



Center for Early Education and Development

Questions About Kids

Why is His Only Word “No!”?

As children near the age of two, they begin to exhibit a behavior called negativism. This behavior is easily recognized by a frequent “NO!” in response to nearly every suggestion from the parent. Understandably, parents can become quite annoyed at this bewildering development in his or her child’s life.

Actually, this negative behavior is a normal part of a child’s development, and it signals the transition from babyhood to childhood. (It is not unlike the behaviors and transitions of adolescence!) The child is asserting herself—seeing how it feels to make decision of her own. And part of making these decisions is disagreeing with her parents.

Remember that your child’s struggle to assert herself is a necessary stage of development.

A child at this stage appears defiant. He wants to do everything immediately and wants things done in the same way every time. He makes unreasonable demands of his parents and tries to dominate them. He says “no” even to things he wants to do! Through this process, the child is learning the distinction between his own will and the intentions and will of others, notably his parents. This rocky road is an important one that leads the young child to autonomous “self-hood.”

What Can Parents Do?

As aggravating as this behavior can be, remember that you are not the cause of your child’s contradictory behavior. All children at this stage of development struggle to assert themselves, although there are individual differences in how this battle unfolds. It’s

important to accept that not only is this an inevitable stage of development, it’s a very necessary one. And remember that sometimes your child may not really want her “no” to be taken seriously.

Try to limit your own “nos” to your child... Offer choices... Commend instances of cooperative behavior.

It’s not hard to understand why saying “no” is so popular with young children. After all, they’ve been hearing their parents use this word with them for most of their young lives! One way to moderate the negativism that occurs at this stage is to reduce the number of times you use the word “no” with your child. Although it takes more energy than giving a firm “no” from across the room, it makes better “child development sense” to divert the child from the unacceptable activity. It is also wise to explain to him what you are doing and why you are doing it, even though he may be too young to understand. It gives both of you practice for the upcoming “terrible twos.”

When your child is acting especially negative, use a combination of the following techniques to help restore a bit of harmony:

- Offer the child a choice of limited options: “Do you want a cheese sandwich or a peanut butter sandwich for lunch today?” rather than “What do you want for lunch today?”
- Use as few commands as possible, and insist on obedience only when absolutely necessary. Encourage your child to make his own decisions in matters of lesser importance.



- Emphasize the positive. “We will have a treat later” works much better than “You cannot have a cookie now.” Negative statements from you can prompt negative behavior from your child.
- Pay special attention to instances of cooperative behavior. (Yes, there will be some!) Commend your child when they occur. Invite your child’s cooperation. Instead of telling her what to do, ask her for a favor: “Will you please not talk to me while I am talking to Grandma on the telephone?”
- Remind yourself that this is a necessary, temporary phase of your child’s development and that as your child acquires more verbal and motor skills, his “nos” will decrease.
- Enjoy your new relationship with this interesting creature who is developing her own personality, likes, and dislikes. You may never have a docile, placid child again, but you are sure to have a more engaging one.

Congratulations! Your stubborn and rebellious toddler now knows she is not a baby, but she is not sure exactly what will happen next. As her parent, you cannot be certain either. You may be experiencing some ambivalence about your child’s new-found independence. Although it may be difficult to remember while your child is energetically emptying cupboards in your just-cleaned kitchen, try to keep an appreciation of his process of self-discovery. The beginning of this lifelong journey happens only once.

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Questions About Kids is on the Web at:

<http://cehd.umn.edu/ceed>

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