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When Punches Fly How to Handle Toddler Hitting By Heather V. Long

"Mommy said no!" a mother says with a patiently weary voice. The little girl's angelic face puckers and reddens with a hint of fury. She picks up a toy and throws it or reaches out and smacks her sibling. These and other kinds of behavior problems can drive a parent to distraction. Why do they do it? What should a parent do? How do you handle it when your toddler starts to hit?

When Does It Start?

Behavior problems in toddlers are common, and they usually result from a child's need for autonomy. This need arises from the child's newly acquired mobility and communication skills.

"Primarily, hitting begins because the level of frustration experienced by the toddler cannot be expressed any other way," says Corinne Gregory of [www.PoliteChild.com](#) in Woodinville, Wash. "They are still largely preverbal and lack any other coping mechanisms to deal with anger and frustration. So they hit, kick or bite – sometimes all three. And they are too young to understand that this is not an acceptable form of dealing with anger. This stage of 'expression' can begin as soon as the 1-year mark to 18 months or even somewhat later depending on the temperament of the child, his verbal skills or his environment."



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Why Do They Do It?

"The position we take is that toddlers know how to hit," says Dr. Edward R. Christophersen, professor of pediatrics at Children's Mercy Hospital in Kansas City, Mo., and author of [Parenting That Works](#) (American Psychological Association, 2002). "Typically, they have been around someone who hits, whether it be another young child or an adult. Also, toddlers who hit have not been taught behaviors that are alternatives to hitting. For example, one reason that toddlers hit is because they have not been taught to share. When this is the case, the caregivers need to work on teaching

the child to share."

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Jessica Durbin, a mother from Streator, Ill., says her son usually hits when he is very tired. "He gets too ornery and just starts hitting or pinching," she says. "He's told 'NO, you don't hit,' or something like that. That works maybe half the time."

How Do You Handle It?

The best way to deal with a toddler hitting another toddler is not to reward it with lots of attention. Simply tell the child no, remove him from the child he's hitting and put him in a time out. Don't make a huge production out of the problem. Conversely, reward the good behaviors.

"You need to get down on their level, eye to eye, and use a very low voice and hold an arm to keep them still as you speak to them," says Dr. Alice Honig, professor emerita of child development in Syracuse, N.Y. "This is 'victim-centered discipline.' You have to tell them, 'That could hurt,' or 'It did hurt. I don't want you to hurt anyone or anyone to hurt you.' Never yell; just keep the tone serious."

Gregory agrees that, in general, the best way to handle it is relatively simple. It involves catching children "in the act," taking their hand and saying calmly, but firmly, "No hitting. Hitting hurts." If the action is repeated, repeat the directive that there is no hitting, and you can even indicate that you understand and empathize with the toddler's frustration. They may not understand all the words you're saying, but they will get the gist of what you're communicating.

"Try to make certain you have not left the toddler with only one alternative: hitting," says Dr. Christophersen. "Watch to see that he or she is not being tormented by, for example, a younger sibling who won't leave their stuff alone. Observe your toddler long enough to determine whether he needs some help with alternative behaviors such as sharing, waiting to talk or taking turns. Your time will be better spent on teaching alternative behaviors rather than focusing your efforts on the toddler's hitting." Dr. Christophersen doesn't discount punishment, either, if nothing else seems to work.



Denying your child positive attention is another approach. When her son hits or acts out, "He's told that he can't be held if he won't be nice," says Durbin. "Whoever has him just puts him down. That seems to work best: refusing to put ourselves in a position to be hit and telling him why we are doing it seems to get through to him."

If all else fails, just letting a situation play out might work. "My daughter liked to hit," says Candace Priore of Columbus, Ohio. "She would hit for any reason or no reason at all. I talked to her a couple of times, and when that didn't work and it seemed nothing else worked – like standing in the corner, taking her from play or sending her into a time-out – I resorted to letting the person she hit, hit her back." When Priore's daughter came back crying that the child had hit her back, Priore asked her questions. "I'd ask why they did it, and she would tell me that she hit them," she says. "I'd ask her if she liked it. She would, of course, say no, and so I would say, 'Well, if you don't like being hit what makes you think they liked being hit?'" Priore would say to her daughter that if she doesn't want to be hit then she shouldn't hit other people. "After a few times of this, she stopped," says Priore. "Sometimes experience is the best teacher of all."

What Shouldn't You Do?

"The key to all this is be calm," says Gregory. "Don't let emotions get

involved, because then you're fighting a toddler's out-of-control emotional system with your own emotions – not a recipe for success."

Honig says parents have to remember that this is a difficult time for growth. "[Toddlers] want independence and freedom, but they also want security, and this seesawing of emotions is very hard for them," she says. "Ignore their 'no's' and make the situations more attractive. Use chants to direct them and don't overreact. Don't let their hitting go, but do not model injurious behavior."



Honig also suggests taking preventive measures when toddlers are still having problems with impulse control. Help them avoid the constant "no's," and take them out of the situations where they are likely to do damage, such as throwing things that are breakable or hitting with them. For example, replace glasses with plastic cups and the like.

So When the Toddler Hits...

Being a parent is one of the most difficult jobs there is. Parents must model their behavior so that a toddler not only understands, but also learns by example. Reward the positive behavior, and deal with the unwanted in a quick, efficient manner that doesn't make a big deal out of it.

Parents like Priore and Durbin used alternative methods other than hitting to handle their toddler's hitting. It can be frustrating, but the ultimate reward, of course, is the toddler who isn't a terror to take out and the bond of trust that the parent will develop with their child.

Want to see more?

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About the Author: Heather Long is a Virginia-based freelance writer and mother of one.

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