



by Karen Stephens

## Living With Two Year Olds: Tips for Survival

If you're reading this, you're likely living with an adorable, but adamant toddler. By now you know toddlers are basically terrific, but they all have days that live up to their stereotype. Rest assured, "the terrible twos" is a normal, predictable stage of development. It happens in the best of families, and it tests the nerve of the most competent parents. The silver lining is that the stage does pass — eventually.

Stepping (stomping!) through toddlerhood takes longer for some children than others. How long it lasts depends on several things, including the child's unique biological make-up, psychological maturity, and ability to learn from experience.

Parents also affect children's developmental journey through the toddler years. Sensitivity, compassion, and patience are always valuable parenting skills, but they are especially important when caring for twos. Equally critical is knowledge of child development. How parents apply that knowledge sets the stage for children's normal — or abnormal — development. By being aware of, and in tune with, developmental milestones, parents can facilitate children's smooth progress.

Of primary importance to two year olds is a sense of independence and an individual identity. If parents successfully help kids achieve those goals, children will learn to respect parents, abide by rules, and cooperate with the family. Just as importantly, children will have moved closer to positive self-esteem.

Based on what we know about two year old development, here are daily living tips for parents and caregivers. They should help you and your two year old survive the turbulent twos. Hang in there!

- To broaden chances for independence, create a *can do* home and child care environment. Diligently childproof to prevent accidents and injuries. Find ways to help twos participate in their own care. For instance, provide step stools by sinks so they can stand and brush their own teeth. Place hooks low so they can hang up their own coats.
- Toddlers hear "No!" hundreds of times a day. (If we were scolded as often at work we'd be chronically frustrated, too!) To reduce power struggles and stalemates, say "Yes" as often as possible. The phrases, "Yes, when . . ." and "Yes, if . . ." can help take the edge off of constant negativity. For instance, if your child wants to go outside, say "Yes, when you potty first." When your child asks if he can have ice cream, answer "Yes, if you at least taste your green beans."
- Young children have an insatiable curiosity, which means they get distracted easily. Twos love to ponder, poke, prod, explore, and investigate. To limit frustration for both of you, plan on taking twice as much time as usual to accomplish *anything*. And I mean anything. This applies to walking to and from the mailbox as much as it does to taking a trip to the grocery store.
- When tired or exhausted, twos can get whiny and cranky (or otherwise unpleasant to be around). To prevent over-stimulation, keep your daily - schedule as easy going as possible. Reduce the number of errands you force into one morning. Limit the number of different child care settings your child experiences.

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- When planning activities, keep your child's energy level and stamina in mind. It's unrealistic to expect a two year old to tag along shopping with you all day, and then still have the self control to behave well at an evening birthday party. (That's hard for grown-ups to do!)
- Balance in all things is a good code to live by when raising twos. Regular sleep, meals, and time for relaxing and playing prevents twos from becoming overly stressed.
- Twos often scare themselves when they lose emotional control during a tantrum. Provide words for the feelings children are experiencing. Empathizing can defuse outbursts and provide comfort.
- Words for emotions children experience should be used often with twos. When a child crumples into tears over a shirt that won't snap shut, be on hand to offer support by saying, "It's frustrating trying to learn how to dress yourself. Here, I'll show you, and then you can try to snap the next one."

## When times are especially tough, focus on the love you and your child share.

- Twos long to be "grown-ups." Being called "the baby" is an insult! Very young children view parents as all powerful, and they find that power absolutely fascinating. Provide opportunities for twos to safely explore concepts of power through pretend play. Give them chances to act out adult roles by providing dress up clothes, dolls, and puppets. If allowed to experiment with "parent-power" through play, twos are less likely to use their power to defy you constantly in the mall. (Well, we can hope anyway.)
- Like all of us, twos thrive best in a stable family atmosphere. They don't like quick schedule changes without notice or forewarning. Unexpected visitors and trips throw them off guard.
- To help twos feel safe and secure, provide a predictable environment. Family routines and rituals, such as bath time, singing, or bedtime stories promote communication as well as continuity. These in turn help children feel self-assured and reduce testing behavior associated with a chaotic, disorganized home life.
- Consistently remind toddlers of schedules so they can anticipate transitions. For instance, it's respectful to let children know how long they have to play until it's time to go to grandma's. (And need I mention the benefit of warning them when toy clean up or bedtime is approaching?)
- Twos are striving toward competence and autonomy. Allow twos to contribute in developmentally appropriate ways to family life. Twos can set out napkins for meals, carry small laundry items from one room to another, or hold a hose on a garden plot. And they'll beam with pride while doing it!
- Remember to acknowledge your child's contributions and achievements with plenty of encouragement and praise. Your toddler will cooperate more often and respond to requests more quickly if you regularly express appreciation and admiration.
- Even though twos are destined to pull away, at the right times they still need and enjoy lots of TLC. Don't miss opportunities to hug, snuggle, tickle, or to playfully roughhouse with pillows.
- And one last piece of advice. The absolute adoration that comes with unconditional love does a lot to make the roller coaster ride through toddlerhood less frightening — for kids and for parents. When times are especially tough, focus on the love you and your child share — (and stop clenching your teeth!).

### For More Information...

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**About the Author** — Karen Stephens is director of Illinois State University Child Care Center and instructor in child development for the ISU Family and Consumer Sciences Department. She writes a weekly column for parents in her local newspaper. Karen is author of two books and frequent contributor to *Child Care Information Exchange*.

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