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# Coping with Defiance: Birth to Three Years

Early Development ([https://www.zerotothree.org/issue\\_area/early-development/?post-type=resource](https://www.zerotothree.org/issue_area/early-development/?post-type=resource))

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It is a toddler's job to be oppositional. This is the period in your child's development when she begins to understand that she is separate from you and can exert some control over her world. One powerful way she can do this is by defying you. You say, "Do this," yet she says, "No!" The drive to assert one's self is useful as it motivates your child to want to make things happen. Being able to do some things for herself builds her confidence. The key is to find ways to show your child how she can be in control and make her own choices in positive ways.

It's important to keep in mind that some toddlers are simply, by nature, more likely to be oppositional than others. Children whose emotional reactions are big and intense, as

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children tend to have a difficult time with changes, for example getting into the car seat, going to bed, or visiting a new place. Natural shifts in the day can also be stressful and result in a wide variety of protesting strategies from toddlers.

## Consider Your Family

No two children or families are alike. Thinking about the following questions can help you adapt and apply the information below to your unique child and family.

- What does your child tend to be most oppositional about? What, if anything, do these things have in common?
- Why do you think these issues bring out your child's "oppositional" side? How can this understanding help you help your child cope better?
- How do you respond when your child is being defiant? What works? What doesn't? What can you learn from this?

## What to Expect from Birth to Three Years

### Birth to 18 Months

Babies do not have the thinking skills to purposefully defy parents. When they don't respond to a parent's requests, they are acting on their impulses (not trying to manipulate others). Babies just don't have the ability to say to themselves: "I am going to grab this glass even though mommy has said not to." Because they do not yet understand logic and have not yet mastered self-control, they also don't understand rules. So the best response is redirection. For example, gently but firmly take the object away or remove your child from the off-limits situation while acknowledging her feelings: "I know this glass looks so interesting, but it is not for play." Then give your baby a toy or object that is safe to explore.

### 18 to 36 Months

Starting at about 18 months, toddlers are beginning to understand that they are separate from others—that they have their own thoughts and feelings that may be different from other's thoughts and feelings. They understand and can follow through on simple directions, such as, "Go get the ball." Young toddlers are eager to make their mark on the world. One way they often show their independence is by defying their parents. You might say, "Time to get dressed for child care." Your toddler might respond, "No! I stay home!" This type of defiance is very typical for toddlers as they are so eager to have some control over their world and to make their own choices.

## How to Respond to Defiance and Oppositional Behavior

### Think Prevention

Anticipate the kinds of situations that lead to defiance from your child and help him problem solve and cope in advance. This might mean letting your toddler know that you understand leaving the house to go to child care is difficult for him, and then offering him the choice of a book or toy to bring in the car to help him make the transition.

It can also be helpful to give children a warning before a transition needs to be made. You can use a kitchen timer so they can actually see and track the time. Making a poster of pictures that show the steps in your daily routines can be very useful as well. For example, pictures of tooth brushing, face washing, reading, and then bed show children what they can expect to happen next. For older toddlers, give some concrete cues about transitions, such as, “Three more times down the slide before it’s time to go.” It’s very important to then follow through on your limit.

## Respond with Empathy and Set Clear Limits

Validate your child’s feelings. As parents, we often skip this step and go right to setting the limit. But acknowledging a child’s feelings first is very important as it lets her know you understand where she’s coming from, and that her feelings matter. (Keep in mind that it’s not the child’s feelings that are the problem, it’s what the child does with her feelings that is often the challenge.)

For many children, it’s this first step—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 language simple and direct: “I know you don’t want to put your pajamas on. It’s difficult to go from playtime to bedtime.” 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.

After validating your child’s feelings:

- **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.
- **Offer a few choices (which are acceptable to you).** “Do you want to put your PJs on before or after we read books?” Or, “Do you want to put your PJs on or should daddy put them on for you?” You might also give a choice between two pairs of pajamas that he might want to wear. Giving choices offers children a chance to feel in control in positive ways. Giving choices can actually reduce defiance.
- **Use humor.** This is a great way to take some of the intensity out of the situation and throw a monkey wrench into a power struggle. You might try to pull your child’s PJ bottoms over your head, or see if they fit onto her favorite stuffed animal.
- **Engage your child’s imagination.** For a child refusing to go to bed: “Elmo is soooo tired. He wants to go to sleep and wants you to cuddle with him.” Or, a child refusing to clean up: “Our favorite books want to go back on the shelf with their friends. Let’s have a race to see how fast we can get them back up there.”
- **Enforce the limit:** If none of the strategies above work, and your child is still digging in his heels, calmly and firmly set the limit. “You can get into the car seat or I can put you in. You decide.” If your child resists, then (without anger) pick him up and strap him in. In a soothing tone of voice, you might say something like: “I know, you hate getting in the car seat. I understand.” Or, just start talking about something totally unrelated to the tantrum. “Wow, look at that big doggie coming down the street.” Or, “I wonder what you’ll have for snack today at school.”
- **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.

The key is to pay as little attention as possible to your toddler’s protests. Ignoring the behaviors you want to eliminate is the fastest way to be rid of them. (The only exception to this rule is if your child is being physically hurtful—hitting, slapping, punching, and so on—in which case you calmly but firmly stop the behavior and explain that he can feel mad but he cannot hit.)

## Your Behavior: Are You Sending Mixed Messages?

Sometimes our own choices and behavior as parents can influence our children’s behaviors. Listed below are strategies to address two very common parenting dilemmas that often lead to tantrums or defiance with toddlers.

Avoid the “Okay?” pitfall. “Let’s go to bed now, okay? Time to get dressed, okay?” Although this is a very common way that adults communicate, it is confusing for young children. They take your question at face value and think they have a choice to say, “No, I really would rather not go to bed right now.” This can create unnecessary power struggles. Be sure to communicate what is and isn’t a choice very clearly. “It is time to put on pajamas and get ready for bed. Do you want to wear the green or the red PJs?”

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 child started to protest because she wanted to wear her favorite short-sleeve shirt that day. 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 naturally worried, at this point, that “giving in” and allowing her daughter to wear the short-sleeve shirt would set a bad example; that it would teach her daughter that throwing a tantrum gets her what she wants. The easiest way to avoid this dilemma is to take a few seconds to think first before you act: “Is this a limit I really need to set?” (This is also known as “choosing your battles.”)

## When to Seek Help

If your child’s defiance is interfering in his daily functioning, then it is important to seek guidance from a child development professional. For example, if his behavior is negatively impacting his ability to make and enjoy friends, interfering with his exploration and learning, or negatively affecting his relationship with you, it’s time to seek help to get back on track. Having an assessment done by an early childhood professional can provide very valuable insight into what might be at the root of your child’s defiant behavior and give you ideas about how you can help your child cope better.

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