

# How to handle your spirited toddler

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Reviewed by the [BabyCenter Medical Advisory Board](#)

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Living with a toddler can be like sharing a house with Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. And if your child is "spirited," the toddler years can be especially trying.

What defines a spirited child? "All toddlers are busy: They're climbing and jumping and throwing things," says Mary Sheedy Kurcinka, author of the popular books *Raising Your Spirited Child* and *Kids, Parents, and Power Struggles: Winning for a Lifetime*. "But the high-energy kid is the one who can get to the top of the refrigerator.

All toddlers say 'no' too, but a spirited child's 'no's!' are louder and more frequent, and his tantrums last longer and are more intense. You gradually realize that as a parent you're working harder than your neighbor, whose child is simply not as intense, persistent, and emphatic as yours. Your child is still normal, he's just *more* of everything."

Spirited kids are definitely a challenge, but there are ways to defuse daily battles and help your toddler learn to control himself. Here are Kurcinka's top strategies:

## **Let him know what's coming.**

All toddlers become anxious when they can't predict what's coming next, but most spirited children need events spelled out to a degree that you might not expect. When it's time to leave the playground and your 2-year-old throws herself on the ground howling, it might be because she's insecure about what's coming next. Tell her in detail: You'll go to the car, we'll drive straight home, find Sis and Dad there, and have spaghetti for dinner.

Remember that with toddlers, words aren't always enough. You might tell her "Daddy will pick you up from daycare this afternoon," for example, but she may well have trouble remembering it all day. In this

case, you might ask her daycare provider to remind her later in the day that Daddy's handling pick-up duties.

Sometimes visual cues can help. If Grandma and Grandpa are coming for an annual visit, show her photos ahead of time. You might even make a picture book outlining her bedtime ritual: Bath, pajamas, story, bed. You can't cut all the surprises out of your toddler's life, of course, but you can minimize the stress by giving her a heads-up when you can.

### **Be clear and consistent.**

Spirited children need the security and consistency of clear rules, so it's important to set limits. If nap time is always after lunch and your spirited 3-year-old puts up a fuss, be firm and confident as you enforce his rest period. If movies aren't allowed after dinner but you let him watch "just this one" tonight so you can make a phone call, he'll test you and demand one – forcefully – every night for the rest of the week.

### **Maintain physical contact.**

"As toddlers move toward independence, they still very much need connection," says Kurcinka. Maybe your toddler would like a backrub before bed. Or she might enjoy cuddling with you in a rocking chair in the morning. Have her bring toys into your room so she can play near you while you dress for work. At daycare, sit with her on the floor until she moves into the group on her own.

These tactics may seem to slow you down initially, but they'll actually save you time in prevented tantrums and battles. "Toddlers need to know they can trust you to be there for them. That way they'll ultimately be *more* independent," says Kurcinka.

### **Create a "yes" environment.**

"Me do!" are a toddler's favorite words, says Kurcinka. Let your child pour his own juice out of a little pitcher, use a fork at dinner, and put on his own shoes. Even if everything is a little messier and takes a little longer, his increased independence and cooperation are worth it.

Also, look at how your house is organized. Is there a low cupboard in the kitchen filled with pots and plastic containers that he can play with? Are his toys and books easy to reach? Is there a bed, couch, or floor pillow that he's allowed to jump on? The more child-friendly your home is, the

less you'll be fighting with him to keep away from special things and places.

**Avoid danger spots.**

If your highly energetic child can't sit still at the table, choose restaurants wisely – or plan a family picnic in the park instead. If she's slow to adapt to new people, don't plop her on Santa's lap. Stay with her and approach Santa gradually – or just wait until next year. And if you find yourself in an overly stimulating situation, such as a playmate's big birthday party, don't be shy about leaving early – *before* your toddler loses it.

**Soothe his senses.**

Help your spirited child wind down when the intensity level starts to rise. Water can be especially soothing: Give him a warm bath on a cold night or put a cool washcloth on his forehead on a summer afternoon. For older toddlers, finger paints and modeling clay are also calming sensory activities. For younger toddlers (under 2), it feels good to spread sand, cornmeal, or shaving cream on a play surface.

**Acknowledge feelings.**

Talk to your spirited toddler about *why* she's starting to melt down and let her know she's not the only one who is overcome by difficult emotions sometimes. Try saying "The people and the noise are bothering you. They're bothering me too. We'll leave the mall as soon as we've paid for these shoes."

Even if she doesn't seem to learn much from what you say at this age, explain it to her anyway. (Just don't become angry with her when your perfectly logical explanations don't result in quick compliance.) Toddlers usually aren't able to change their behavior in response to verbal reasoning, so keep it short and sweet.

For now, this exercise will help *you* empathize with your child. And eventually she'll learn to recognize what winds her up before she goes over the edge.

**Reward good behavior.**

Don't worry that your spirited toddler will get a big head if you praise him. Reinforce his efforts with positive messages: "Good job getting out

of the tub when I asked you to" or "You really used your quiet voice at Peter's house today." Try not to pass up a chance to praise the behavior you're trying to teach.

**Set realistic expectations.**

The many daily transitions adults take for granted – getting out of the house, in and out of the car, to daycare, to the store, home again, going to bed – are especially hard on a spirited toddler, who needs extra time to cope with change and who may become overwhelmed by people and noise.

Ask yourself, "Can I reasonably expect my toddler to handle this? " And when possible, skip unnecessary trips and demands. Do you really have to make that last stop or could it wait?

**Avoid using negative labels.**

Most important of all, examine the way you describe your toddler. The "wild child" who is "stubborn," "exhausting," and a "crybaby" is also a spirited child who is persistent, energetic, and sensitive – all traits that are admired in adults. Use positive labels when discussing your child with relatives and teachers, and they'll come to see his wonderful attributes too.

And with increased self-esteem, your spirited child will *want* to learn to behave well. You'll know you're on the right track when your 3-year-old announces to Grandma, "I had lots of energy today!" instead of saying, "I was a bad boy." When you focus on your child's positive features and strengths, it changes your behavior, and that in turn changes your child's behavior.

**Give her time to run and play.**

Toddlers like to keep moving. Make sure she gets plenty of physical activity and time to explore every day – especially outdoors. Unless they're sleeping, toddlers shouldn't be inactive for more than an hour at a time.

Being active does more than help your toddler improve muscle control, balance, and coordination. When you play games with her where you each take turns, such as kicking a ball back and forth, she'll get practice exercising self-control. As she masters a new physical skill, she'll also

gain self-confidence. And the more confident she is, the more well-behaved she's likely to be.

### **Take care of yourself.**

You may find it difficult, if not impossible, to admit that you need more time for yourself. But the house doesn't have to look perfect and the dinners don't have to be gourmet. If it's already midnight and you're exhausted, leave the dishes in the sink.

Rest or take a bubble bath when your child naps instead of vacuuming the living room. Take full advantage of your time at night after your toddler goes to sleep to connect with your partner or a friend, or to relax on your own.

Most important of all, says Kurcinka: "Build a support system. You can't do this seven days a week, 24 hours a day." Your child will benefit when you're revitalized, and so will you. Whether it's your partner, a friend, a relative, or a babysitter, find a consistent caregiver you and your child can trust and let them help out.

### **Resources**

There are many books available to help you understand and work with your spirited toddler. They include:

*Raising Your Spirited Child*, by Mary Sheedy Kurcinka

*The Difficult Child: Expanded and Revised Edition*, by Stanley Turecki and Leslie Tonner

*Living With the Active Alert Child*, by Linda Budd

*The Fussy Baby Book: Parenting Your High-Need Child From Birth to Age Five*, by William and Martha Sears