

## Handling Toddler Expectations

In line with the goal this year of helping families navigate the realm of toddlerhood, this first newsletter is Part 1 of Handling Toddler Expectations. How often do you find yourself struggling with your toddler who just simply doesn't seem to respond to no or any other request to stop what he is doing? How often are you exasperated that your toddler cannot – or does not – do the things that you keep being told she should be doing?

Sadly, most families find themselves in what they believe to be a constant power struggle with their toddler. Many of them have been told their toddler runs the house and they just need *more* boundaries, *more* discipline, and *more* consistency to get their toddler in line.

For the vast majority of you, this is not the case.

I won't say that your child isn't running the house, but rather that answer to these struggles isn't more of the ideas that pervade our culture. To understand this – and what we need to do – we have to look at what our toddlers are capable of and what they are communicating to us through these behaviours.

The problem for many toddlers is that they are just the most adorable little adults. Their attempts at mimicking us in speech, gestures, and activities is their way of learning about the world and how they are to engage with it. However, it also makes them seem older and more competent than they are. This is not to say toddlers aren't competent – in their own realm, they are amazing at what they do (e.g., learn through play, imagine, pick up languages, model adult behaviours) – but rather that they are not the type of competent we are expecting. What are some of the specific behaviours that bother us parents the most?

- Not stopping when we say 'no' or 'stop'
- Repeatedly doing things we have asked them not to
- Having tantrums regularly
- Biting, kicking, hitting
- Demanding our time and attention beyond what we see as reasonable
- Not doing things on their own we are told they should do, like use cups or get dressed

If we look at these, they fall under the following categories: executive control (not stopping, repeatedly doing things we've asked them not to), emotional control (tantrums, biting/kicking/hitting), and independence (demanding our time, not doing things on their own). These are not strong points for toddlers and let's examine them one-by-one.

## Executive Control

The toddler has some development executive control, but they are quite underdeveloped in this area; even at age 5, the areas of the brain dedicated to executive functioning is still woefully immature. Now imagine how much worse that is if we go back a few years. One of the main issues for toddlers is ‘task switching’. In psychology, a task switching task is one in which someone starts to do one thing and the rules change part-way through and they have to adapt to it. Some people are better than others generally speaking, but those with prefrontal cortex damage tend to do much worse than others. These individuals have brains like our toddlers, though possibly even more developed.

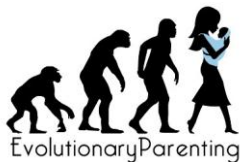
This means that when we tell our toddlers to just stop, they struggle. They may do it if you sound angry enough because fear will freeze them in the moment, but this is not an adaptive long-term strategy because we (a) don’t want our children afraid of us, and (b) fear will become habituated and they will no longer respond to it, even when we want them to. The key here is to remember that we need to set the stage for success for them.

### *How Can You Help?*

It means *redirecting* them when they are doing something you don’t want instead of just saying no. Painting on the wall? Help move them to paper and stay with them if you can to help them stay focused on the paper until they have mentally shifted to it. Grabbing the pet’s tail? Help direct the hand to petting the animal instead. Redirection is key, but it doesn’t change things overnight and you should expect to do *a lot of* redirection throughout the toddler years. You also have to set up your child for success before they start engaging in certain tasks. If you see your toddler headed to the pet, remind her that she needs to pet, not grab, and help start her off that way. Offer lots of words of encouragement to her as well (e.g., “I love watching you pet the cat! Isn’t he soft?”) and avoid any punishing words when she falls flat (as she will inevitably do). When your child succeeds he is more likely to build up the paths that remember these behaviours (thanks to our wonderful reward system) and you will find behaviours easier in the long-run.

## Emotional Control/Regulation

You’ve probably seen the memes and pages dedicated to pictures of young children crying hysterically over something that we adults see as utterly benign or even illogical. The child wanted a sandwich, was presented with said sandwich, and lost her mind. A toy drops and the world ends. For toddlers, the ability to regulate emotions is actually much harder than we realize and in turn, we often expect certain behaviours from our toddlers that they just cannot do. We now have our background on executive control, which plays a role in emotional regulation, and how toddlers have a woefully immature prefrontal cortex, making certain inhibitory behaviours quite difficult. From an emotional perspective this is still only part of the story. The other part stems from our children’s experience of emotions and how emotion regulation actually develops.



### *Experiencing Emotions*

Our young children experience emotions quite intensely and can go from 0 to 100 much faster than us adults. Furthermore, what they experience as distressing is quite different from us. In many cases, because our toddlers don't have the communication abilities of an adult, we can't actually understand what it is that causes such extreme reactions. However, do know that there are certain elements that can exacerbate these behaviours and they are quite common in toddlerhood.

The following are all elements that can lead to heightened distress for anyone and are a particular problem for toddlers:

1. Being hungry
2. Being overwhelmed
3. Being tired
4. Feeling lonely

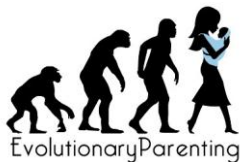
If you take a moment and think of how well you regulate when faced with these, hopefully you can see that it's likely harder to regulate than when you are full, calm, well-rested, and feeling connected to others. The problem for our toddlers is that they are often hungry given the growth spurts they experience and the fact that a 2-year-old's brain uses twice as much glucose as an adult's. They are often overwhelmed if they are spending their days with lots of other kids in a daycare situation and struggling with these new peer interactions (this stress is well-documented and discussed in my upcoming e-book *Finding Daycare*). They get tired and this can be more of an issue at times when naps are being dropped and they are pushing their endurable awake times. They can feel lonely after a full day away from their family and this can lead to struggles trying to contain other emotion states and cope with troubles that crop up then.

We have to consider the experience of emotions in terms of what is the threshold that we need to reach before our ability to regulate is compromised. For each person this level is different and because children are just starting to learn regulatory techniques (we'll get to this below), that threshold is going to be much lower in general than for an adult and then it will be lowered even more when any of the above factors are also in play.

### *Developing Emotion Regulation*

The other part of this equation is the element of how children develop emotion regulation. Many of us think about emotion regulation as being quiet when it comes to our toddlers. Sadly this often isn't an indicator of regulation at all, but rather an indicator that the child either (a) isn't actually distressed at all (and remember that to regulate one needs to actually experience distress), or (b) has shut down externally but still experiences distress internally.

Regulation involves behaviours that help us to ease the distress (or temper excitement for that matter and this is something we can face with hyper and manic toddlers as well) and toddlers are learning these



capacities but are a far ways from actually engaging in them regularly. Things like deep breaths, removing ourselves from the situation, and so on are skills we work on with our toddlers, but the key for many of them in terms of 'regulation' is *co-regulation*. This is the process by which our toddlers use other individuals to help them regulate. In infancy, our babies cry for us and when we respond, we are actually modeling and teaching them physiological means to regulate. In toddlerhood, we often forget that our toddlers need the same modeling and sensitivity to learn how to regulate themselves. We are their model and when they act out, they often require our assistance. Some toddlers will be better than others at actively seeking this help, but all toddlers need it.

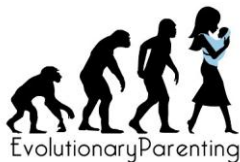
### *How Can You Help?*

The first step is to acknowledge that your toddler is going to struggle emotionally. They are not acting out to harm you or hurt you or manipulate you (in the negative sense). They are having a hard time themselves, even when they're hitting, biting, and so on. These kinds of outbursts are behaviours we should absolutely expect from our toddlers from time to time and when we expect them, we won't be as distressed ourselves when they happen.

The second step is expecting that we will have to respond sensitively to our children in need. This is one of those things that can sound easy to say, but may not be easy at all. One of the problems that parents face is *how* our toddlers try to get us to help. Being in a state of distress, they are not polite, reasonable people, but instead are often angry or highly distressed leading to screams, tears, demands, and so on. Us parents then respond with defensiveness, distress, and anger which only serves to exacerbate the situation. However, if you can practice (and practice and practice) taking your own deep breath and reminding yourself that this is a cry for help, it can eventually get easier to respond as they need us to in order to diffuse the situation.

In addition to these in-the-moment steps, we can also work to prevent some of the negative behaviours by focusing on preventing the elements that heighten distress. If you see times when your child struggles emotionally on a regular basis, try to see what might be behind it. I hear many families say their child is having the hardest time after being picked up from daycare and that's not surprising. At that stage, most children are hungry, overstimulated from the day, in need of connection with their caregiver, and possibly even tired. It's the perfect storm. If that's your toddler, then you may want to take 15 minutes when you pick them up to sit with them and snuggle or play as they eat a snack. This provides them with some time away from the stimulating environment, food that's much needed, and that one-on-one connection many are looking for. Whether you sit down and relax or get active will depend on your toddler's tired levels.

Emotion regulation is something that our toddlers are learning, but we have to remember that they don't have it down and we have to shift our expectations to ones that still provide space for them to need us to help them. When we make room for this, we are actually helping our toddlers learn these very important skills.



## Independence

In many cases, we know our babies are wholly dependent on us (though we may think we need to force independence on them – a topic for another day), but when we get to toddlerhood, we see independence start to emerge and this can trick us into thinking our toddlers are far more independent than they are. When we start off with an expectation of independence, this can make things a lot trickier for often our toddlers aren't actually that independent at all – they're just flirting with the beginnings of it. This is probably the hardest area for families and why there's also more to cover here on it.

There are several areas of independence that we need to consider when we think about this:

- Developmental capabilities
- Control within boundaries
- Knowing when it's up to you
- Independence, affection, and connection

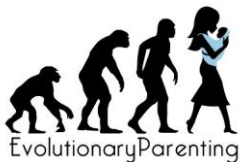
### *Developmental Capabilities*

One of the biggest challenges to parenting a toddler comes when we mistakenly believe that development should be further along than it is. This is most often the case when we are looking at areas like eating, sleeping, and gross motor movements. Parents in Western cultures often think that toddlerhood is a time where our kids want to do things themselves and should do things like sleep alone, eat lots of food, work on getting dressed, toileting, and so on with minimal help.

The problem is that this often isn't in the actual realm of capabilities for our toddlers. Let's take sleep, for example, because it's one that families often struggle with. Toddler sleep looks a whole lot like infant sleep and sometimes even worse. According to normative data on sleep development, more 12-month-olds are waking regularly at night than 6-month-olds, and 18 months is the peak of separation anxiety for most children. In fact, children's need for bedsharing at night actually *increases* from age 1 all the way to age 5 before tapering off again. Thus, contrary to what you may expect depending on your cultural leanings, your toddler may actually be more dependent on you at night.

Why is this? There's lots going on for them and sleep is quite difficult. There's gross motor development (e.g., walking), language development, the early onset of theory of mind, often there is daycare initiation which has been found to be stressful, there's growing pains, and so much more. Life for a toddler is hard and as their safety net, you are often called upon to catch them and help them feel safe again.

It is like this in many areas of development. Of course, I don't want to suggest you need to stifle any growing independence as toddlerhood is also a time in which they reach out and test new boundaries and capabilities. This is wonderful and should be applauded, but remember that these tests and activities are not signs of full competence, but rather just the beginnings of the skills that will take years



to hone. And their ability to hone these skills well will depend greatly on how supported they feel by you, the parent.

### *Control within Boundaries*

Sometimes families struggle with this fine line between having boundaries for their kids and letting them explore their independence. Contrary to the issue of expecting too much independence (or rather, the wrong kind of independence), some parents struggle with how to give independence when they clearly also need to set boundaries.

Too often parents in Western cultures err on the side of setting more boundaries and exerting more control (which is quite different from allowing dependence) under the belief that they need to control their toddler's every movement. However, this ignores the very real need of toddlers to have some control themselves over their environment. In fact, without it, we often end up in power struggles that make parenting a miserable experience. When we can find that balance between giving our children some control while maintaining the larger boundaries, we can often find parenting a toddler a fulfilling experience, even if it's not always joyful.

### *Knowing When It's Up to You*

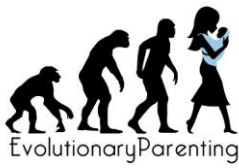
Notably, sometimes there will be something that your child just can't get away from. If you find yourself with some action that your child continues to attempt over and over without success, it's time to consider that you – the parent – needs to do something to help avoid it or to help with. At this stage your child simply isn't neurologically able to be the independent person you are looking for.

This type of expected independence can come in many ways, but often comes when we find ourselves struggling with children playing with breakables, getting ready, cleaning up, and so on. When we find ourselves upset that our child isn't doing something we think they are capable of, it's time to realize that it's not them, it's us. As the adults in the house, we are responsible for the environment we create for our children and we are responsible for helping teach them how to do the things they eventually need to learn to do.

So if you find yourself in a constant battle, it's not them, it's you. And that's almost easier because you can change you with effort, but changing someone else is much, much harder.

### *Independence, Affection, and Connection*

I want to make a very important point here that I think is essential to remember: being independent does *not* mean needing less affection or connection. Independence is about the skills we use and not the way in which we interact with other people. Sadly many of us live in cultures where we associate affection and connection with dependence and thus we push our kids away and expect them to not need these types of behaviours as they age. We hear it when parents tell an older child who's upset, "Be a big girl". Our children will become independent in many ways, but they should never be independent of our love.

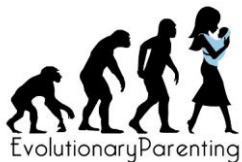


### *How To Help?*

The key to helping our children build independence is multifaceted. Let's take a look at some of the ways you can really help with this while still maintaining connection and love:

- Start with what I would say is 'toddler-proofing' the house. Create environments in which our children can thrive and test their limits without us having to hover over them. This can also alleviate our anxiety because we know that whatever our kids get into, it will never be the end of the world.
- Take time to figure out the areas where you feel you need to provide boundaries and guidance and then figure out how to give your toddler control within those boundaries. For example, many families feel their toddler needs to leave the house clothed, but you can let your toddler decide what to wear.
- Be prepared. This means that when you give your toddlers control, be prepared to help them learn from any misguided decision they make. This is how they learn best. For example, it's winter and your toddler picks a t-shirt and shorts to wear, instead of forcing him into other clothes, bring a change of clothes so when they experience the cold outside you can get him changed as needed.
- Don't try to control biological processes. Eating, sleeping, activity levels are all normal biological processes that you shouldn't mess with too much. Our goal should not be to control these, but to provide a good environment for them to flourish and develop. This means making evening conducive to building up sleep pressure and falling asleep, making healthy foods and letting our kids decide what and when to eat, and when our kids are active, giving them space to get it out. Independence comes when our toddlers realize they have some control over these very basic parts of life, not when they're very bodies are being controlled.
- When it's not working, change gears. Take note if you have something you're always complaining about then realize it stems not from a defiant toddler, but one who can't meet your expectations. Then change gears to find ways to help your toddler instead of feeling bad that they can't do what you want. Sometimes I find it helpful for families to just get rid of the expectation or boundary altogether for a week to see what happens which can give them time to really see their toddler and where she's at.
- Make time for lots of connection and affection. Set aside time each day to connect and provide affection for your toddler as this will help him feel loved and want to work with you. When our toddlers don't feel that affection, it can be especially hard for them to do much of anything as they are too focused on their anxiety.

There you have it. Toddler expectations broken down in a way that I hope is helpful for you navigating a toddler's world. Knowing this won't necessarily make it easier all the time, but hopefully it does help alleviate some of the worry and stress that can come with their budding development.



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