



Understanding the Importance of “No”

In Montessori we call it Self-Affirmation Crisis (not terrible twos)

Self-affirmation crisis begins around 18 months and lasts until 2 ½ to 3 years. It represents a period of transition from infancy to childhood, and is often recognized in the child who begins to say “no.” Children at this age are growing and changing rapidly, gaining new motor and language abilities daily.

The child begins to see themselves as a capable, unique individual, fully separate from the mother. It is also during this time that he/she begins to develop impulse control, empathy, and an understanding that they are not the only person in the world with needs, wants, and desires.

The use of the word “no” or “mine” represent the child gaining a sense of power and control over their own destiny.

Parents can support their child through this challenging time in the following ways:

1) Set clear and consistent limits

Toddlers are curious beings, constantly exploring every aspect of their environment. It is important to understand that when a child tests and retests limits they are trying to make sense of a complex world. When the adult is inconsistent, this is both confusing and frightening for the child; without clear limits, they feel abandoned. We can help by setting well-defined limits even in the face of a power struggle. Though it may seem as if the child wants to win the power struggle, what they are really seeking is confirmation that there are certain rules in the world and that you mean what you say. Give reasons for why the limit is there, for example, “Do not climb the table, you may get hurt” rather than “No! Because I say so!” these are not rules that adults made up, these are the rules of physics.

2) Offer choices

Children at this age are constantly seeking an opportunity to assert their newly discovered power. If we do not provide a positive outlet for this, they will create their own opportunities to engage in power struggles. Instead, we should provide the child with many opportunities to have a voice. Giving a choice does not mean that the adult is giving up control. Rather, we offer the child a choice between two acceptable outcomes.

For example, a child does not have a choice of staying naked. They may, however, be given the choice of: blue underwear or yellow underwear. Whatever two choices you offer can be consistently reiterated, **but no underwear is not an option**. For example, you might say, “Would you like the blue underwear or yellow underwear? If you cannot choose I will help you make a choice.”

Once the child makes a choice they need to feel the consequences of their own choices and should not be allowed to change their mind.

For example, you might give the choice of eggs or yogurt for breakfast and the child chooses yogurt, but then decides they want eggs after the yogurt is prepared. He/she should not be catered to, but rather should be gently reminded that they made a choice and will have another opportunity to make a different choice next time. Toddlers want their choices to be respected, it is our duty to respect their initial choice and follow through.

3) Don't engage in temper tantrums

Temper tantrums begin with anger or frustration. The adult cannot buy into this, as young children are not reasoning human beings and cannot be talked out of the tantrum. The adult should offer comfort and be emotionally available to the child when they are ready. When a child is having a tantrum the adult should calmly give the child some space. The adult can say, "I can see that you are not ready to talk to me. When you feel better, we can talk about this." At that moment, the adult should walk away but still be visible to the child. If you are in a public space, it is the adult's duty to create a safe space around the child for the child to express their big feelings, not to stop the feelings.

Once the child has calmed down, it is critical that the adult **never apologize** for setting the limit. Keep the discussion to the point; toddlers are unable to understand lengthy, rationalized discussions. You could say, "I see, you were very upset when I told you not to climb the shelf. It is not safe to climb on shelves. Now would you like to help me wash the dishes or sweep?" have an alternative activity ready after the discussion to signal the end of the tantrum.

4) Remember that toddlers do not yet have a reasoning mind

It is tempting to provide lengthy explanations for the limits we give children. However, toddlers are unable to rationalize at this age. In fact, children do not develop a reasoning mind until around six years old! They are more concerned with knowing what the expectations are than why the limits exist.

The adult should also word the limit as a matter of fact instead of making it as if they are imposing their rules on the child.

For example, you might say, "chairs are for sitting" instead of "sit down because you may bump your head." It is easier for a child to wrap their head around a clear, simple idea that can be repeated again and again so that the child can understand that the **limit is permanent and consistent**.

Though this can be a trying time, adults must be willing to help children through this crisis. When a child is respected, given a voice, and provided with many opportunities to develop independence, he emerges as a confident child, fully assured in his new abilities. If, however, the adult does not support the child through this crisis, the deviation will continue and can reemerge with a vengeance during adolescence. We must patiently and unwaveringly offer the child our love, support, and understanding, even through the most difficult times.