

The Basics On Toddler Discipline

Toddlers, especially more than one, can be exhausting and it may seem like "no" is the only word a parent ever gets to say. Toddlers love to explore but are often frustrated by the limits on their own ability and this can lead to problem behavior, such as hitting, pushing, temper tantrums and biting.

In an interview with "The Duet," family psychologist Susan Kam, M.A., of Furlong, Pa., offered tips on solving problem behaviors and on handling difficult moments with very active toddler(s).

The most effective method for teaching positive behavior in toddlers is to reinforce desired behavior with verbal praise. In other words, catch your children being good and give them lots of praise, Kam said.

Parents often give more attention to negative behaviors and do not notice when their child is being good, Kam said. It is important for parents to realize that negative attention can be just as reinforcing for a toddler as positive attention. Toddlers do not differentiate as to why they are getting attention. To a toddler, "attention is attention," Kam said.

Reward your children for "good behaviors" such as sharing with a sibling, using nice touch, etc, Kam said. Rewards can include praise, stickers and hand stamps. Toddlers love surprise rewards and it is a great way to reinforce desired behavior.

A very busy parent can create opportunities for good behavior to make sure they are reinforcing positive behaviors each day, Kam said. For example, sit down with your children and play a game where a parent can show toddlers how to share and take turns.

A key element to reinforcement is to teach a child what the desired behavior is, i.e., sharing, nice touch, using utensils. "You cannot expect good behavior if the children do not know it," Kam said.

Problem Behavior

While reinforcing positive behavior, a parent must discourage negative behavior, Kam said. This, however, can only be done successfully by remembering that "attention is attention" to a child, Kam said.

Many parents make the mistake of talking too much about bad behavior or yelling to make a point, she added. According to Kam, the most effective discipline tool to discourage negative behavior in toddlers is to use the time-out method. Unfortunately, Kam said, most parents use a time out incorrectly. A toddler should be placed in a time-out immediately after the negative behavior occurs and the place must be one where the toddler receives no attention whatsoever, Kam said. A parent should avoid eye contact with the toddler while a time-out is in progress, Kam said.

The time-out method must be used consistently over a period of time before results should be expected, she said. Negative behavior may actually get worse before it gets better, Kam said, because a toddler's passion is to constantly "test" his/her parent.

For aggressive behavior that has not subsided with consistent, correct use of a time-out, parents can resort to withdrawing privileges that have immediate consequences, Kam said. For example, if a toddler is watching a video and bites a sibling or a friend, the video should immediately be taken away for a short period. Parents could also remove favorite playthings for a short period, she added.

When discouraging undesired behaviors through time-outs and loss of privileges, parents must remember to teach correct behaviors, Kam said. With biting and hitting, a parent should show "nice touch" taking the child's hand and demonstrating this skill, Kam said.

Children that are easily frustrated should be taught alternative acceptable behaviors to hitting, biting and hair pulling such as saying the word "help" or giving them something else that they can hit or bite rather than a sibling, Kam said.

Group Management

A definite benefit to parents having multiples is that they can use "group management skills" to encourage positive behavior, Kam said.

Basically, Kam said, a parent can turn the tables on their toddlers by giving praise to a child behaving correctly and giving no attention whatsoever to another child engaging in negative behavior. In search of attention, the child engaging in negative behavior may suddenly copy the sibling to receive the verbal praise, Kam said.

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