, where we repeat ourselves over and over, and no one seems to hear. This is frustrating for us and unhealthy for our children.

Scenario 1: Your son is jumping on the sofa. Happily.

- Stop jumping on the sofa!
- If you don’t stop right now you’ll get a spanking!
- Why can’t you be more like your sister?”
- STOP THAT!!!!
Sound familiar? Occasionally, there is a physical problem. If you are concerned that your son is unable to hear, understand, or attend well, take him to his pediatrician for evaluation.

Otherwise, you are experiencing a trial faced in varying degrees by most parents. But why do children who can hear perfectly well, tune us out?

Kids are passionate about a great many things. It is all too easy for our voice to come to represent nothing more than an unwanted intrusion into their world: “Stop that . . . Stay in your seat . . . Keep quiet . . . It’s time to stop playing . . . Don’t climb on the chair . . . Get in bed.”

Children are full of energy, wanting to play, to move, to explore - drunk with freedom. As adults, we are anchored by responsibilities, wanting peace, courtesy, safety, order - haunted by the way things should be.

These agendas collide. We feel frustrated; they feel nagged; we all grumble.

The grand adventure of parenting is learning to bring these two marvelous worlds together in a creative union. Practice seeing events from both perspectives. As you become skilled at ‘bi-em-
pathic vision’ (a new word created just for you to describe seeing and feeling both worlds simultaneously), new ways of speaking to your son will suggest themselves to you.

Have you seen the recent 3D posters and books that don’t need glasses for viewing? They can take a little practice, but if you let your focus soften so that your two eyes see the page independently, a previously invisible 3D image will pop into view.

With practice, you can let your focus soften with your son. Let one ‘eye’ continue to see what you as a wise parent see, while with the other you try to see what he as a child sees.

A hidden reality will emerge - for both of you! Bi-empathic vision is the best way to teach your son what he needs to know to succeed in this world.

SANITY SAVER!

Practice seeing events from both perspectives. As you become skilled at “bi-empathic vision”, new ways of speaking to your child will suggest themselves to you.
Let’s look at how you both feel after Sofa Scenario 1: You are frustrated, angry, concerned that you’re losing control, and worried that your child won’t respond in an emergency. Your child feels hurt, squelched, misunderstood, and angry. They think the sofa is more important to you than they are, they resent their sister. Worst of all, they learn nothing positive.

Now let’s try the Sofa Scenario again, using bi-empathic vision, start with saying what your child is feeling:

“Jumping on the sofa is sooo fun! I love to jump! But jumping hurts the sofa and it might hurt you. Let’s go jump on an old pillow!”

You scoop her up, or take her by the hand, put an old pillow on the floor, and jump together, giggling.
How do you both feel this time?

You enjoy your child, and you spend less time and energy than in Scenario 1. She is giggling, feels understood, and realizes you think she’s important. She wants to listen to you.

This time your child learns that jumping hurts the sofa, there are better places to jump, and “Mom loves me.”

This is a long process. There will be many moments of exasperation. Still, nothing compares to the thrill of bringing your two worlds together in a burst of creativity.

Not only will you raise your child well, but they will raise you - to new levels of empathy, compassion and wisdom. Your life will never be the same.
The time period for gaining the first 50 or so words is often very slow. These early words are usually very simple and useful for getting the children’s needs met.

Most kids at this stage either over-generalize (all men are Daddy, all animals are doggy) or over-restrict (only my cat is kitty). Words appear and disappear in kids’ vocabularies. This slow ebb and flow causes many parents to worry -- especially if they know other kids of the same age who are talking up a storm.

During this slow gain in single words, a rich, complex comprehension is developing almost unseen.

**Q:** Should I be concerned if my daughter’s speech seems delayed?
Want dada home!

An explosion of language follows, when children rapidly learn to use hundreds of words and begin combining them in unique ways (“spoon comb” for fork, or “me puter TV now” for wanting her turn at the computer monitor -- you’ve been surfing long enough!).

Most kids come out with delightful, original utterances during this stage -- great fodder for baby book memoirs. Verbs, adjectives, and pronouns are incorporated into their repertoires. “Her goed to the store.”

After another plateau, most kids go through another language explosion, this time of sentence complexity. At first, all past tens-es end with “ed” (boy falled down) and all plurals end in “s” (I like mouses and gooses).

Rules of grammar begin to find their places, and at the same time intelligibility improves greatly. Others outside the family can understand whatever the child is saying.

Daddy, you can’t take a shower, Mom already took it! (dissolves in giggles)
Now, before you know it, language becomes sophisticated enough to give rise to word play. Puns, jokes, and poetry mark the flowering of this remarkable growth.

Several warning signs along the way suggest that this powerful process may need some extra help. There may be no problem at all, but a child should get a hearing and speech evaluation if any of the following applies:

**SPEECH WARNING SIGNS BY MONTHS**

- **12** months: no babbling or jargon
- **18** months: no single words
- **24** months: vocabulary of 10 words or less
- **30** months: vocabulary of less than 100 words or no 2 word phrases
- **36** months: vocabulary of less than 200 words, no sentences, clarity less than 50%
- **48** months: vocabulary of less than 600 words, no complete sentences, clarity less than 80%
Pointing is an important key to language development. Children who point at objects in the first year and who use symbolic gestures at 13 months are likely to have completely normal language, even if they are late bloomers.

Your child could be a late bloomer who is on the perfect course for her, or there may be some obstacle (such as fluid in the ears) hindering her development. Either way, after a discussion with your pediatrician, a hearing test is the next step.

Your pediatrician may suggest other steps as well, including speech evaluations or developmental evaluations.

In today’s day and age, much media attention has been focused on autism. It is important to note that developmental disorders such as autism sometimes present as concerns over speech. These are very complex disorders, though, and extensive evaluation by developmental specialists is necessary to make such diagnoses.

Even if your daughter should turn out to need some extra help, most speech problems can be successfully dealt with when discovered at this age. Because of your concern for her now, you will treasure all the more the pearls that she will eventually say to you. Two of the things on the list. If children can make some choices, they will learn more and feel better.
3 TANTRUMS & BEHAVIOR

In this Chapter:

- How do I prevent my toddlers’ tantrums?
- What should I do if my child is having a temper tantrum?
- What should I do if my child bites?
Children are most susceptible to tantrums - or, as I like to call them, “emotional storms” - when they are tired, hungry, uncomfortable, bored, or over-stimulated.

Be creative at orchestrating life to minimize tantrum weather. You may want a toy basket that only comes out when you are on the phone or online or preparing dinner. Better yet, dinner preparation might be a great time to involve your child in cooking.

When possible, plan shopping for times when your child is rested, fed, and healthy. Interact with your child throughout shopping and/or bring along stimulating toys or books.

Remember the situation from your child’s perspective. You are going along making choice, after choice, after choice, but when he tries to make a choice, he doesn’t get what he wants. You can see
how frustrating this would be. It’s often helpful to let your child pick out one or two things when at the store.

A good way to do this is when a child asks for something, instead of saying, “No,” (which will immediately make him or her say, “Yes!”) say, “Let’s write that down.” Then write it down. When your child asks for something else, write that down, too.

Then when you are all done, read back a few of the things on the list that you think would be good choices, and let him pick one or two of the things on the list. If children can make some choices, they will learn more and feel better.

SANITY SAVER!

Children are most susceptible to tantrums when they are tired, hungry, uncomfortable, bored, or over-stimulated. Be attentive to their physical needs and environments (just like when they’re babies) and you’ll experience far fewer “emotional storms.”
Another worthwhile technique is for you to make a list before you go to the store. That way it won’t look so arbitrary when you pick what you want off the shelf while your child doesn’t get his choice.

As you shop, whenever you put something in your basket, check it off your list. Even if it is not on your list, check it off. The list is to teach that each item has a purpose, not that you had thought of it previously.

His task during this time is to gain skill at making appropriate choices. To help him accomplish this, offer your son limited choices at every opportunity.

He will be demonstratively frustrated when he is given direct commands with no options. He will decompensate if he has too many alternatives. Two or three options generally work best.

Make sure the choices you offer fall within an appropriate agenda. Your child still needs the security of knowing that he’s not calling all the shots.
Surveys have shown that there are two common reactions of parents in this situation. The first is to spank or discipline the child in some way. Our role during this phase is to teach our children to make choices, to raise them as independent, highly functioning people.

If you discipline a child for a temper tantrum, you are teaching a powerful unconscious lesson: down the road, when he or she is in second adolescence, and is confused, hurting, scared, and doesn’t know what choices to make -- don’t talk to Mom or Dad, because they will not understand and it will hurt.

The second major way that people deal with temper tantrums is to give the children whatever they had the temper tantrums to get. Basically, this teaches kids that if they cry hard enough, or act out sufficiently, they will get whatever they want. We don’t want to teach our children that either.
So, what does one do about temper tantrums?

First, take a deep breath. Realize that tantrums are an expression of acute frustration. They deserve a medium amount of attention (children should not feel that they get more of your attention by throwing a fit). Parents may be tempted to be loud or angry, but tantrums are a time to be calm.

**SANITY SAVER!**

Children feed off of your energy, so as much as you might want to yell or scream, tantrums are a time to be calm. Remember to breathe deeply.

I’ve been in a grocery store with my children having temper tantrums, as a pediatrician, with my patients in the checkout line. The first thing you feel is, “I just wish I could drop into the floor so nobody would see me.” Many people won’t understand. They will look at you and think your child is spoiled or that you are a bad parent. The truth of the matter is that you probably have a normal child and are a good parent.
People who don’t have kids may not understand, yet. That is their problem, though. Try to be patient with them.

When I see a parent whose child is having a tantrum in a store, I am reminded of labor. When I look at a mom in labor, I see something that is heroic, triumphant, and beautiful.

Tears come to my eyes when I am privileged to be a part of a birth. So, the next time this painful situation happens to you, take a deep breath and remember: if Dr. Greene were here, he would see something heroic and beautiful.

Next, while you are taking a deep breath, consciously relax. Kids play off your emotions. It’s so hard to relax in this situation, but just let your muscles go. The more uptight you are, the more energy is available for their tantrums. Kids thrive on attention, even negative attention.

Where you go from here depends on your child. Some children will calm down if you pick them up and hold them.

My first son was like that. His storm would dissolve if you just gave him a big hug and told him it would be all right. If you picked up my second son during a storm, he would hit you -- there were different ways to get him to calm down. Each child is unique.
One thing that often works very well is to try to voice to the child what he is going through. “You must really want to get this, don’t you?” Then he may melt and say, “Uh huh.”

Handle tantrums with a light touch. Seasoning the interaction with understanding, humor, and distractions can save the day.

You will have to experiment with your child to see what it is that can help him understand that everything is okay, these bad feelings will pass, and that it’s all a normal part of growing up.

Whatever you do, if your child had a temper tantrum to try to get something, don’t give it to him, even if you would have ordinarily done so. Giving in to tantrums is what spoils a child.

Giving in is the easiest, quickest solution in the short run, but it damages your child, prolongs this phase, and ultimately creates far more discomfort for you. Choosing your son’s long-term gain over such dramatic short-term relief is part of what makes properly handling temper tantrums so heroic.

Instead you might say, “Sorry, I would love to give you what you want, but because you had a temper tantrum, I can’t right now. Next time, let’s do that.” Stand by your child during this difficult time for both of you.
When you feel yourself getting tense, again say to yourself: temper tantrums are a beautiful, albeit painful, part of growing up, so take a deep breath, relax, and remember, “Dr. Greene thinks you are beautiful, courageous, and worthy of high praise!”

What should I do if my child bites?

What a sinking feeling to see, or hear about, your toddler biting another child. It may be comforting to know that most parents will go through this at one time or another as their children explore the wide variety of ways to interact with others in their search to find the best ways to relate.

Your child is at an age where the urge for exploration and experimentation propels him forward throughout the day. He is also continually seeking to attract attention, especially from adults.

It wasn’t always this way. Your son began his life in the solitary confines of the womb -- a protected place where he alone was the center of attention and where all his needs were met.

After his birth, his primary relations were with adults who likewise treated him with love and understanding. In encounters with other
children, he had very little control. It wasn’t until he began to toddle that a whole new world of decisions opened up -- to approach or run away, and how to respond if he and another child both want to play with the same toy or be with the same person. A whole set of previously unknown situations presented themselves to your son.

Somewhere in this time period most children experiment with biting to see how exerting this power will affect their interactions with other kids -- whether it will get them the things or the attention they want (children want attention even more than toys and playthings).

SANITY SAVER!

When you observe biting, say, “No biting!” and remove your child from the situation. Set a timer for about two minutes and pay no attention to him for that time. Instead, lavish attention on the bitten child. When the two minutes are up, go right on with your child as if nothing happened.
You will have to repeat this scenario a number of times, but it will teach him that biting is not the way to get the things he wants. Consistency is important, so if you are going to leave him with other adults in charge, ask them to take the same approach.

What your son is going through is quite normal. It is particularly normal for bigger kids to bite smaller kids in order to assert their power. The biting behavior can be reinforced by paying lots of attention to it, even if it is negative attention.

It is a fine idea to use distraction as well. When you see a situation arising where you think your child might bite, you might want to distract one or another of the parties involved and delay these learning experiments until he is a little older and can learn more quickly.

Some people advocate spanking as a solution for biting, but if the goal is to teach him peaceful resolution of conflicts, that is probably not the quickest way to get there.
4 GOLDEN TIPS FOR TALKING WITH A TODDLER

A quick guide to managing the terrible twos.
QUICK TIPS FOR TALKING WITH A TODDLER

1. Golden Rule: Be “bi-empathic”
   Practice seeing events from both your perspective and your child’s. Make sure your child feels understood. The grand adventure of parenting is learning to bring these two marvelous worlds together in a creative union.

2. Have fun
   When communication gets stuck, consider a humorous approach. Humor is fun; kids love fun. Laughing and playing are part of the wonder of childhood. You bring your perspective about what needs to happen, and your child brings his (which usually includes fun!).

3. Be fair
   Kids have a strong sense of what is, or is not, fair. Demonstrate respect for your child, her belongings, and her desires and expect the same back. When she feels understood, it will be easier for her to understand your adult perspective.
Offer choices
Children need direction, but instead of telling your child what to do, you can give structure by offering choices within certain limits. By listing alternatives, or by giving information about situations, you enlist your child as an ally rather than making her into an obedient (or perhaps a rebellious) little soldier.

Avoid commands
Nobody enjoys being bossed around; kids are no exception. Save commands for issues of urgency or safety. If you use commands too frequently, your child will start to ignore them. If you use them only in important moments, they will have a high impact.

Avoid repeating yourself
If you said something, and didn’t get a response, your child may be tuning you out. It is better to try a different approach than to repeat your requests. Get him to acknowledge he has heard you rather than droning on and on. If he says he hasn’t heard you, you will now have an opportunity to get your message across.
Be relatable
For example: “Remember how you felt when you didn’t get to go to the party because you were sick? You were disappointed and sad. That’s how Mommy feels right now. Let’s sit down close together and read a book instead of running around the house.” By explaining how you feel, and comparing it to something your son can relate to, you are teaching your child to have bi-empathic vision.

The whirlwind of activity and emotions that typically go hand-in-hand with toddlerhood can be overwhelming. Combined with sleep deprivation, stress, and other children and work, you may quickly find yourself wishing you could just “get through this.”

But remember, when you look back on these years a decade from now they’ll seem very short and you actually might miss them. So don’t blink, enjoy what you can, and remember - if Dr. Greene were here, he would see something heroic and beautiful.
5 DR. GREENE’S RESOURCES
Toddlers understand so much more than they can say! The **KidGlyphs™ Communicator** App is a free & fun and useful tool for learning & exploration. Founded by Dr. Alan Greene. App designed by Valley Design Group Inc.

[Click here for more info.](#)

Dr.Greene.com is filled with posts and recipes for all stages of development.

[Click here to visit site.](#)
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Written by Alan Greene, MD,
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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr. Alan Greene

Pediatrician Alan Greene, MD is the founder of Dr.Greene.com, WhiteOut Now, and KidGlyphs™. He is the author of numerous books including award winning Raising Baby Green and Feeding Baby Green. Media appearances include the TODAY Show, the Dr. Oz Show, and The New York Times. He is the recipient of the Healthy Child Healthy World Prevention Award and Intel’s “Children’s Health Hero of the Internet” award.

He is the father of four and he wears green socks. Read about Dr. Greene here.