

## **From Terrible to Terrific Twos (tots)**

**By Ann Gadd**

I'm not sure which is worse - your little darling sinking their razor sharp fangs into your best friend's child, or your friend's child leaving a bite mark on your little poppet.

Both can create awkward situations and may, if they occur often, put adult friendships to the test. I recall my daughter being bitten by a friend's son. Much as I told myself (and her repeatedly), that it was "normal- just one of those things etc...", if I am to be truthful, I felt parental protective anger arising, which was hard to mask.

Later, with my second child, I experienced being on the opposite side of the fence, as he happily chomped a pal. With it came the awkwardness and shame that my child had hurt another. (He, in spite of my reprimands, was unperturbed - he had after all achieved his objective of obtaining the toy train.)

The truth is there are few children that don't at some time display habits that we would rather they didn't, such as biting, whining, throwing tantrums and saying "no" to everything from going to visit granny, what t-shirt to wear and to what food to eat. So why do toddlers act out this way and what can we as parents do to understand and lessen this behavior (and remain sane at the same time)?

Much of the answer lies in understanding your child's behavior – knowledge as they say is power. If you know why your child is doing what they are doing, then you don't feel helpless dealing with the situation. Lets look at some of these problems, what their causes are and how best to respond.

### **Will and little Grace**

If you are reading this, chances are your child has just passed through the developmental stage of sensory exploration and locomotive skills, which is around the age of six to 24 months. Now, as your child, moves into the age of the so called "Terrible Twos," he or she is starting to realize their separateness from you - up to now they

would have felt little distinction between themselves and you. With this realization of separation, comes the development of their freewill, which naturally they will want to express – its all part of growing up.

At this age they are also starting to understand the concept of being “good.” They most likely get rewarded or praised for this and punished for doing the opposite. This creates an inner battle between their own needs and wants, such as “I want that toy,” versus the will outside that says, “no you can’t - it belongs to Jane and she is playing with it.” In order to be “good” then and not grab the toy, they are forced to go against their own will. This can create inner turmoil as they struggle between meeting their own needs and the expectations of parents, peers and care-givers.

Too much authoritarianism and you can break the child’s will. Too little and there is the potential to create a child with poorly developed willpower and self discipline. Passivity or overly aggressive behavior can also result, if we as parents don’t find a mid path to dealing with the situation. When their will, conflicts with your or anyone else’s will, it creates a potential explosive situation. As few tots have the emotional development to cope they usually respond in one of the ways listed below:

### **Throwing a Tantrum**

When your tot throws a tantrum (for which they always choose as an audience relatives you want to impress, or large crowded shopping centers). To give in, is to set a pattern for the behavior to be repeated whenever the child is not getting what he or she desires. However the reality of a major showdown when you’re tired, stressed and perhaps have another child in tow, makes the giving in seem a lot easier in the short term than worrying about the long term repercussions.

If you are able to remain calm, then reassuring the child will go a long way towards helping work through their anger. The anger usually stems from fear, such as “if I don’t get this toy now, I’m afraid I never will,” and is replaced by sadness or grief, at not getting what the child wants; to acknowledgement by the child that they have not behaved well. Only after this can they reach final acceptance and letting go of the situation. Allowing the child to work through their emotions in the order described above,

with calm acknowledgement and acceptance from you about how they are feeling, will go a long way towards creating a relationship where the child feels understood.

### **Saying “no” repeatedly**

This is another aspect of the same problem. When your child says “no” repeatedly, they are trying to establish their independence from you and demonstrate their newly discovered need for control or power. “No” is a way of showing others they have freewill and expressing it can be fun!

Remember though, that this feeling of separateness also brings about a degree of fear and insecurity. As a parent, one needs to maintain a balance between controlling this exertion of will, without becoming over controlling and in doing so, destroying the child’s will, spontaneity and enthusiasm.

### **Biting basics.**

Biting is a fairly common occurrence between the ages of one and three and occurs either as a result of a desire to explore, or as a means to a desired end. Children will naturally use their mouths as a sense organ to discover the nature of something and may not realize that clamping down their jaws on another person’s anatomy may be painful. The resulting yelp creates a form of attention which the child may learn to use as a way of getting attention (albeit negative) in the future. Children also learn to bite by watching other children do so.

When its not exploratory, learnt behavior or as a result of teething, biting can also be a way of expressing ones will at an age when we lack the emotional and verbal skills to say what we are angry about. When you want a toy, your playmate is not prepared to let go of, biting becomes a way of solving the problem, its an effective means to an end, as is kicking, pushing or hitting. This can cause havoc in day care centers and play groups.

Where the behavior is extreme, rule out firstly that there is no physical violence in the home, or excessive discipline, such as constantly hitting a child or the child witnessing violence. If the child is exposed to this as a way to solve emotional problems, then aggressive behavior becomes an acceptable way to behave.

## Whining

When your child whines, they are reacting in a way that shows they are feeling disempowered - that their will won't be heard. When we feel we lack power, we can't speak up for ourselves, so we attempt to empower ourselves by manipulating others. The same can be said for the whiny child. The more you ignore the child, the more disempowered they feel, so the more they will whine – it's a vicious circle.

So how do you handle these situations and empower your child to make appropriate choices, build a healthy esteem and have self discipline?

1. **A regular routine** should help create some sense of security.
2. **Empower the child to make appropriate choices.** Saying no constantly will lead to conflict, so allow the child a limited way to express his will, such as “would you like peanut butter or jam on your sandwich, or do you want to wear the red or blue trousers?” This can go a long way to showing your child your understanding of his/her growing will and respect for his or her choices.
3. Let your child establish **age appropriate independence** such as taking his/her own shoes off etc.
4. **Examine your own need to control.** If it's extreme, realize that you may be attempting to suppress your child's will to the point that they will rebel.
5. **When you do say no, do it calmly and firmly** - your toddler needs to know that it is non negotiable. Consequently minimize the use of the word no and keep it for more serious situations. With a little thought you can turn things around such as “why don't we see how quickly you can take your clothes off and get into the bath,” may avoid the inevitable conflict that comes with “No! Stop that and get into the bath.” Remember you are the adult and it's not appropriate to enter into a long debate with a three year old as to why they should or should not have a bath.
6. **Use praise to encourage good behavior**, as opposed to constantly criticizing bad deeds. If the child wants attention, show them that good behavior gets more attention than bad behavior.
7. **Distraction is a great tool.** In the event of “No I won't,” try not responding to the “no,” but rather suggest a different activity, sing a song, or discuss when daddy

will be home. Very often the child will have forgotten that they were about to enter into conflict.

8. **Don't sweat the small stuff.** Remember none of us are perfect. If your house is not as clean as you would like it to be, or the books aren't exactly in the right order, ask yourself if it's worth losing energy over. Remember the more perfect you try to make your world, the more draining energy wise it is for you.
9. **Laughter is the best medicine.** While not laughing at your child, humor can go a long way to relieve a potentially explosive situation. If it takes roaring like a lion, dancing a jig, putting on a funny hat or wiggling your butt, it may be worth it.
10. **Don't scream and yell, bite back or hit, chances are you'll only aggravate the situation.** Speak calmly and firmly and tell your child "no." Depending on the child's age you can explain that there are negative consequences to his or her actions, such as time out.

Ann Gadd is author of *The A-Z Guide to Common Habits*, Findhorn, UK 2007 as well as two other books on habits. [www.anngadd.co.za](http://www.anngadd.co.za)

