



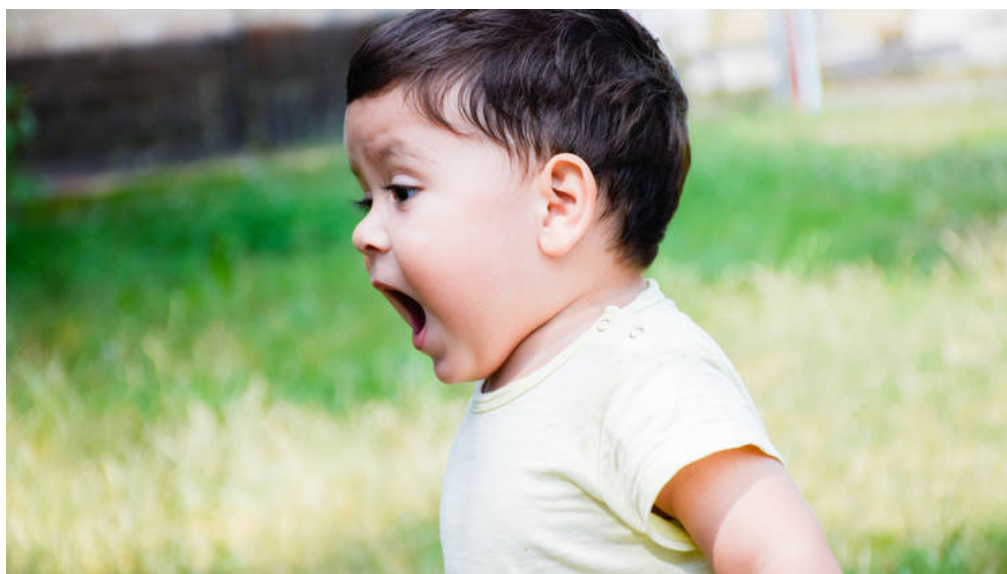
Home • Resources & Services

 PARENTING RESOURCE

## 5 Tips for Responding to Toddler Sass

Sep 25, 2018

Babies do not have the thinking skills to purposefully defy parents. Toddlers are another story.



### Why It Happens

Starting at about 18 months, your child begins to understand that she is separate from you and can have some control over her world. One powerful way she can do this is by defying you. You say, “Do this,” and she says, “No!” The drive to assert oneself is useful. It motivates your child to want to do things for herself and make things happen—which builds her confidence and self-esteem. The key is to find ways to show your child how she can be in control and make her own choices in positive ways.

### What You Can Do

#### 1. Think Prevention

Think about the situations that are most likely to lead to toddler defiance and come up with workarounds. For example, if there are frequent battles over getting dressed in the morning, offer two outfits that work for you and allow your child to choose

her favorite. If you know there's a current issue—"no dresses" or "sparkly sneakers only"—make that preference part of the plan. Giving choices offers children a chance to feel in control in a way that's positive.

If transitions are the trouble spot, plan ahead to make them easier. It can be helpful to give your child a warning before making the switch to whatever's next. You can use an old-fashioned kitchen timer so she can actually see and track the time. Making a poster of pictures that show the steps in your daily routines can be useful as well. For example, pictures of tooth brushing, face washing, reading, and then bed show children what to expect. For older toddlers, give some concrete cues about transitions, like: "Three more times down the slide before it's time to go." Make sure to follow through (because negotiation and protests may still happen)—this helps your child learn that you mean what you say.

## 2. Respond with Empathy

Validate your child's feelings. Remember that it's not the child's feelings that are the problem, it's what the child does with his feelings that can be challenging. As parents, it's easy to skip this step and go right to setting the limit. But acknowledging a child's feelings *first* is very important because it lets him know that his feelings and opinions matter. Even though it may feel silly to say, "I hear how sad you feel that you can't wear your dinosaur costume to preschool", it sends the message that you understand your toddler's perspective. When you skip this step, children often "pump up the volume" to show you—louder, harder, and stronger—just how upset they are. This is often when tantrums start.

For many children, it's your empathy and validation that helps them start to calm down. Labeling your toddler's feelings also helps her learn to be aware of her emotions and, eventually, to manage them. Keep your language simple and direct: "I know you don't want to put your pajamas on. It's hard to go from playtime to bedtime."

## 3. Set Clear Limits

**Set the limit.** "It is time for bed now. You need to sleep so your body can get some rest and grow big and strong." Use language your child understands. Keep it short and clear, but not threatening.

**Use humor and imagination.** Either strategy takes the intensity out of the situation and avoids a power struggle. See how your child's PJ bottoms look on your head as a hat or on his favorite stuffed animal. Talk about the situation from another point of view: "Your teddy is soooo tired. He wants to go to sleep and wants you to cuddle with him."

**Enforce the limit.** If none of these strategies work (and sometimes they won't), calmly and firmly set the limit. "You can get into the car seat or I can put you in. You can choose." If your child resists, then (without anger) pick her up and strap her in. In a soothing tone of voice, you might say something like: "I know, you hate getting

in the car seat. I understand. But the car seat keeps you safe on the drive to Grandma's house."

**Avoid giving in.** If you give in to tantrums, your child learns that if he pushes hard enough, he'll get what he wants. This will also make it more difficult for you the next time you try to enforce a limit.

#### **4. Pick Your Battles**

Think in advance about the limit you are going to set so that you can avoid changing your mind mid-stream. For example, one mom insisted her 2-year-old wear a long-sleeve shirt on a winter day. Her daughter insisted on wearing her favorite t-shirt. About 5 minutes into the tantrum, the mother realized that this was an unnecessary battle. Her daughter would be wearing a coat outside and the child care center was heated. But she worried that allowing her daughter to wear the t-shirt at this point would teach her daughter that throwing a tantrum is a good strategy to get what she wants. The easiest way to avoid an unnecessary battle is to take a few seconds to ask yourself: "Is this a limit I really need to set?" (Note: This is excellent practice for the teen years, too!)

#### **5. Find Support**

Still feeling stumped or frustrated? If your child's behavior makes it hard for him to make and enjoy friends, explore and learn, or have a good relationship with you, then reach out to your child's health care provider or a child development professional for additional guidance. An assessment done by an early childhood professional can also provide new insights into your child's behavior and how you can help him better manage his emotions.

Copyright © 2020 ZERO TO THREE All rights reserved.