



## 7 Common Parenting Pitfalls and How to Avoid Them

Almost every parent who reaches out to me for help starts with a description that goes something like this: "Henry can be the most delightful child. He is curious, extremely clever, and very funny. But he won't listen to anything we say. He argues and negotiates about everything and throws tantrums when he doesn't get his way. We feel like all we are doing is yelling and getting into power struggles with him. Help!"

The bottom line: toddlers are marvelous, and also maddening.

But they don't have to be...maddening that is. The frustration and powerlessness many parents experience often stems from a crucial expectation gap: they approach their young children using reason ("Why won't Serena just cooperate with getting dressed and avoid all the yelling and threats of having stuff taken away? It would make everything so much easier. She's just hurting herself.") The problem is that young children are not driven by logic but by their impulses and emotions. Their desire to get what they want when they want it and to exert some power and control over their world rules the day. That's why so many of the strategies parents typically use to try to coax cooperation from their children backfire; they rely on reasoning or on the faulty premise that you can control your child when you can't actually make her do anything--eat, poop on the potty, sleep,

etc. The fact is that the more you try to control your child the more likely it is that he will resist complying with your expectations. The approach and strategies that ultimately help children make good choices and behave in ways that help them thrive are often counter-intuitive.

Below are 7 common parenting pitfalls and a description of how to avoid them:

**Trying to minimize or talk children out of difficult feelings; that they shouldn't be mad/sad/scared.** This doesn't make the feelings go away. It just means your child is more likely to act them out. Further, when we minimize or try to talk children out of their feelings we are sending the message that we are uncomfortable with their emotions. This makes it less likely your child will share them, missing critical opportunities to help your child learn to identify and manage his emotions, which is the key to healthy social/emotional development. Don't fear the feelings!

**Reacting when children say provocative things after you've set a limit they don't like, such as: "You're not my mommy and you're not invited to my birthday party!"** Successfully yanking your chain only reinforces this behavior. Remember, for young children any attention or big reaction is rewarding as they are all about power and control. If you want to teach your child not to talk in this inappropriate way, the best response is to ignore his actual words and address the underlying issue: "I know you are mad that I said 'no' to Logan coming over to play today. You are really disappointed." And then move on. When these kinds of tactics don't get a reaction, kids are more likely to give them up.

**Making potty training personal--about pleasing or disappointing you--and getting over-involved in the process.** It's natural to think that this approach would be motivating to children, but it often has the opposite effect. Signaling that using the potty has the power to make you happy or unhappy adds a lot of

pressure and anxiety to the process for many children. This causes children to get stuck or paralyzed by the process because using the potty has become an emotionally-laden “relationship issue” between the parent and child versus simply being a bodily function. Further, children sense that their parents are trying to exert some control over their bodies (at exactly the time when children are driven to exert power in any way they can) which may lead to more withholding or resistance in a desperate attempt to maintain their integrity and efficacy. In one family, the parents had a rule that 3-year-old Julian had to sit on the potty for 5 minutes after bath time or he wouldn’t get any books. As the timer was winding down they repeatedly asked if Julian was sure he didn’t have to go which was met with a very clear, “Nope!” As soon as the timer went off Julian got up and promptly peed on the bathroom floor as he smiled mischievously at mom and dad. The message—*you don’t control me*. What to do? Follow your child’s lead and support his efforts; avoid inserting yourself and your needs or expectations as that just complicates the process and gives your child something to react to. That means avoiding judgment, shaming, bribing, rewarding, etc.

**Bribing/forcing/negotiating with children to get them to eat.** Research (and lots of anecdotal experience) shows that these tactics actually result in children eating less. Just like trying to control your child’s elimination—the more you force, cajole, reward or punish the more likely your child is to dig in his heels to let you know you can’t actually make him do anything, including eat. Food becomes a tool to gain power that results in constant struggles. Take, Rumi (age 4) who demanded a chocolate “energy” bar every morning for breakfast or she would “starve”. She refused to eat any of the healthy foods her moms offered her until they gave in, which they did, in fear that she would go to school hungry and be a terror. What to do? Offer your child a range of healthy choices of foods that she *typically* likes and then get out of her way. Let her decide how much her body needs to feel full. She may test for a few meals to see if you will cave; but once she sees you are not trying to control her she has nothing to rebel against and will

be more likely to take responsibility for nourishing herself.

**Trying to get a child to cooperate by telling him he's a "big kid" (especially when there is a new baby in the family).** From our adult perspective we expect children to hear this as a positive message and to be motivating. But from the child's point of view, particularly if there is a new baby getting a lot of attention, being the older child isn't looking all that great or desirable. Telling a child to "act like a big girl" can also feel shaming; the underlying message is that she is acting like a baby. Shaming shuts kids down, erodes their self-esteem and self-confidence, making it less likely they will actually act their age.

**Insisting your older child love the new baby.** The more you force the issue the less likely it is your older child will feel warmly toward the baby. It is natural to have very ambivalent feelings toward a new sibling. When the older child is made to feel bad for having negative feelings toward the baby and/or a lack of interest in the new addition to the family, there it is again—shame. When parents acknowledge the older child's mixed feelings and give him space to learn about and engage with the new baby without judgment, he is much more likely to feel loving toward this new member of the family.

**Pushing a fearful/clingy child to just go play with the other kids.** This approach often backfires because it increases rather than decreases your child's anxiety and erodes his trust that you will tune in to his feelings and help him cope. Instead, acknowledge that it can take time to feel comfortable engaging with a new environment or new people. This makes him feel understood which should decrease his anxiety and make him feel calmer and more open to taking steps forward to engage. Talk about what you see the other kids doing, then maybe play alongside some other children to slowly and sensitively help your child adapt.

Whether you've encountered any of these specific experiences or not, when faced

with a challenging situation with your toddler, start by recognizing that what seems totally irrational from your adult vantage point makes a lot of sense once you see it from your child's perspective. Putting yourself in her shoes and wondering about what she is feeling, struggling with, trying to express, will almost surely set you on a path that will result in a more effective response and less frustration for you and your child.