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## **Gaining Cooperation and Setting Limits**

One of our many parenting roles is to teach our children socially acceptable behaviour. In order to do this, we need to set rules. Although children sometimes resist your rules, these limits give children a sense of security and help to keep them safe. Your child needs the security that you watch, care and will do something if they get out of control. Children want to know there is a parent in charge.

### **How toddlers think and behave**

Toddlers do not think like adults. Their brains are still developing:

- Toddlers live and learn in the here and now. Toddlers do not rely on their memory to guide their behaviour.
- They are curious and programmed to explore.
- They have under developed impulse control.
- Your toddler's coping skills are lowered when they are ill, bored, hungry, tired, or frustrated. At these times your child is more likely to misbehave.
- Their speech and understanding skills are still developing.
- They have very short attention spans, often less than 10 minutes.
- Parents may interpret behaviour as 'bad' but the behaviour may not reflect the actual intention inside.
- They don't understand cause and effect and are still developing a sense of remorse.
- They are self-centred and struggle with sharing.

Keeping these in mind, it may be easier to understand how difficult it is for your toddler to remember and follow household and social rules.

### **Why set limits?**

Parenting in "the toddler years" requires your active presence and intervention. As your child enters school age years you can move to more verbal reminders and "parenting from a distance". The goals of setting limits are to teach your child acceptable social skills and to develop the ability to make decisions for themselves.

A household with limits is more predictable and calm which makes it more pleasant for both parent and child. Limit setting teaches your child self-discipline. This means that when they are older and you are not around, they will use the rules needed to keep themselves safe.

### **How do I select and set limits?**

Pick important limits and set as few as possible. It is easier to be consistent when you have fewer things to parent.

- Your first priority is to set limits that will keep your toddler safe and healthy. This can be challenging, balancing safety with their need to learn through exploring. Toddlers rely on us to save them from themselves. Examples include: not playing on the road; staying close in public places; brushing teeth.
- Your next priority is behaviour that has the potential or has caused harm/hurt to people or property. Such behaviour requires immediate action by physically removing your child and firmly restating the rule. Examples include: throwing; hitting people or animals; biting.
- You may also start to include some family rules/limits such as; eating together, manners and courtesy, tidy up toys together at the end of the day. Limits must be reasonable for your child's age.

### **What can parents do to promote cooperation and following limits?**

- Provide opportunities for physical activity and exercise.
- Create an environment where it is easier for your child to behave (safe, fun, child-friendly.)
- Set expectations of how you want your toddler to behave. Let your child know what they can do as opposed to focusing on what they can't do. e.g. "Stay close to me" vs. "Don't run away".
- Spend time alone with your child. Do fun things and laugh together.
- Acknowledge and "name" their feelings. e.g. "You look really frustrated" "You look happy".
- Notice and comment when they do cooperate.

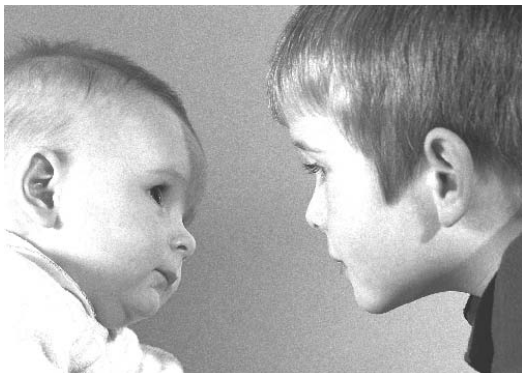
- With your older toddler, you can brainstorm with them to help them solve their problems.
- Offer age appropriate choices when you can. e.g. “Do you want to read a book together, before or after brushing your teeth?”
- Toddlers are big on imitation. Model the behaviour you are trying to teach. e.g. Thank your toddler when they offer you things even in play. Be polite in conversation with other family members.
- Avoid using labels e.g. good, bad, and dumb. Instead, describe what you see. Be specific. e.g. “It keeps us safe when you pick up your blocks” vs. “You are a good girl” after your child picks up her blocks.
- Keep in mind that yelling, nagging and hitting show a lack of respect for your child.

For your child to learn a new rule, you need to be consistent with your follow-through about 80% of the time.

### **What do I do when limits are not followed?**

Even if you could be perfect at setting limits, all children, especially toddlers will break rules sometimes. It is normal and in fact expected that they will test limits as they become more independent.

- **Evaluate-** If a family rule is often broken, ask yourself if the rule is age appropriate or important. You may consider modifying it or saving it for when your child is older.
- **Ignore-** Ask yourself, is the issue about their safety, the safety of someone else or property. If not, ignoring the behaviour is a strategy you can use. Behaviours that can often be actively ignored include “those annoying behaviours”, such as whining and interrupting. Initially you may find the behaviour increases before it begins to decrease.
- **Redirect-** Distract your toddler from the current activity to stop the behaviour, and help him to engage in an alternate activity.



- **Consequences-** By using consequences you are teaching responsibility. Your child learns that their actions cause reactions. Consequences can be natural or logical. Natural consequences are ones that would happen if you do nothing. e.g. “Your hands will be cold if you don’t wear your mitts”. Logical consequences are ones that you create. They teach what will logically follow if a limit is broken. Logical consequences must be related to the behaviour. e.g. Immediately removing your child would follow an aggressive act. When you apply a consequence, stick to it or it shows lack of respect for yourself.
- **Time-out-** Can be used for children aged 2-12. The goal with time-out is not to punish, but to support your child so he can get back in control. It isn’t a particular place, but an interruption of an unacceptable behaviour, a cool-off time for your child. They are more effective if they are reserved for aggressive acts. The message is, something changes when you behave aggressively. Select a quiet, non-rewarding place. At first, some children may require that you sit quietly with them. It is suggested that time-out last as many minutes as your child is in age, up to age 5. e.g. 2 year old.....2 minutes. Afterwards, when they are calm, provide a BRIEF explanation of why you gave them some calming down time, welcome them back into family activities.

If you find that you are going through a day with repeated situations of challenging behaviour, review the section on promoting cooperation and also consider whether the two of you could benefit from some time-in together.

If you have any further questions and would like to speak with a Public Health Nurse, please call **KIDS LINE** Monday to Friday, 8:30-4:15 at 821-2370 or 1-800-265-7293.

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