



Addressing Children's Behavior

12-15 Months

Your baby is still young and is still learning appropriate behavior. The following steps will help you change your baby's behavior for the better without saying no and without yelling.

Think of a behavior your baby does that you would like to change. The next time your baby does this behavior, follow these simple steps:

1. Move their attention to something else (distract them!).
2. Show or tell your child what they **should** do instead of what they **shouldn't** do. "Please walk" instead of "No running."
3. Use the word "please." It will help you stay calm.
4. Ignore the misbehavior or behavior you want to change.
5. Use the word "we." For example, "We don't hit" or "We use gentle hands."
6. Give choices when possible: "Do you want the blue cup or the red cup?" When there is something your child needs to do and doesn't have a choice over, don't ask them to do it, tell them to do it (but remember to say please).

18 Months

Children at this age often don't behave in the ways parents would like. Fortunately for parents, scientists know more than ever about how toddlers develop, and research has shown that some strategies for dealing with misbehavior work better than others.

Misbehaving children are not being manipulative

When children misbehave at this age, parents may see them as being manipulative or trying to “work” them. But a toddler’s brain is not capable of manipulation. Young children just act in ways that get them attention – good or bad. For example, if your child hits you, and you give them your attention by picking them up or scolding them, your child quickly learns that hitting is a good way to get your undivided attention. We eventually label this behavior “manipulative,” even though your child simply wanted your attention and got it!

Encouraging Good Behavior and Discouraging Bad Behavior: What Works

Positive reinforcement. Positive reinforcement is a powerful tool for teaching good behavior.

Praise your child right after a specific behavior you like. For example, when your child puts their toys in the toy bin, praise them by saying, “I really like the way you picked up your toys and put them away in the toy bin.” This praise will make your child more likely to do it again the following day. Children want to please their parents, so praise means a lot to them. Catch your child being good!

Positive opposites and asking for the behavior you want. Don't wait for your child to make a mistake before telling them what you expect of them. Give clear request for what you do want your child to do, for example, “Please sit down,” instead of, “Don't run.”

Ignoring. Ignoring annoying behaviors (that aren't dangerous) teaches that those behaviors are not good ways to get your attention. Annoying behaviors include complaining, asking repeatedly to buy something at the store, interrupting your conversation with another adult, pouting, being noisy, whining, and even crying.

Modeling. Children learn by copying, so always ask yourself what your own behavior is teaching your child.

Clear expectations. Spell out exactly what behavior you want from your child. Be consistent across situations (at home, out in public) and over time (one day to the next).

Consistent rules. If you tell your child that a behavior is not allowed, you must respond with the same consequences every time that behavior appears, as inconvenient and unpleasant as that may be. Otherwise, your child will not only ignore that rule, but they'll also ignore other rules

because they know you don't always mean what you say. A good guideline is not to make a rule unless you are prepared to enforce it.

Distraction. Sometimes when a problem situation starts developing, you can move your child's attention towards something new before they reach the stage of an unwanted behavior.

Explaining how unwanted behaviors affect others. Tell your child in one sentence when their unwanted behavior is wrong because it hurts other people. For example, "When you hit your sister, it hurts her and makes her sad." This teaches your child to avoid that behavior because it's wrong, not because you will punish them.

Warnings. Once an unwanted behavior appears, warn the child about what will happen next if it occurs again. Give your child a chance to correct themselves. Toddlers deserve a second chance!

Temporary loss of privileges. The appropriate response to an unwanted behavior in a child this age is a temporary loss of privileges such as taking away the toy they are playing with for 3 minutes or leaving the party for 3 minutes. Never take away a necessity such as food or warmth. And don't make the punishment permanent ("We're never going to another birthday party"). Always give your child a chance to do better next time.

Effective commands. It is hard to keep track of a string of commands, so ask your child to do one thing at a time.

Family rules. It can be effective to command your child not to do something, such as "Don't hit your sister!" or "Don't put your feet on the table." But whenever possible, try to make it clear that everyone in your family (including you) follows these rules, such as "We don't hit each other in this family." This can be especially helpful for children who are quick to feel shame when they are told not to do something.

Encouraging Good Behavior and Discouraging Bad Behavior: What Doesn't Work

Negative attention. Attention encourages behaviors. If you give attention to a positive behavior, it will increase. If you give attention to a negative behavior, it will also increase. So pay attention to the behaviors that you want to see more of.

Nagging. We have high hopes that if we keep reminding our kids to do something, eventually they will. But making repeated requests of children loses effectiveness. After telling your child once or twice, move on and stop giving the situation attention. You can try again later on or the next time.

Lecturing. Toddlers are too young to understand a long explanation of why certain behaviors are expected.

Physical punishment. Toddlers should never be hit or physically punished. This approach may work in the short run by getting the desired behavior, but in the long run it actually leads to more behavior problems. This has been shown over and over again by scientists. Physical punishment is not an effective form of discipline.

Empty threats or changing rules. Toddlers learn quickly whether parents mean what they say. Your actions and words should match up, or your words will not be effective.

Time-outs. Children below age 2 are too young for time-outs.