

The Toddler Years - Discipline - Part One

By Mike Witzky

The previous articles on childhood development were offered to help new parents understand how an infants and children progress through the toddler years. It is important to review this information so parents don't have expectations that are beyond the child's capacity. Doing so can frustrate both the child and the parent. Understanding childhood development can help to avoid fears, such as "my baby isn't walking soon enough – or talking soon enough," or "she should know better that to do that." During these years, a great deal of learning and experimentation is taking place and parents are teachers, guides and role models.

This brings us to the subject of discipline. I have already had some discussion about discipline and will have more to say as we look at how it changes during the stages of childhood development. This discussion will focus on the best approaches to disciplining infants and toddlers.

First, take the word 'punishment' out of your vocabulary and practice for children of this age. An infant should never be physically punished, as that would be child abuse. I will go further and say that a toddler should never be physically punished either. By 'punishment' I am referring to slapping, hitting, shaking, grabbing, squeezing hard, and anything else that uses physical force on a child. I also include verbal abuse, including yelling, name-calling, storming around slamming and throwing things, and other activities that are meant to intimidate. *These methods should never be used with infants or toddlers and should never be used with children of any age.* In fact, these are not appropriate interactions with any other human being.

I know that being a parent to an infant or toddler is not a piece of cake. An infant can keep you up all night crying, sometimes for days in a row. Your nerves become shot and nothing you try helps. Sometimes you may need to just walk away. It may be at these times that you are most prone to shake or harm the baby in a way that will cause serious damage. Parents need to share the care, especially during these trying times. It is important to know each other's limits. If one parent has less patience, they may want to take a shorter time with the baby. Obviously, crying may indicate that the doctor needs to be called and you shouldn't wait too long to respond. Have a support system, such as relatives or friends that can be called to help.

Toddlers also have the tendency to drive you crazy at times. They spill their milk for the third time in a row, or think it is cute to write on the walls or play in the toilet. When they get tired, they can throw tantrums of kicking and screaming or throw themselves backward when you try to pick them up. Because toddlers are beginning to understand what you are saying to them, use verbal instructions to tell them that their behavior is not okay. Separate them from the activity, toy or circumstance. Placing them in their room for a quiet time may not stop the screaming, but it will separate them from you at a point that you may have run out of patience.

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Here is where I want to interject my notion that “the punishment doesn't need to fit the crime.” This notion is only true in our legal system and sometimes not even then. I will come back to this idea in the discussion of discipline in each stage of development. The point of discipline is teaching, not punishment. Several principals to follow are:

1. Don't threaten discipline if you don't have any intention of following through. This will teach the child that there are no real consequences and will cause greater discipline problems later.
2. Select a discipline that can be carried out. In wanting the punishment to fit the crime, we often select a harsh punishment, but we will eventually cave in. This also weakens the point of consequences. It is more important that we select disciplines that we can carry out. “Go to your room and don't come out for two hours.” For a toddler this may be too long and two hours has no meaning to them. You may want to place a screaming toddler in their room until you feel ready to approach them again.
3. Make sure that the consequence is disciplining the right person. “If you don't behave we won't go to the zoo.” This may have consequences to others and isn't fair. Check to see how the discipline affects others, and if it does, you may want to select something else.

Parents need to have methods of discipline. Therefore, select ones that are firm enough, can be carried out, and don't also punish others.

If you think your child may benefit from professional assistance, please go to the “*Find a Service Provider*” section of the BHG Web site <http://www.bhg.org> to locate a behavioral healthcare agency in your county.

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