



When Your Child Says "No": A Guide for Parents

Why did my toddler suddenly get defiant?

It's part of a toddler's natural development to start saying "no" soon after they learn to talk. During this time, your child is starting to understand they are separate from you. They may show you they want some control in their life. This growing independence is important. Being able to do some things on their own builds confidence.

Some toddlers are more likely to be defiant than others. Some kids have a hard time with changes. They may have big feelings about small things, like getting in the car seat, going to bed, or visiting a new place. Shifts in their schedule can also be stressful.

The best advice for the "no" stage is not to take it personally. This phase will pass more quickly if you stay calm and know that you are the adult in charge.

Start with empathy

Feeling heard helps your child calm down. Naming their feelings helps them learn to manage them. Try, "You are upset and don't want to put your pajamas on. It's hard to go from playtime to bedtime."



ZERO TO THREE
Early connections last a lifetime



What to try after you validate feelings

- **If you don't need a limit, you can let it go.** For example, if your child says no to a snack and they don't really need one, you can say, "I hear you — just let me know when you're hungry." Not every moment needs to turn into a power struggle. We want children to feel like they can make some choices on their own.
- **Offer a few choices that you are okay with.** "Do you want to put your PJs on yourself, or can I help?"
- **Get silly.** Humor breaks a power struggle. Try pulling your child's PJ pants over your head.
- **Use their imagination.** "Elmo wants to go to the store. He needs you to help him buckle in."
- **Hold the limit and practice patience.** If your child keeps resisting, calmly state the limit again. "You can get in the car seat, or I can help. You decide."
- **Take a deep breath or step away if it's safe to do so.** Your child needs your calm to help them get calm.
- **Try to connect with their feelings again.** Sometimes kids say "no" because they need a good cry. Holding the limit and listening to the upset can help them move through it.
- **Avoid giving in.** Giving in even once makes it more likely they will keep pushing.
- **Ask questions that your child can say "yes" to.** For example, "Do you like ice cream?"

When to ask for help

The "no" stage will pass. If you feel stuck or worn out, talk to your child's healthcare provider or one of the professionals supporting your family.

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