

I Said I Want the Red Bowl! Responding to Toddlers' Irrational Behavior

Parenting Resource

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Learn what important factors influence your child's behavior, and what you can do in challenging moments.

Amelia, told that she can't have a fifth book before bedtime, shouts: "You are the meanest mommy! You are not invited to my birthday party!" Derek, when offered a choice between carrots and cheese, not ice cream, before dinner announces: "I don't like the choices you are choosing me!" Alex hurls a bowl of his favorite cereal off the table and screams, "I said the red bowl, not the blue bowl!" If any of these exclamations sounds familiar, you are not alone. Welcome to what can feel like the Wild West of toddlerhood.

But seen through the eyes of the child, and through the lens of development, these behaviors, while maddening, are utterly normal, and signal important milestones are being achieved. Further, these incidents don't have to be dreaded, as they are opportunities to teach children to manage their emotions, learn to cope with frustration and disappointment, and find ways to feel in control of their ever-expanding worlds in prosocial, acceptable ways.

Getting clear on expectations is critical because the meaning we assign to a child's behavior influences how we manage our own emotions and reactions to the behavior at hand. If we see the behavior as manipulative or purposely designed to drive us crazy, then we are much more likely to react in angry or harsh ways that escalate instead of calm our child. If, instead, we see these behaviors in the context of normal development, then we can approach our children with empathy and be more effective in teaching good coping skills.

Here are some important factors that influence young children's behavior that are helpful to keep in mind when dealing with challenging behaviors:

1. **Young children are driven by emotions, not logic, so irrational behavior is normal and to be expected.** Toddlers don't have a real understanding of time—they live and react in the moment. They have very little self-control. They want what they want when they want it.



- 2. Toddlers are becoming increasingly aware that they are separate beings—that they can have different thoughts and feelings from others.** This means that while they want to sleep in your bed, they know this is not what you have in mind. This new cognitive milestone, coupled with toddlers' innate drive to exert some control over their world, leads to an all-out effort to bring you around to their way of thinking. They are extremely clever and will try any and all tactics at their disposal (calling you names, threatening to never go to sleep, or throwing a knock-down-drag-out tantrum, to name a few). This is often what many parents call "manipulation," but which I like to think of as strategic, as beautifully illustrated by this shrewd three-year-old. When she cried out for food every night after she was put to bed (not more than 15 minutes after having passed up the snack offered at book-reading time), her parents appeared at her bedside, snacks in hand. The next morning she told her dad, "I just want to let you know that tonight after you put me to bed I am going to be very hungry!"
- 3. Toddlers have strong feelings but few tools for managing them at this young age.** Think about it—many adults are still working on being aware of their feelings and choosing to act on them in healthy ways.

So, what's a parent to do?

Stay in control when your child is spiraling out of control. Managing your emotions and reactions is one of most important parenting tools at your disposal. When parents get reactive and emotional, it tends to escalate the child's upset and intensify power struggles. When your child is losing it, she needs you to be her rock and stay sane and rational.

Keep in mind that you can't actually make your child do anything—eat, sleep, pee, poop, talk, or stop having a tantrum. What you do have control over is how you respond to your child's actions, as this is what guides and shapes their behavior. If throwing a tantrum results in extra iPad time, a later bedtime, or simply getting more of your attention, your toddler is putting two and two together, making an important assessment: "Excellent strategy! Put that one in the win column."



This is not manipulation, it is a smart calculation, and means you are raising a really competent kid. He is figuring out successful ways to get what he wants, which is awesome. It is our job is to teach our kids which strategies are effective and which aren't. So any behaviors you don't want him to rely on can't be successful, or what would be the motivation to give them up?

Show empathy and validate the feeling. "I know the blue shirt is your favorite and you are really disappointed that you can't wear it today, but it's in the wash." It isn't feelings that are the problem, it's how they get acted on that can be problematic. The more you validate feelings, the less likely children are to have to act on them.

Set the limit and provide acceptable choices. "Your choice today is the red or yellow shirt." If your child refuses the "choices you are choosing" him, then you let him know that you will make the choice. He may throw a fit. As calmly as you can, put a shirt on him and move along so he experiences the consequence of his actions. That is how children ultimately learn to make good decisions—by experiencing the outcomes of their choices and assessing which get them what they want and which don't. If a tantrum leads to you taking that blue shirt out of the laundry, you: 1) give him the false expectation that he will get everything he wants, making it harder for him to learn to be flexible and accept alternatives—a critical life skill for getting along in the world; 2) send him the message that tantrums or refusal to cooperate are successful strategies, which he will naturally continue to rely on; and 3) communicate that you don't think he can handle this disappointment, a missed opportunity for him to experience that

he can indeed survive wearing a different shirt—building flexibility and important coping skills.

When my son was three and my daughter one, after over 600 consecutive nights of his getting to choose the books we read at bedtime, my daughter spoke up and said, “I want Clifford!” Since it seemed utterly fair for her to finally get a chance to choose, I promptly started to read about the big red dog, when my son shouted: “I NEVER GET TO CHOOSE THE BOOK!” What planet do you live on? (said the voice in my head). Talk about irrational! I completely mishandled it (despite being a child development specialist even back then), shaming him for being so selfish and engaging in all sorts of inappropriate and ineffective responses, like freezing him out and refusing a hug at bedtime. I still cringe when I think about it 20 years later. But I ultimately learned from my mistakes and made some course corrections. It’s never too late.

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