

When Your Child Says “No”



PEDIATRIC CARE • SUPPORTING • PARENTING
A Program of ZERO TO THREE

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 and may begin to show you they want some control in their life. This growing independence is important for your child. Being able to do some things themselves builds confidence. The goal is to find ways for your child to be in control and make their own choices in positive ways.

Some toddlers are more likely to be defiant than others. Some children have a hard time with changes and tend to have big feelings about small things, like getting into the car seat, going to bed, or visiting a new place. Shifts in the day's schedule can also be stressful and result in pushback from toddlers. The best advice for getting through the “no” stage with your toddler is, don't take their behavior personally. This is a phase that will pass more quickly if you take it in stride, remain calm, and know that you are the adult in charge.



START WITH EMPATHY AND REFLECTING BACK THEIR FEELINGS

When you show a child that you understand their feelings, it gives them space to feel their emotions. Feeling heard will help them start to calm down. Labeling your toddler's feelings helps them become aware of their emotions, so they can learn to manage them better. If you skip this step, children often get even more vocal to show just how upset they are. This can lead to a full-blown tantrum.

It's important to keep yourself calm while also sharing your authentic feelings with children. Your emotions are valid, but how you express them is important, too. Take a deep breath and keep language simple and direct. Say, “I'm frustrated that this is taking so long. You're upset and don't want to put your pajamas on. It's hard to go from playtime to bedtime.”

WHAT'S NEXT AFTER YOU VALIDATE YOUR CHILD'S FEELINGS?

- **Respect your child's “no” when possible.** There will be times when you can allow a child to say “no” to something. This shows your child that you respect them and will

listen to them. Also, there will be many times in your child's life where you want them to feel comfortable saying "no." This sets the stage for learning boundaries and consent when they are older. Try to stay consistent with any other adults in the house.

- **When needed, hold and restate the limit.** "It is time to put the toys away and have lunch. You need to eat so your body can grow big and strong." Use language your child understands. Keep it short and clear, but not threatening.
- **Offer a few choices (that are acceptable to you).** "Do you want to put your PJs on yourself, or can Daddy help you?" Giving choices offers children a chance to feel powerful in a positive way.
- **Get silly.** Humor is a great way to bring calm, and to slow a power struggle. You might try to pull your child's PJ bottoms over your head or see if they fit onto their favorite stuffed animal. Laughter often brings cooperation.
- **Engage your child's imagination.** Make up a story to entice your child. Say, "Elmo is ready to get in the car. He wants to go to the store and needs you to help him buckle in."
- **Hold the limit and practice patience.** If none of these strategies work, calmly and firmly state the limit and/or choices again. Say, "You can get into the car seat or I can help buckle you in. You decide." If your child resists, then (without anger) help them into the car seat. With a soothing voice, you might say something like, "I know, you hate getting in the car seat. I understand." Or try distraction. Say, "Wow, look at that big doggie coming down the street."
- **Try again to connect with their feelings.** Sometimes children say "no" because they are upset. They need a good cry. If you hold the limit and listen to the upset, it can help them move through the feelings and settle down.
- **Avoid giving in.** When you give in to defiance, your child learns to push to get what they want. This will bring more pushing next time. We sometimes think, "Just this once, I'll give in." But science tells us that giving in once in a while actually makes it more likely they will keep pushing!

SCAN FOR MORE INFO



- **Help your child get in a "yes" frame of mind.** Try asking them a few questions you know will have a "yes" answer. For example, "Do you like ice cream?" or "Is your name Alaina?"

If you are struggling to navigate your child's defiance, refer to our [Limit Setting](#) or [Tantrums](#) articles or ask your HealthySteps Specialist for support.