

Talking to Toddlers

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Communication kids will actually respond to

Rae Jacobson

You come home from a walk and tell your toddler, “Okay, time to put your shoes away.” Seems pretty straightforward, right? Not if you’re two.

Toddler communication is its own special language, one that isn’t always intuitive for parents. We asked our experts what parents can do to make talking to toddlers more effective and less fraught. As the mother of an almost-three-year-old I was pretty eager to hear what they had to say.

Give clear directions

When talking to toddlers, the way you communicate is just as important as what you’re trying to say, explains [Laura Phillips](#), PsyD, a *childpsychologist*

at the Child Mind Institute. The clearer the directions, the more likely you are to get the desired result.

“Be specific when you give directions, and don’t assume kids know what you’re talking about, even if it seems obvious to you,” says Dr. Phillips. To us it might seem obvious that “put your shoes away” means: *Take your shoes off and put them in the closet*. But to a toddler who lacks the knowledge (or attention span) to fill in the steps, the direction can be confusing. Toddlers are also easily distracted and can get overwhelmed by strings of instructions, making it less likely they’ll complete the task as directed.

If you’d like your toddler’s help cleaning up, you might be tempted to say: “It’s time to clean up. I need you to pick up your toys and put them away.” Instead, try breaking the instructions into smaller requests, making sure to offer positive reinforcement along the way when kids do as they’re asked. For example: “Okay! Please pick up the blocks and put them in the bag.” Then when that’s finished: “Great! Now pick up that green book and put it back on the shelf.”

Label and validate their feelings

As a general rule, toddlers don't have much control over their lives. And that's good. If they did, the world would resemble a Godzilla movie. But, as their brains develop and they become more independent, that lack of autonomy can cause friction. Kids' desires and feelings are real and valid, even though (obviously) you can't always let them have their way.

When kids get upset, whether it's about something understandable, like a skinned knee or losing a favorite toy, or something that seems ridiculous — *Are you seriously crying because your water cup is blue not red?* — it's important to remember that toddlers are people. Tiny, adorable, irrational people, but still. For a child who's just learning to make sense of the world, those experiences and the feelings they provoke are as intense as any an adult has.

"Kids need to know you're taking their feelings seriously," says Dr. Phillips. "So it really helps to label and validate how kids are feeling." This can be as simple as saying: "I know you want that cookie right now. I can see you are mad," she says. Showing your child that you're taking their feelings seriously, and helping them put words to their emotions, can help defuse potential tantrums and make it easier for them to explain their feelings more effectively next time.

Offer choices

Another way to honor toddlers' burgeoning independence is to offer choices instead of issuing declarations, says Dr. Phillips. "Whenever it's reasonable, try giving kids limited choices. For example, when it's time to get dressed you could say: 'Do you want to wear your tiger shirt or your dinosaur shirt?' If a child is lobbying for a treat, you could say, 'Well, we can't eat cookies right now. But I can offer you some fruit. Would you like blueberries or strawberries?'"

Finally, Dr. Phillips says sometimes letting your child's will prevail is an appropriate way to keep the peace. "Pick your battles.", She says. "Sometimes, as parents we'd *like* something to happen, but we don't *need* it to happen." Choosing what is, and isn't, worth going to the mat for will also help kids understand that when you do decide to draw the line, it's important to listen.

Keep it consistent

Toddlers like repetition, whether it's watching the same movie 500 times, asking you to read a beloved book over and over, or demanding to hear a song "again!" Annoying as it may be to parents, repetition helps kids learn, absorb information and make sense of the world.

"Consistency in the language you use is important," says Alexandra Levine, MS, a speech-language pathologist at the Child Mind Institute. "Using the same language and backing it up by keeping the meaning consistent makes it easier for kids know

what to expect, and means they're more likely to understand and listen to what you're asking them to do."

To paraphrase Dr. Seuss, this means that parents should say what we mean and mean what we say. "Make sure you can follow through with the direction before giving it," Levine explains. "Staying consistent and predictable helps toddlers understand that, for example, when we say, 'This is the last book,' it really is the last one."

Consistent language works best when everyone is following the same playbook. Parents should make sure they're on the same page around language and rules — that is, "five more minutes" needs to mean five more minutes *period*, regardless of who's saying it.

Levine also recommends sharing language you use at home with other caregivers, like babysitters or grandparents or even your child's teachers, especially if there's a specific behavior (like not hitting, cleaning up or taking turns) you're working on at home. "Saying, 'Hey, this is something we say at home when this behavior comes up,' can help underline the rules and values you're trying to communicate even you're not there," she says.

Positive attention

A red-faced parent yelling "Stop that right now!" may not be quite the same as a smiling one offering hugs and praise, but to a toddler, attention is attention. When kids are misbehaving, it can be hard not to show your (perfectly reasonable) frustration: "Hey! No throwing!" But when parents give big reactions to bad behaviors, they may unconsciously be giving kids incentive to keep acting up.

"As parents, we often give a lot of attention to behaviors we don't want to see," says Dr. Phillips. Instead, parents should focus on praising behaviors we *do* want, and try to redirect kids to more appropriate actions. For example, says Dr. Phillips, "if a kid is drawing on the wall, instead of yelling, 'Don't color on the walls!' try telling your toddler what you *do* want them to do, like 'Please color on this piece of paper,'" and offering praise when they do what you've asked." Heaping positive attention on desirable behaviors (like listening) helps reinforce them, and makes undesirable ones (like smearing yogurt on the carpet) less appealing.

Be specific about safety

Repetition, consistency and clarity are especially important in situations where there's no room for misunderstanding. Doing some preparation when things are calm and kids are receptive can help. Asking kids who are verbally capable of doing so to repeat important directions back to you (and praising them when they

do) can also help reinforce the message. For example, before heading out to the park, you might say, “Ok, remember what you do *every time* before we cross the street?” and ask your child to respond with “hold your hand.”

In the moment, make sure to use clear language that’s specific to the situation. For example, if your child is close to the street, just saying “Stop!” — a word most toddlers hear several thousand times a day — isn’t likely to get the immediate response you’re looking for. Instead, you could try “Stay on the sidewalk!” Likewise, if something is hot or sharp, instead of the oft-used “Don’t touch that,” try “Dangerous! Hands off!”

Take space when you need to

As the mother of a toddler I know that even the most perfectly conceived strategies quickly go out the window when Bad Moods are in play. What works when kids (and parents) are calm and receptive can be hard to stick with when your toddler is melting down and your patience is hanging by a thread. “In those situations, it’s good to step back and either tag in your partner or just take a break and a breath before coming back,” says Dr. Phillips. “Moments when kids or parents or both are upset are not the time to press your point.”

Give yourself some grace

That said, there are going to be times where you lose your cool and snap. It’s something we all do, and something no one feels proud of. But instead of beating yourself up, think of it as a moment to model positive coping skills.

“Parents make mistakes,” Dr. Phillips says, but those not-so-proud parenting moments can actually be opportunities to model important emotional skills. “Maybe you got frustrated and snapped at your kid,” she says, “You can go back in a little bit and say, ‘You know what? I made a mistake a little while ago. I was feeling frustrated and I spoke a little too loudly and I’m sorry.’” Acknowledging mistakes and making amends is a great way to show kids how you’d like them to behave, too.