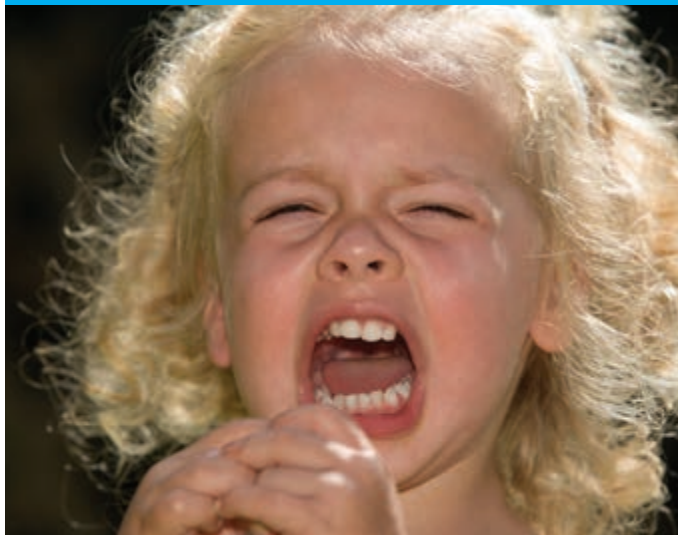




What Every Parent Needs to Know About “NO”



One word that gets the adrenaline surging and the heart pounding in every toddler is the word “No.”

It can send most toddlers and many preschoolers into a head-spinning, body-flopping, ear-piercing orbit. For them, it simply means “Pump up the volume and game on!” This can result in some of the most frustrating experiences parents have to deal with and can certainly test their parenting skills.

Most children at the toddler age operate under the premise of, “If it feels good, give me more, and if it doesn’t, I want nothing to do with it.” Toddlers are focused on those things they can do, eat or watch immediately. Delayed gratification is not a well-developed skill at this age and basic reasoning skills are almost nonexistent. Unfortunately, when parents spend an excessive amount of time trying to explain and reason with their young children, it simply goes in one ear and out the other.

There is not a parent alive who hasn’t said the word “No” to his or her child. In fact, “No” is probably the most commonly used word with toddlers. The use of “No” certainly has its place, but only if it’s used effectively. The problem is that to toddlers, “No” is just a word unless it’s paired with something that is meaningful to them. For example, a tornado siren is just a sound and a red traffic signal is just a light until we understand that one means we should seek shelter and the other means we should stop. So if you’re going to use the word “No,” and we recommend that you do, then you might as well make it as effective as possible.

Using “No” is important for a lot of reasons. It can be used to stop minor misbehaviors and to ensure a child’s safety, like when a child reaches for a dangerous item or goes near a busy street. Children need to know that a specific action will happen depending on whether they stop what they’re doing or continue what they’re doing. They also need to understand that your first “No” will be your last “No.” That is, it will not be followed by one “No” after another.

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Here are a few things to consider when helping your child learn the meaning and value of “No”:

- **Make sure “No” is the answer you want to give.** Parents sometimes let the word “No” pop out of their mouths without thinking about it. If your child is asking for something, the best thing you can do before saying anything is to ask yourself, “Why would I say ‘No’?” Being selective about when you say “No” — and then sticking to it — allows your child, over time, to learn that “No” means “No.” But if your answer to everything is always or usually “No,” your child will think he or she has nothing to lose by appealing your decision (or throwing a tantrum).
- **When you say “No,” it is not a suggestion.** Your child must learn to understand that when you say “No,” it means “Stop.” So your “No” needs to be followed by either positive praise when your child responds appropriately to “No” (he or she listened!) or immediate action (consequences) when your child does not stop.
- **Adding volume is not the solution.** If you say “No” and your child ignores you, repeating it as loudly as you possibly can is not going to help him or her understand what “No” means. It will just lead your child to cover his or her ears or become very good at tuning you out, even when you’re yelling at 5,000 decibels. Just as a stoplight doesn’t get any brighter, there is no need to make your “No” louder. Remember — act, don’t yak.
- **Saying “No” multiple times only dilutes its value.** Constantly repeating your “No” teaches your child it’s a word that can be ignored, and further reduces your authority as a parent.
- **Action is the key.** Don’t take it for granted that children have an inborn ability to respond to “No” — they don’t. So after you have issued one “No” — that’s right, one “No” — you need to take action. If your child obeys your “No,” or perhaps follows your redirection, then praise



him or her for doing so. On the other hand, if your child ignores your one “No,” take appropriate action to help your child understand that stopping what he or she is doing is an expectation, not a suggestion. On occasion, it may be necessary to simply physically redirect your child to another activity, physically prevent him or her from doing something dangerous or, if he or she is engaging in an inappropriate behavior, to place your child in Time-Out.

Additional Resources

- ***Help! There’s a Toddler in the House!*** by Thomas M. Reimers, Ph.D.
- ***I Brake For Meltdowns: How To Handle The Most Exasperating Behavior Of Your 2- To 5-Year-Old*** by Michelle Nicholasen and Barbara O’Neal
- ***Parenting the Strong-Willed Child: The Clinically Proven Five-Week Program for Parents of Two- to Six-Year-Olds*** by Rex Forehand and Nicholas Long



For more information or to make an appointment at the Boys Town Center for Behavioral Health, call **531-355-3358**.

Visit **BoysTown.org/Parenting** for more information from the parenting experts at Boys Town.