

Question: How can I stop my toddler from hitting?

Ouch! There are many reasons why your toddler may be hitting. Learn why and how to help your child learn other ways to express himself by promoting the life skill of Focus and Self Control.

Focus and Self Control involves paying attention, remembering the rules, thinking flexibly and exercising self-control (not going on automatic, but doing what's needed to pursue a goal). Children need this skill to achieve their goals, especially in a world filled with distractions and information overload.

1

Remember that it's normal for toddlers to hit or to show some form of aggressive behavior.

Your child's behavior is communication and can teach you a lot when determining what he's telling you, rather than viewing it as an isolated behavior. Step back to try to see the whole picture.

Toddlers typically have limited ability to talk about what's upsetting them and creating more acceptable solutions to solve their problems. This is a normal part of children's development. However, the knowledge that it is normal—that there's not something wrong with him—doesn't mean that you should let it go. It's a great time to begin helping your child learn new ways of managing his feelings and behavior.

2

Watch for patterns.

When watching your child, you'll likely notice patterns in situations that tend to lead to hitting. For example, young children may become angry when they're hungry or tired, when they get frustrated by not doing something they want, but they don't have the words to express these feelings. Watching your child will help you identify situations that lead to hitting and set you on the path to creating new ways to promote self-control and learn when and why your child is hitting. Ask yourself:

- “What is making my child upset right now?”
- “What is my child trying to tell me?”
- “Is my child hungry or tired?”
- “What happened right before he struck out?”

3

Be ready for problems and help your child step back before the hitting begins.

Teach your child problem-solving skills when you both practice stepping back from a frustrating situation, like hitting.

Once you identify some patterns that lead to hitting, you can help your child step back and notice them, too. For example, you can:

- **Acknowledge that your child gets upset at certain times and try to prevent them from happening:** “I know that you get angry when you are really hungry so I am going to give you a healthy snack before that happens.”
- **If there is no getting around the problem, be ready with a solution or a diversion:** “I know you don’t like getting into the car seat, but I am going to give you this plastic bottle filled with things that make noise so you can shake it while I strap you in.”

4

Problem-solve to arrive at solutions.

You want to set limits so your child uses other ways of expressing himself or herself. Again, think like a scientist and see what works best. Ask yourself:

- “What do I do that helps my child really calm down?”
- “What does my child do to calm himself?”

Use that knowledge in setting limits that help your child control himself or herself.

5

Set reasonable and consistent alternatives to hitting.

Tell your child in a firm but caring voice that you won’t allow hitting, but provide other ways for your child to deal with challenges.

- **Act like a sports announcer and narrate what your child is doing like:** “You don’t want to get your diaper changed, so you’re hitting me but I don’t like it and I’m not going to let you do it.” This helps your child connect his feelings to his actions and to your reaction.
- **Ask your child to show you what he or she wants or needs.** Say, “I’m not going to let you hit me but you can show me what you want. Do you want something to eat? Do you want to see what’s over there?”
- **Meet your child’s needs when it is reasonable to do so.** Yes, if your child is hungry or tired, you want to do something about those needs. But no, your child can’t have something in the kitchen that’s dangerous.

- **Provide alternatives.** You can say, “I’m not going to let you play with that pot from the cabinet. It is too heavy. But you can play with this smaller pot.” Or, “You can’t hit me but you can hit that pillow.”
- **Offer real and reasonable choices.** When you let your child choose, he feels a sense of control that helps him cope. You can say things like, “It’s time to leave the park. Would you like to walk or ride in the stroller?”
- **Use diversion but remind your child of the limit.** You can say, “You are getting ready to hit me and I am not going to let you do it, but we can dance to the music on the radio because you love dancing.”

6

Share your reasons and feelings with your child, while trying to maintain your own self-control.

Martin Hoffman of New York University has found that children are more likely to listen to their parents and respond positively if the adults briefly share the reasons behind their discipline, as well as share their own feelings—except when they do it in a harsh way.

“Tell your child why you are stopping his or her behavior by saying things like, ‘I am not going to let you take your friend’s things. She doesn’t like it.’ Or, ‘I am not going to let you hit me. It hurts and I don’t like it.’”

Or, “I am not going to let you hit me. It hurts and I don’t like it.”

The hardest part is that children’s hitting does affect adults and can make you feel like losing your temper. Yet, when you get aggressive it leads to more aggression in children.

Joseph Campos of the University of California at Berkeley has found that adults’ facial expressions affect children’s reactions in uncertain situations. He says:

“By 11 to 12 months of age, the baby is already doing what all of us do when something unusual happens—we look around to figure out how other people are reacting.”

Even a very angry tone of voice affects children, as the research of Anne Fernald of Stanford University has found.

“Ultimately, you are a role model for your child’s learning self control. So if you need support when your child angers you, try to have someone who you can call on to help you.”