



Ms. Michelle's Guide To Creating And Enforcing Appropriate Limits And Boundaries:

How To Set Your Toddler Up For Success

Limits. Must have them.
Be consistent. Follow through.
Tough now? Later... GOLD!

- A Haiku by Michelle

Toddlers are not born with the skills necessary to act as well-functioning and well-behaved people in society. Their behaviors are learned through problem-solving or are ways to communicate how they are feeling. Toddlers require adult support and guidance when navigating behaviors and emotions, and therefore adult reactions to the behaviors are crucial for their learning. I hope this guide will help you to navigate limit-setting and toddler behaviors with confidence and calmness. Keep these principles in mind when you are redirecting your child.

Principles:

1. *Check Your Emotions*
2. *Understand Your Child's Behavior: All Behavior Is Communication*
 - a. What is your child trying to tell you?
 - b. What is your child's intention?
3. *Language*
 - a. Be clear
 - b. Be respectful
 - c. Be simple and short

Toddler Teacher Tip: Your child's behavior is not about you. It is about them and how they are feeling. Do not take their behavior personally.



Communication

- Communication includes your tone of voice, body language, and choice of words.
- Be positive and tell your child what they can do:
 - Your feet go on the floor.
 - When you eat, you sit.
- Avoid making the situation about you and your feelings when the behavior is unrelated to you. For instance, “It hurts my feelings when you do not clean up.” The purpose of cleaning up is not to protect one person’s feelings, but it is an act of grace and courtesy. Be careful not to shame or guilt your child into doing something.
- Avoid telling your toddler or child at any age to apologize. Apologizing is a very abstract concept that is hard for children to grasp. Making them say, “I’m sorry,” will cause them to either over apologize or to say it without meaning it. Instead, reflect on what happened and consider how your child could better approach the situation.

Toddler Teacher Tip: Your words and how you communicate them hold power. You are human and will make mistakes along the way, which makes for a beautiful lesson in reflection and awareness of oneself. This is the time to tell your child how you were feeling, how you reacted, and how you wish you had approached the situation.

Name the Behavior

- When redirecting your child, name the inappropriate behavior you are seeing or just observed:
 - You *are throwing* your legos.
 - You *hit* your sister. Hitting hurts.
 - You *left* your toys on the floor.
- This brings your child’s attention back to the behavior.

Toddler Teacher Tip: Be aware of how you deliver this message to your child. How is your tone? What message does your face convey?

Tell Your Child What They CAN Do

- After naming the inappropriate behavior, give your child the appropriate behavior by telling them what they *can* do:
 - You are throwing your legos. You may *build* with your legos. What are you going to make?
 - You hit your sister. Hitting hurts. You *may be gentle* with your sister.
 - i. Rub your child's hand gently and say "Gentle" as you do.
 - You left your toys on the floor. You may *clean up* your toys.
- This brings your child's attention back to the behavior and then provides them with a more appropriate way to act.

Toddler Teacher Tip: Be sure to recognize appropriate behaviors. Children, toddlers especially, will repeat behaviors that get a reaction. Adults tend to react to inappropriate behaviors, thus inducing the child to continue to behave that way. When you point out behaviors you wish to see repeated, the child will respond and feel a sense of pride. "You were so gentle with your sister. I saw you rubbing her toes with soft and gentle hands. That was so kind of you."

Name the Consequence

- If your child repeats the inappropriate behavior, use a firm tone to name it again and the consequence. Then provide them with a chance to redirect themselves.
 - You *are throwing* your legos. When you throw your legos, that tells me you are done with them. Are you done or would you like to continue building?
 - You *hit* your sister. Hitting hurts, and I will not let you hurt your sister. When you hit, you will lose your choice (name the activity they are doing: *to play, to eat your snack, to draw, etc.*)
 - You *left* your toys on the floor. You may sit here until you are ready to clean up, or you may clean up now.

Toddler Teacher Tip: Before your child sits down until they are ready to clean, consider a fun approach to cleaning up toys. Perhaps ask if they would your help. Set an egg timer and see how much can get put away before the timer goes off. If the toys are all put away, celebrate your success. If not, keep a growth mindset and discuss what you can do differently next time to be successful.

Action

- After you state the natural consequence for a behavior, you must act when the behavior is repeated. If you do not follow through with the action, your child learns that they can do the action without any consequences. Your words lose their meaning.
 - You *are throwing* your legos. That tells me that you are all done with the legos.
 - You clean them up and take them away. Your child is finished with the legos until you decide they are ready to try again.
 - You *hit* your sister. Hitting hurts. Now, you lose your choice (name the activity they are doing: *to play, to eat your snack, to draw, etc.*)
 - You will have to take the activity away from your child in a very calm manner.
 - You *left* your toys on the floor. You may sit here until you are ready to clean up.
 - Your child may try to walk away. Bring them back and calmly restate, “You may sit here until you are ready to clean up. Are you ready?”

Toddler Teacher Tip: Your actions teach a child what is ok and what is not. If your child screams for a blue bowl when you serve their dinner in a green one, and then you switch the bowls to make your child happy, this teaches your child, “I get what I want when I scream.” They are problem solvers.

Emotional Reactions and Tantrums

- When you enforce a limit, your child may react emotionally and may throw a tantrum.
- If your child becomes physically reactive when they are upset, acknowledge the emotion and the behavior.
 - You *are angry* that I took your legos away. It is ok to be angry, but it is not ok to hit. Hitting hurts.
 - You *are so mad* that you lost your choice. It is ok to be angry, but it is not ok to kick me. Kicking hurts.
 - You *left* your toys on the floor. You may sit here until you are ready to clean up.
 - Your child may try to walk away. Bring them back and calmly restate, “You may sit here until you are ready to clean up. Are you ready?”

Toddler Teacher Tip: All children want to feel significant and have a sense of control and belonging. When they do not, it translates through their behavior. Create a safe space for them to sit with their emotions or just simply for alone time.



Mend the Relationship

- After your child has recovered from being upset, be sure to check in with them.
- Acknowledge how they felt and ask if they would like a hug.
- All emotions are ok, but not all behaviors are ok. Remind your child that it was ok to feel their feelings, but their behavior was not ok.
- If you had to help your child's body when they were emotional, tell them why: "You were so angry and threw your body on the floor, and I was worried you were going to hurt your head."

Toddler Teacher Tip: Your child may feel shame in how they behaved. Be sure to tell them you love them.

Be Proactive

- When your child is calm, talk to them about the best ways to help themselves when feeling emotions other than happiness.
 - If they feel angry, take a breath, or are sad, they can ask for a hug.
 - They can give their emotion a color and then paint it.
 - They can listen to music.
 - They can do yoga.
- Tell your child about your day. Did something frustrate you? How did you react? What could you have done differently, and how would you approach a similar situation in the future?
- Pretend play is a great way to practice social skills. Role-play different scenarios that may happen in their daily lives like a friend taking their work, or they are the grownup telling you to clean up, and you say "No."
- Consider having family meetings to discuss ground rules for your family, and ask your child if they have anything they would like to add.

Toddler Teacher Tips: Sharing stories about your day, your emotions, your reactions, and your ideas for alternative approaches to situations is a great way to model self-awareness, self-reflection, humility, and problems solving skills. It is also the best way to humanize yourself to your child and allow them to normalize feeling emotions other than happiness.



Additional Resources

- Book Recommendations:
 - *Positive Discipline: The First Three Years* by Jane Nelsen
 - *The Whole-Brain Child: 12 Revolutionary Strategies to Nurture Your Child's Developing Mind, Survive Everyday Parenting Struggles, and Help Your Family Thrive* by Dr. Daniel Siegel and Dr. Tina Payne
 - *The Yes Brain Child: HOW TO CULTIVATE COURAGE, CURIOSITY, AND RESILIENCE IN YOUR CHILD* by Dr. Daniel Siegel and Dr. Tina Payne
 - *The Emotional Life of The Toddler* by Alicia Lieberman
 - *1-2-3 Magic: Gentle 3-Step Child & Toddler Discipline for Calm, Effective, and Happy Parenting* by Thomas Phelan
- Online Recommendations:
 - ZeroToThree.org
 - TransformingToddlerhood.com

Setting and enforcing limits and navigating toddler emotions and behaviors can be confusing and even daunting. As you continue along your parenting journey, I wish you good thoughts and patience. Please do not hesitate to contact me (mnowacky@gtms.org) with any questions.

I wish you all the best,

Ms. Michelle

