Challenging Behavior

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Toddlers have a reputation for being unreasonable. This is because they have strong feelings and are not yet able to stop their impulses. Their big emotions lead them to behave in difficult ways: screaming, hitting, throwing things, and more.

Some ways to manage these tough behaviors:

Keep calm. One of the most important things you can do when your child is acting out is to stay regulated and calm (see Self-Regulation article).

Stop the behavior. For example, take your child's hand—firmly but not roughly—and tell them, at eye level, "No hitting. Hitting hurts." in a serious but calm voice.

Validate your child's feelings. Say, "You are angry that Pablo took your toy. It's OK to feel angry. But I will stop you from hitting. Hitting hurts."

Give options. Tell and show your child what they *can* do. Teach them better ways to direct their energy. If you stop your child's behavior, but do not tell them what *to do instead*, they may keep doing the thing you want them to stop. Tell them they can jump up and down, stomp their feet, or hit the sofa cushions.

Look for patterns. Watch closely so you can notice what is stressful for your child. That way, you can predict when a blowup might happen. You might figure out that your child melts down every time they need to get in their car seat. Once you know this, you can offer support. You might give a heads-up 5 minutes beforehand. Or they can choose a special book or toy to bring in the car to make the transition easier (see Transitions article).

Point out what happened. There are many natural consequences to actions. Explain what happened. Say, "When you hit Carrie, it hurt her and she started to cry," or, "When you threw the toy on the floor, it broke."

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Redirect the behavior. Help your toddler express their wants in a way that's OK to you. Offer an alternative. Say, "It's not okay to throw blocks. Someone might get hurt. You can throw these foam balls in the basket instead."

Some things that won't help:

A big emotional response from a caregiver. The more upset you are, the more likely the behavior will continue. This is because a big reaction—positive or negative—gets your child's attention. That alone can be a reason they repeat the behavior.

Punishment. Consequences given at this age don't help much. Young children are still learning the rules and how to manage their behavior. Punishing can be scary for them, and fear doesn't help them learn. Or they may just laugh or run away since they don't really understand.

Shaming. When a young child is shamed for behavior they cannot yet control, they will only feel worse. Feeling worse will not improve their behavior or ability to self-regulate.

Too much bargaining. When a child is allowed to negotiate often, they learn that it's an effective way to get what they want. Having consistent rules helps children feel safe and secure.

Demanding an apology. Young children who are asked to say "sorry," without fully understanding what they've done wrong, do not learn from their actions. If you point out what happened, they will start to see the consequences of their actions. Someday they will make a heartfelt apology.

Difficult behaviors can be really tough for caregivers to manage. Reach out to your HealthySteps Specialist with any questions and/or challenges you're facing.

SCAN FOR MORE INFO

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