

**Title: Toddlers for beginners**

Lead: On the verge of spitting the dummy when your two-year-old plays up? Follow these tips from mums and pros that'll have your toddler changing from terrible into terrific.

By: Stephanie Oley

It's a humbling moment for all parents: the day your docile little infant morphs into a feisty toddler. Gone are the feeble "Waah's" of protest. This new person takes defiant swipes at your proffered dinner, sun hat or pram seat, throws her toys and shouts "No!" with attitude.

Your pint-sized person is ready to navigate her physical and social world independently – even if it's with all the zest and skills of a chimp wearing a blindfold. That means she's also ready to learn discipline, something you didn't have to consider in baby's first year.

Discipline is about learning self-control (punishment, by contrast, is the penalty inflicted after misbehaviour has occurred). Disciplining young children means maintaining a range of guidelines and tactics that teach what is socially acceptable behaviour.

But before continuing, let's take a look inside your bright-eyed bundle's head during the toddler years (around 18 months to four years).

According to parenting educator Dr Michael Grose, children under three are all action and zero commonsense because they are still developing myelin in the brain. This substance insulates and protects spinal nerve cells, allowing for faster signal transmission between the brain and body.

"Positive things you stimulate during myelination become hardwired – things such as affection and speech," says Grose. "On the other hand, parents have to work hard to keep their toddlers safe and social – for example, by saying 'no' when their 18-month-old hits another child with wooden blocks."

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**How to start disciplining**

**1. Set limits**

Establish clear guidelines about what you expect: such as tidying up toys before bed, eating at mealtimes, wearing a hat in summer. Be equally clear about what you won't tolerate: hurting others, deliberately breaking things or making a mess. But be prepared to repeat yourself – often. "Our daughter likes to test us regularly and see if the rules have changed in any way," comments Agnes Tsoa-Lee, mother of Mila, two-and-a-half. "But as long as my husband and I stick to our rules, the bad behaviour eventually goes away".

Warn your child in advance what will happen if they misbehave. "If you make threats, these should be a logical consequence of that behaviour,"

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advises clinical psychologist Sophie Dunstone. "For example, if your child hits someone with a toy, don't threaten him with losing dessert – say you'll take away the toy, and actually do it if the problem continues. If he speaks rudely, say, 'Mummy can't understand you and won't talk to you if you speak like that. Let's try nice words'."

## **2. Be consistent**

Limit setting would be nothing without consistency and routines. "Routines are the cornerstone of family life," says Dunstone. If your tot knows that the TV goes off at 5.30 every evening and is always followed by dinner, bath and bedtime, he is far less likely to fuss. Remind your toddler of the drill regularly. "We never pick our daughter up and do even routine things without explanation. If we need to change her, we tell her that she needs to be changed and we will now do so. We always tell her where we are going and what we are doing," says Mila's mum, Agnes.

## **3. See it their way**

Toddlers don't understand a lot of adult concepts – such as safety, ownership or waiting. Mother-of-two Michele di Giorgio cites much success from thinking in the shoes of her three-year-old son, Rafael. "If he misbehaves it's usually because he is bored, tired, or jealous [of his baby sister], so trying to address the reason is easier than battling the problem."

Toddlers also have a huge appetite for attention. *Toddler Taming's* Dr Christopher Green explains: "They don't store up [attention] for later – they need some now and will need a top up in half an hour." "Toddlers care most about what they want right now. Parents need first and foremost to show they are listening," says Dr James Donnelly, Head of Psychology and Neuropsychology at Sydney Children's Hospital. For Rafael's mum Michele, paying attention often involves a creative compromise. "Instead of hanging out the washing while he sits glued to the TV, I ask him to help," she says. "Yes, it takes longer, but he enjoys pulling out the clothes from the basket and identifying who wears what. When we go shopping, I talk to him constantly about what we need: can he get one for me, what we are going to do with the item, and so on."

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### **Some handy techniques**

#### **▪ Praise the good**

Children do essentially want to please their carers. "From a few weeks or months of age, babies learn that mum smiles when they do certain things. As they reach 15 months or so, they start testing this relationship," explains Grose. Sue Denny, daytime carer of her 18-month-old grandson, Oliver Richardson, says, "At this age they are building their identity by their behaviour. If you keep telling children they're naughty, they'll embrace that role. It's far more effective to keep telling them how good they are."

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For older toddlers or preschoolers, add motivation with tangible rewards. "Successful parents connect special events with good behaviour. 'You've had an excellent day today. Mum and I would like to take you out for some ice cream'," suggests US parenting author and psychologist Dr Sal Severe in his article, *Never Give Away the Ice Cream*. Rewards are different to bribes, in which the ice cream (or other treat) is offered before the child has had a chance to prove himself.

▪ **Removal from situation**

By removing a toy or your child from a situation of conflict, you physically stop problems from recurring. "When a parent repeats or yells instructions too much, the child becomes deaf to that parent," says Grose. The removal tactic shows you mean business. "Taking away toys, stopping Wiggles music in the car or turning the DVD off can stop bad behaviour immediately," says Rafael's mum, Michele. "If Ike pushes another child in the park, shouting at him won't work," says Anne Ahern, mother to Ike, two-and-a-half, and Abe, six months. "So now we'll simply leave the park, which not only stops the behaviour, he often apologizes, too!"

▪ **To the naughty corner**

This is considered the next level up from the 'removal' technique. If the bad behaviour persists, the child is sent to a corner, step or chair away from the social area, to calm down for a minute or two (*Supernanny's* Jo Frost advises one minute for every year of the child's age). "Our active, sociable toddler is miserable if he's missing out, so this one is very effective," says Michele.

▪ **Take time out**

Time out removes a child even further from the action, with a stint in her room. Older children should think about their actions during time out and verbalise them, along the lines of: "I'm sorry I made Tommy cry by taking away his toy train". For children under three, Tracy Hogg – the late nurse and author of *The Baby Whisperer* fame – does not advocate sending to their room alone. Sydney mum Becky Ball, mother of Jake (nearly two) and Charlie (10 months), agrees: "I go to Jake's room with him for time out, and it works just fine – even after ten seconds or so."

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**I'm still having trouble!**

If things still aren't going to plan, try taking a softer stance – not a tougher one.

- Don't overdo punishment – "If you're always angry or giving the child negative attention, time out won't be effective because the child won't see it as different from time in," says Dr Donnelly. "Maintain a positive home environment, and when time out is necessary, be immediate, calm and consistent in your response."

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- Lower your voice – Melbourne mum Daniela Galway says shouting only makes things worse, referring to her own childhood and to tactics effective with her young daughter Emilia, aged two. “I grew up with a very dominating father who I often feared because of his hard line on discipline, so I don't want my daughter to grow up fearing me. Keeping a calm voice is the only way Emilia will listen.”
- Keep up the kind words – “The most effective mums choose words that focus on the positive. Instead of saying, ‘Get off the table!’ they’ll say, ‘What great balancing skills. Now let’s do it on the chair instead’,” observes Jade Barclay, mum to 10-year-old Aaron. Jade took NLP (neurolinguistic programming) courses when Aaron was a toddler and meets many new mothers through her involvement in youth programs.

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### **Smacking and punishment**

None of the parents interviewed for this story found smacking effective, linking it with lost self-control, overwhelming feelings of guilt and a hurt child. According to NAPCAN (the National Association for the Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect), smacking is considered abusive if any of the following occur: the child is hit above the shoulders, anything other than a hand is used, or if marks are left. NAPCAN does not recommend any smacking, while Dr Donnelly at Sydney Children’s Hospital advises caution with any type of punishment. “Punishment teaches a child what not to do, but not what to do instead. It’s much effective to adopt a system of discipline that fosters a child’s sense of mastery in doing something right.”

### **Useful books**

Steve Biddulph, *The Secret of Happy Children and Raising Boys*  
Betsy Brown Braun, *Just Tell Me What to Say: Sensible Tips and Scripts for Perplexed Parents*  
Jo Frost, *Supernanny*  
Dr Christopher Green, *Toddler Taming*  
Tracy Hogg, *Secrets of the Baby Whisperer for Toddlers*  
Penelope Leach, *Your Baby and Child*

### **Useful websites**

Michael Grose website, [www.parentingideas.com.au](http://www.parentingideas.com.au)  
Raising Children website, [www.raisingchildren.net.au](http://www.raisingchildren.net.au)  
Parenting NSW website,  
[www.community.nsw.gov.au/DOCS/STANDARD/PC\\_100217.html](http://www.community.nsw.gov.au/DOCS/STANDARD/PC_100217.html)

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