



# FIRST WORDS Project Infant Toddler Play Group

## Session 7: Communication & Behavior in Toddlers

Think about your toddler's behavior as communication. Your child is telling you a message through his or her behaviors; however, that message is not always clear. Try the following ideas to help interpret and respond to your child's behavior as communication.

### Use choices

Instead of telling toddlers what they can't do, tell them what they can do. For example, if your child is throwing trucks, try saying, *"Trucks are for pushing on the floor. Let's find a toy you can throw. Would you like the big ball or the little ball?"*

Avoid yes/no questions. Instead of asking *"Are you ready to eat?"* try saying, *"Would you like milk or apple juice with dinner" or "It's time to eat."*

### Try using routines

There are many parts of your toddler's day that happen regularly like dressing, diapering, bathing, eating, sleeping, shopping, and going to child care. You can help your child know what to expect by using words to talk about what is happening and what will happen next. Try a hug or song before bedtime, a tickle game before bath, saying, *"One more time then bye-bye toy"* before putting a toy away, and saying *"All done"* when a meal is over. Using simple phrases will help prepare your child for changes in routine.

Also, when your child becomes upset it helps to know what calms your child and what helps prepare your child for something new or different. For example, a blanket, a hug, or rocking. Using these ideas can make tantrums less likely.

### **What about biting, hitting, scratching, hair pulling, and throwing?**

These are not unusual things for toddlers to do. Yet, they're very uncomfortable and occasionally

quite dangerous. Try to figure out the message your child is sending.

### Here are some possibilities:

*"I'm overreacting to the stress of a new person."*

*"I don't want to do this anymore."*

*Let's do something else."*

*"I don't like this. I want something else."*

*"I need room to move."*

*"I need help doing this."*

*"I need a break."*

Let your child know that it is okay to be angry or frustrated but it is never okay to hit, bite, or scratch. It may also help if you label your child's feelings, for example, *"I know that you are mad and want that truck. Hitting is not the way to ask for it."* Give them a word to express why they are mad, for example, encourage them to say "help" rather than throwing. Also, redirecting their behavior to another toy or activity may help to distract them. You may want to try removing your child from the situation or away from the person causing difficulty.

### What to do when a temper tantrum occurs:

It is important to stay calm and controlled, make your child's surroundings safe, and ignore the tantrum. Try not to look at, touch, talk to, or try to calm your child in any way. If you know your child is in a safe place, it is best to walk away so your child can't see you. Anyone else around who might pay attention to the tantrum should also ignore it or leave the situation. When the tantrum is over, come back and act as though nothing happened, offer a drink or a hug to say hello and don't talk about the behavior.

You may also try holding your child in your arms like a baby with a firm hold that will prevent your child from hurting him/herself or you. It is very

### FIRST WORDS Project

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important to remain calm during this time so your child knows you are in control. You may talk quietly to your child or try to comfort him or her by saying *“It’s okay”* or *“I’ll hold you until you’re calm.”* As your child begins to calm, slowly release your hold and act as though nothing happened.

Remember that tantrums typically occur to draw attention so denying attention should help solve the problem. The more consistent you are with ignoring tantrums, the faster your child will learn that they don’t work. By giving your child a word to use or a way to tell you she or he is upset, your child can have an alternative way of expressing him/herself.

**What to do when you can’t understand what your child is saying:**

Encourage your child to show you with gestures and take advantage of the context to interpret your child’s communication. Show your child a specific

gesture to convey the message, for example, putting their hand to their mouth to request food. Help your child use a small set of functional words to convey messages, for example, *“no,” “more,” “stop,” “help,” “all done,”* and *“bye-bye”* which can have many meanings depending on how they are used.

**When is a child’s frustration more than just the “terrible twos?”**

Some children have difficulties with communication or self-regulation that become more obvious when they are toddlers. If your child is extremely frustrated and has difficulty calming it might be a good time to ask your health care professional about your child’s behavior.

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Adapted from Brazelton, T.B. (1992). *Touchpoints: Your child’s emotional and behavioral development*. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley Publishing Co. Grimm (1988), Parks (1992), and *Today’s parent* (1998). S. Parks (Ed.) (1988) [Help...at home](#). Palo Alto, CA: VORT Corporation.