



What Makes Toddlers Tick»

Why toddlers do the weird things they do. **By Bethany Braun-Silva**

My toddler will not keep his clothes on. Seconds upon entering our apartment he strips down to his diaper and pretty much stays like that until it's time to leave again. He also answers almost every question with a "no," and will only eat out of a green bowl. While we entertain this weirdness because he is only 2, it turns out it might not be so weird after all. I'm sure most parents of toddlers have at least a few things they consider out-of-the-ordinary behavior, and like me, find themselves constantly chasing after a naked dictator while dodging attacks from his green bowl.

Toddlers are new to this earth and are figuring things out at their own speed and in their own weird way. Read on for some of the strangest things they do, and why they do them.

No Means No

Chances are if you ask a toddler a question, you will be met with... "No!" "Do you want to go outside?" "No." "Do you want to eat dinner?" "No." "How about you put some pants on." "No!" That last one wasn't really a question, but you get my drift.

So what's with the negative attitude, tots? Turns out, it's not

really so negative. Toddlers who are learning to express themselves use "no" as way to assert their independence and gain just a bit of control in a world where they are constantly told what to do and when to do it.

"Toddlers are gaining independence from their parents. Up until about eighteen months or so, kids really feel as though they are one with their mom (or primary caregiver). Their little brains don't have the maturity to understand seeing the perspective of another person," says Amy Webb, creator of the blog thoughtfulparent.com, who has a doctorate in Human Development and Family Sciences and is mom of two. "So as they are gaining this independence, they want to 'do it myself' for just about everything, and this could include dressing or just about anything else."

While hearing "no" from your toddler all day long can be increasingly frustrating, just know it means your little one is growing up and growing into herself.

Here's what you can do if your child's refusal is becoming a bit too much:

- **Offer choices.** Instead of telling your child to put pants

on, ask what color pants he would like to wear today. This leaves little room for a negative answer.

- **Make it a learning game.** Help your child count how many peas are left on her plate as she eats them one at a time. Make it fun!
- **Watch your language.** Toddlers are sponges and will pick up your behavior. Instead of telling your spouse, “No, I’m not watching another episode of *The Bachelor* tonight,” try saying, “How about we watch a movie we will all enjoy.”
- **Don’t back down.** Toddlers can be defiant, but they need their parents to set boundaries. If what your child is saying no to is a non-negotiable, stand your ground. It *will* get better.

Again, Again!

I have seen *Moana* at least 50 times. While it’s a great movie, I’m ready to move on. In fact, since starting this article we have moved on...I am currently on my 20th viewing of *Trolls*. Ughhhhh. When my toddler finds a movie he likes, he will watch it every day, sometimes twice a day. Melissa Robles from Kew Gardens, Queens, has the same issue with her 2½-year-old. “Gracie is obsessed with reading *Green Eggs and Ham*. She would have me read it to her ten times in a day, and on more than one occasion, I have,” she says.

While this repetition is frustrating for parents, it’s extremely comforting for little ones. “Toddlers really thrive on repetition and it makes them feel safe and it’s also exciting and fun to them,” says Tanya Altmann, M.D., pediatrician, mother, and author of *Baby & Toddler Basics: Expert Answers to Parents’ Top 150 Questions*. “They like patterns, they like counting the steps walking up to preschool the same way every day, and will get mad if you skip a step.”

Toddlers rely on repetitive behavior to know what to expect. Their communication skills are so minimal at this age that knowing what to expect is, in fact, key to their health and happiness.

Repetition is actually a great tool for parents, too because if you stick to the same routine, your toddler will know what’s expected of him and will likely do it. Dr. Altmann suggests using this behavior to your advantage. “The good thing about repetition is that you can change any toddler behavior that you want to change. Whether it’s getting them to sleep through the night or eat green vegetables, as long as you’re consistent for a week and offer positive reinforcements and ignore undesired behavior, you can change their behavior,” she says.

Nudity, Nose Picking, and Head Banging

No, this is not the name of the latest Tarantino film, but rather three distinct (and strange) behaviors you might witness from your little one. As I mentioned earlier, the main problem we deal with in our family is getting my toddler to keep his clothes on. While

we manage to keep our little nudist contained at home, sometimes he starts stripping in public.

Toddlers have no concept of what’s socially acceptable, so they don’t really see this as a problem. Same goes for nose picking. If your toddler has an itch or a booger, she will stick her finger up her nose because she doesn’t realize it’s a gross thing to do. Teaching your toddler social cues and what’s expected of him in the house and outside of the house will go a long way to making his behavior more acceptable.

As for head banging, that’s a bit different. Some toddlers will bang their heads against their crib at night or before falling asleep for a nap. While this behavior can seem worrisome or outright scary, it’s actually completely normal and a way for your toddler to self-soothe. Often head banging happens at night as way for her to get herself to sleep. She is soothed by the rhythm she is creating and will most likely outgrow it in no time.

When to Worry

Toddlers definitely display some strange behaviors from time to time, but there are certain behaviors that could raise a red flag. For instance if your child is using the above-mentioned head banging as a way of cutting off interaction from you and others, it might be time to reach out to your pediatrician. Also, “if your child consistently is testing limits to the point where it’s driving you crazy and it’s disrupting everyone in the house and causing a lot of extra stress, that could be a sign that there is something else going on with your toddler, and you may want to talk to your pediatrician,” Dr. Altmann says.

Rafi Bilek, LCSW, director of Baltimore Therapy Center, suggests parents watch out for certain behaviors, as they may be indicators of something more serious going on, such as autism or a behavioral disorder:

- Regression in language or motor skills (e.g., child was using many words but then can’t seem to speak in words at all; child was running but now can’t seem to walk)
- Child screams for hours without a break
- Child clutches at private parts anxiously (possible sign of sexual abuse)
- Child is violent to the point of causing serious injury to self or others

As the parent, you know your child. If any of your toddler’s behaviors seem really strange or off to you, make an appointment with his pediatrician or even ask to chat over the phone. That’s what they’re there for.

Raising a toddler is one of the most challenging times for parents—they don’t call it the Terrible 2s for nothing. One thing I know for sure is my toddler is weird (but adorable!), and it’s my job as his mom to help him feel comfortable and safe enough to let his little freak flag fly.

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