

The Stubborn Toddler Who Just Says “No”

Negativism is a normal phase most children go through between 18 months and 3 years of age. It begins when children discover that they have the power to refuse other people's requests. Once the “terrible twos” are in full swing, children become more stubborn and less cooperative. They respond negatively to many requests, including pleasant ones. They delight in refusing a suggestion, whether it's about getting dressed or taking off their clothes, taking a bath, going to bed, or getting up in the morning. Unless this behavior is understood for what it is, it can be extremely frustrating for parents. Handled appropriately, it lasts about a year.

Don't take this phase too personally. By “No” your child means “Do I have to?” Or “Do you really mean it?” A negative response should not be confused with disrespect, nor is it meant to annoy you. The negative phase is critical to the development of independence and identity. Try to look at it with a sense of humor.

Don't punish your child for saying “No.” When necessary, discipline your child for what he or she does, not what he or she says. Since you can't eliminate the “No,” ignore it. If you argue with your child about saying “No,” you will probably prolong this behavior.

Give your child plenty of choices. This is the best way to increase his or her sense of freedom and control so that he or she will become more cooperative. For example, let your child choose whether to take a shower or a bath, which toys to take into the tub, which book to read, which fruit to eat for a snack, which clothes or shoes to wear, which breakfast cereal to eat, which game to play, inside or outside, in the park or in the yard, and so forth. For tasks that your child doesn't like, such as washing hands, give them a say in the matter by asking “Do you want to do it slow or fast?” or “Do you want me to do it, or do you want to do it yourself?” The more quickly your child gains a feeling that he or she is a decision maker, the sooner that the negative phase will end.

Don't give your child a choice when there is none. Safety rules, such as sitting in the car seat, are not open to discussion, although you can explain why your child must follow the rule. Going to bed or day care is not negotiable. Don't ask a question when there is only one acceptable answer, but instead direct your child in as positive a manner as possible (“Let's do this.”). Avoid commands (“Do this or else.”).

Allow transition time when changing activities. If your child is having fun and must change to another activity, he or she probably needs transition time. If he or she is playing with trucks as dinnertime approaches, for example, give your child a five-minute warning. Using a kitchen timer sometimes helps a child accept the change more easily.

Eliminate excessive rules. The more rules that you establish, the less likely it is that your child will be agreeable when it comes time to follow them. Eliminate unnecessary expectations, and therefore arguments, about wearing socks or cleaning his or her plate, for example. Help your child feel less controlled by helping him or her to have more positive interactions than negative ones each day.

Avoid responding to your child's requests with excessive “Nos.” Be a model of agreeableness for your child. When he or she asks for something and you are unsure, try to say yes, or postpone your decision by saying, “I don't know right now.” If you are going to grant a request, do so right away, before your child whines and begs for it. When you must say no, say you're sorry and give your child a reason.