

# Stubborn Toddler

## Definition

- Your child says No to many normal requests
- Your child disagrees with many of your normal suggestions
- Your child constantly tests your rules

## Health Information

### Cause

- Stubborn and negative behavior is a normal phase most children go through between 18 months and 3 years of age.
- It begins when children discover they have the power to refuse parent requests. He just learned the word No. He delights in refusing a suggestion, whether it's about putting on or taking off his clothes, taking a bath or getting out of the tub, going to bed or getting up. He's just trying to figure who's in charge and how things work in your home.
- Some call these the "terrible twos" or the irrational years.

### What to Expect

- This normal phase has no quick fix.
- The end point is when your child feels in control of his life, but finally accepts you as his leader and teacher.
- If you handle it gently but consistently, it will slowly improve within 6 months.
- If you try to stop this phase and punish your child for saying No, it can continue to age 3 or longer.

## Care Advice

1. **Don't Take this Normal "No Phase" Personally:**
  - By saying no your child simply means, "Do I have to?" or "Do you mean it?" This response should not be confused with disrespect.
  - This phase is important to the development of independence.
  - Try to look at it with a sense of humor and amazement. Praise him for cooperation, such as helping or getting ready.
2. **Don't Punish Your Child for Saying No:**
  - You can't stop this negative phase.
  - Try to ignore it or give choices.
  - Punish your child for what he does, not for what he says.
  - Arguing with your child about saying no will prolong this behavior.

3. **Do Give Extra Choices Over Unimportant Decisions:**
  - This is the best way to increase your child's sense of freedom and control, so that he will become more cooperative.
  - Examples of choices are letting your child choose between a shower or a bath; which book to read; which toys to take into the tub; which fruit to eat for a snack; which clothes to wear; which breakfast cereal to eat; which game to play, and so forth.
  - For tasks your child doesn't like, give him a say in the matter by asking, "Do you want to do it slow or fast?" or "Do you want me to do it, or you?"
  - The more quickly your child gains a feeling that he is a decision-maker, the sooner this phase will be over.
4. **Don't Give a Choice When There is None:**
  - Safety rules, such as sitting in the car safety seat, are not open to discussion. Going to bed or to child care also is not negotiable.
  - Don't ask a question when there's only one acceptable answer.
  - Direct your child in as kind a manner as possible. For example, "I'm sorry, but now you have to go to bed".
  - Avoid commands such as "Because I told you so" or "Do this or else".
5. **Do Give Transition Time When an Activity Must End:**
  - If your child is having fun and must change to another activity, he probably needs a transition time.
  - For example, if your child is playing with trucks as dinnertime approaches, give him a 5-minute warning.
  - A kitchen timer sometimes helps a child accept the change more readily.
  - When the time is over, don't allow stalling. Take him to the next event. You can ask: "Do you want to do this by yourself, or do you want me to help you?"
6. **Do Eliminate Unnecessary Rules:**
  - The more rules you have, the less likely it is that your child will be agreeable about following them.
  - Eliminate unnecessary expectations. Examples are needing to wear socks or clean your plate.
  - Help your child feel less controlled.
  - Aim for having more positive interactions than negative contacts each day.
7. **Try to Say Yes When Your Child Makes a Request:**
  - When your child asks for something and you are unsure, try to say Yes. Of course, it has to be harmless and convenient. Or postpone your decision by saying, "Let me think about it."
  - If you are going to grant a request, do so right away, before your child whines or begs for it.
  - When you must say No, say you're sorry and give your child a reason.
  - Be agreeable and a good role model for your child.

## Call Your Doctor If

---

- Your child has many other behavior problems
- You can't accept your child's need to say No
- You have trouble controlling your temper around this behavior
- Stubborn behavior is not better after using this plan for 8 weeks
- You have other questions or concerns

### **Pediatric Care Advice**

**Author:** Barton Schmitt MD, FAAP

**Copyright 2000-2022** Schmitt Pediatric Guidelines LLC

**Disclaimer:** This health information is for educational purposes only. You the reader assume full responsibility for how you choose to use it. The information contained in this handout should not be used as a substitute for the medical care and advice of your pediatrician. Listing of any resources does not imply an endorsement.