



ZERO TO THREE
Early connections last a lifetime



Helping Kids Manage Big Feelings

Babies, toddlers, and young preschoolers have **strong feelings and are not yet able to stop their impulses**. Their big emotions can lead them to scream, hit, throw things, and more. Some of this behavior is just a **normal part of early childhood development**. It doesn't mean your child is bad. It doesn't mean you are a bad parent.

Around the age of 18 months, children start to realize that they are separate from their parents. They speak up about what they like and dislike. They want to be independent as much as they can! At the same time, they do not understand logic. They still have a hard time with waiting and self-control. They want what they want when they want it. This is normal. Your job is to help them learn how to manage these big feelings in a safe way.

Best tips to manage tough behaviors

- **Keep calm.** This is the most important thing you can do when your child is acting out.
- **Stop the behavior.** For example, move your child away from another child they are hitting. Be firm, but not rough.
- **Show you understand your child's feelings.** Say, "You are angry that your friend took your toy. It's okay to feel angry. But it's not okay to hit."
- **Teach what to do.** Tell and show your child what they *can* do: "You can say, *That's mine. I'm playing!*"
- **Later, point out what happened.** Say, "When you hit your friend, it hurt her and she started to cry." Or "When you threw the toy on the floor, it broke."
- **Later, you can also talk about other ways of expressing mad feelings.** Your child can jump up and down, stomp their feet, or hit the sofa cushions when they are angry.

It's also helpful to **look for patterns** in behavior. Noticing what moments are stressful for your child can help you plan ahead. For example, you may notice that your child is more likely to fall apart when they are hungry or tired. Having snacks on hand after school or postponing errands until after naptime can make things easier for both of you.

Some things that won't help



ZERO TO THREE
Early connections last a lifetime



- A big reaction from you. The more upset you are, the more likely the behavior will continue. Your reaction (even if it's negative) gives your child attention.
- Punishment or shaming. Young children are still learning the rules. Punishment can be scary for them. Fear and shame don't help them learn. Punishment doesn't teach children what they should do instead.
- Too much bargaining. When a child is allowed to negotiate, they learn that rules are not for real. Having consistent rules helps children feel safe.
- Demanding an apology. It's true that toddlers can be forced to say "sorry." But that doesn't make them *feel* sorry. They need to first understand what they did wrong. Then, understand how it affected the other person. They can't do this in the heat of the moment. (Even adults often need time to think before apologizing!)

10 ways to help your child learn and grow

- 1 Catch your child being "good."** Give more attention to the behaviors you'd like to see. Give less attention to the behaviors you don't.
- 2 Create routines and stick to them.** Having meals, naps, and bedtime routines at the same time each day reduces bargaining and tantrums.
- 3 Prepare for daily transitions.** Letting your child know what's coming up next helps prepare them and can reduce tantrums.
- 4 Set limits and explain why.** Letting your child know what the rules are helps them understand what they are supposed to do (or not do).
- 5 Give clear and simple instructions.** Get on your child's eye level and explain exactly what you want them to do in a kind, calm voice. Keep it simple — no more than 2-3 steps.
- 6 Give choices when possible.** Offering a child a choice can help them feel in control.
- 7 Tie the consequences to the action.** If your child is still throwing the ball in the house, after a reminder, put the ball away. Calmly explain: "I see that you are having a hard time listening, so I will help. The ball will go away until this afternoon." Then offer a choice of two acceptable activities.
- 8 Build a toolkit.** Help your child find ways to calm themselves down, like taking deep breaths or reading a book. Offer these in tough moments.
- 9 Be a positive role model.** How you react to a difficult situation teaches your child how to react. You are showing them how to manage big feelings.
- 10 Find support.** Children's behavior can be frustrating. If your child's behavior is making you angry or causing you to lose your temper, there is support. Talk to your healthcare provider or one of the professionals supporting your family about options in your area.

Text **SPARKS** to 274 448

Receive messages like this on your phone

©2026 by the Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai. All rights reserved.