



Terrific Twos — Helping Toddlers Navigate Conflicts



Toddler Characteristics and Conflict

1. **Toddlers see the world from the standpoint of their own feelings and needs.**

Toddlers do not have an awareness of anyone else's viewpoint. This is called being egocentric. For example, Anna may walk right on Roger's foot to get to the stuffed zebra on the sofa. If Sophie is playing with the pinwheel, Jamal may take it from her because he is attracted to the reflection of the spinner.

2. **Toddlers have limited verbal skills.**

Toddlers understand many more words than they can express. They rely on adults to provide much of the language needed for problem solving. For example, Thecla may scream, "My bear!" in a tussle over a bear with Joey. The adult provides the additional language: "You are upset because Joey wants to play with the bear, too."

3. **Toddlers are physically expressive.**

Toddlers show anger and frustration by crying, hitting, and grabbing. They need adults to name their feelings. They will be physically expressive until verbal skills are developed. They need time, practice, and adult modeling of the problem-solving process. For example, when Jessica's mother leaves her with her caregiver in the morning, Jessica throws herself on the floor and cries. The caregiver soothes Jessica with her calm approach, gentle touch, and these acknowledging words: "You are really sad because your mom had to go to work."

4. **Toddlers are working hard to do things without adult help.**

Toddlers are learning new skills and moving toward independence. Sometimes this will cause a conflict. For example, after naptime, Gaby tries to put her socks back on. She begins to cry because she cannot get the second sock on her foot.

Misbehavior or Making Mistakes?

In the three situations below, discuss how these children are making social mistakes rather than misbehaving. Record your thoughts below each example.

1. While David, a preschooler, is putting together a puzzle on the floor, Phoebe, a toddler, walks over and stands in the middle of the pieces he has put together. How is Phoebe making a social mistake by interfering with David's work? Why do you think this is happening?
2. Tamara sees that Joshua is holding a board book. She runs over and snatches it from his hands. How could you interpret this as making a mistake?
3. Danny stands in the kitchen every morning, points to the cookie jar, and whines, "Cookie! Cookie!" He continues to whine as he grabs the back of your shirt. How could this be perceived as a mistake rather than misbehavior? What is Danny telling you?

"If we want to help children develop new and lasting social skills, then we must respond to their social mistakes with kindness and understanding, just as we do when they make other kinds of mistakes.... Mistakes thus lead to opportunities: to explore feelings, to hear differing points of view, and to discuss ideas for solutions."

— Betsy Evans, *You Can't Come to My Birthday Party!*, 2002, pp. 13–14

The Six Steps for Resolving Conflicts With Toddlers

1. Approach calmly, stopping any hurtful actions.

- Place yourself between the children, on their physical level.
- Use a calm voice and a gentle touch.
- Think about a positive outcome.
- Remain neutral rather than taking sides.
- Do not force children to look at you.

2. Acknowledge children's feelings.

- Name and describe children's feelings.
- Place your hands on the disputed object and say, "We are going to hold this together until we can figure out the problem."
- Look at each child and use their names.
- Name feelings repeatedly until children are calmer.

3. Gather Information.

- With older infants and toddlers, observe children's actions and describe the problem.
- With older toddlers, ask "what" questions. For example, "What's the problem?"
- Watch and listen closely for details of the problem.
- Provide language for those children who are not verbal. For example, "So, Rachel, you were playing with the baby and Gracie wanted to play with the baby, too."

4. Restate the problem

- Repeat the information you have observed and heard. For example, "So the problem is..."
- Continue to acknowledge feelings if needed.

5. Ask for children's ideas for solutions and choose one together.

- With older infants and younger toddlers, describe choices and offer a solution. For example, "Would you like to hear my idea? You could stand on the stool instead of the sofa."
- With older toddlers, ask them for ideas and agree on a solution.
- Check to make sure the solution is acceptable to both children.

6. Be prepared to give follow-up support.

- Stay nearby the children to support the chosen solution.
- Tell the children, "You have solved the problem."

Kory and Kameya and The Shopping Cart

Kory and Kameya are two-year-old twins. Their mother brings them to Petra's house every morning before she heads to school. Petra uses the six problem-solving steps to resolve conflicts with the preschoolers and school-aged children who come after school. She has also been successful in using the six-step process with older infants and toddlers, too.

Just before lunch, Kory and Kameya are outside playing in the yard with Jesse and Alicia, who are preschoolers. Petra has put a child-sized shopping cart (that she recently picked up at a garage sale) in the yard for the children to push. Kory has the fingers of one hand wrapped around the cart's handle, and is bending down to pick up a large stone to put in the cart. Kameya, who has been busy picking dandelions and putting them beside a tree, comes over and grabs the basket of the cart.

"Nooooo!" Kory cries as he tries to pull the shopping cart away. "Mine!" screams Kameya, as she grips the basket of the cart and tries to rattle the basket to get it away from Kory.

Petra, who is by the driveway with Jesse and Alicia using sidewalk chalk, looks up and walks quickly over to where Kory and Kameya are struggling over the cart. She keeps in mind that her body language will affect how the conflict is resolved, and she takes a breath, preparing for a positive outcome.

She gets down on her knees between the children and looks at each one. She says, "Kory, you are using the cart and you are upset because Kameya also wants to use it." She puts her arm around Kameya and says, "Kameya, you are upset because you want to use the cart that Kory is using. I am going to put my hands on the cart along with yours until we can figure out how to solve this problem." Kameya leans into Petra's body and puts her thumb in her mouth.

"My car! My car!" Kory exclaims. Kameya removes her thumb from her mouth and screeches "Noooo, mine!" She once again begins rattling the cart's basket. Petra senses that the children are still really upset. "Kory, you really want the shopping cart, and Kameya, you really want the shopping cart, too," Petra says in a gentle voice.

"I wonder what we can do since you both want to use the shopping cart? How can we solve this problem?" Petra continues.

Alicia looks up from her sidewalk drawing and yells, "They should share it!" Petra responds, "What does that mean?" She knows that telling toddlers to share is probably not something that they will be able to understand, or do.

Alicia responds, "You could put a timer on Petra, and Kory could use the cart first, and then Kameya could have it after the timer rings."

Petra asks, "Kory and Kameya, what if I get the kitchen timer and set it so that Kory could use the shopping cart first, and then when the timer rings, Kameya could use the cart?"

Kameya, grips the basket tighter and cries. "Noooo!" Kory digs his heels into the grass, and grips the shopping cart's handle tightly.

Petra responds, "You are still upset. You really want to use the shopping cart, Kameya." She waits for a moment and says, "I have an idea. Would you like to hear my idea?" Both Kory and Kameya look down and nod in agreement. Petra says, "What if I go inside and get the doll stroller from the basement, and then one of you could use the stroller, and the other one could use the shopping cart?"

Kameya smiles at Petra, lets go of the cart's basket, and nods her head in approval. Kory continues to grip the handle of the cart. Petra says, "I am going to get the stroller. Is that OK, Kory?" Since Kameya has let go of the cart's basket, Petra believes that Kameya would like to use the stroller. She asks Kameya, just to make sure. "Kameya, would you like to use the stroller?" Kameya nods in agreement. Petra moves quickly inside the house and brings the stroller outside.

Kameya takes the stroller over to her dandelion pile, and begins to fill the stroller with the flowers. Kory runs the shopping cart in the back yard, and dumps the stone onto the ground, and puts it back in the cart again, giving it "a ride."

Keeping an eye on Kameya and Kory, Petra sits closer to them, at the picnic table where the preschoolers using the chalk join her to use their chalk on paper. After 15 minutes, she tells all of the children, "In 5 minutes we will be going inside for lunch."

Acknowledging Feelings and Describing Conflicts

- **State the feelings concretely.**

“You are feeling really upset” (or angry, or sad). Do not ask questions about feelings. For example do *not* ask, “Why are you so sad?” or “How come you hit him?” Simply state what you see. “You are really upset.”
- **Describe the conflict to toddlers with limited verbal skills.**

For example, “Jenny, I see that you want to play with that doll, and Emily wants to play with it, too.”
- **If necessary, state a limit as part of your acknowledging statement.**

For example, “You are really angry Sasha, because Tommy has the car and you want it. It is not okay to hit. I know you really want the car.”
- **Let toddlers know that you need to hold any objects in dispute.**

For example, “I need to hold this stroller with you.” or “I need to hold this while we talk.”
- **Watch for signs that children have fully expressed their feelings.**

Children’s bodies will relax, they will stop crying, their voice tone becomes softer. When you notice this happening, you can move forward with problem solving.
- **If necessary, acknowledge feelings throughout the problem-solving process.**

If the children refuse solutions or their body language indicates they are still upset, acknowledge their feelings again.

Approaching Calmly

Here are some considerations for calmly approaching a conflict between toddlers:

- **Neutral position:** Place yourself between the children, at their physical level. This makes it easier to give equal attention to both children involved.
- **Comforting gestures:** Put your arms around both children, or a hand on each child's shoulder. If children withdraw from your touch, respect their feelings. Stay close, but don't touch. Comforting physical gestures lead to a transition to cooperative discussion.
- **Eye Contact:** Make eye contact with the children. Children may not make eye contact in return. This is okay.
- **Tone of voice:** Conflicts are often loud and full of emotion. Use a voice that is loud enough to be heard, but not scary. A calm voice communicates neutrality.
- **Facial Expression:** Look concerned as you approach children who are in conflict, and give each conflict your full attention. If your expression depicts anger or frustration, it will be difficult to begin problem solving.

Helping Adults Resolve Conflicts With Toddlers

The following scenarios describe toddlers in conflict. What strategies would you use to begin the problem-solving process? Write down your responses with a partner. With the same partner, choose one of the scenarios to role-play, using the strategies that you chose.

1. Crystal and Tanisha are trying on adult shoes on the floor. Crystal leans over and bites Tanisha.
2. Throughout the morning, Molly toddles into the bathroom, stands on the stool, and turns on the faucet, playing in the water.
3. Celia and Sarah are sitting on the floor playing with cars. Celia reaches over and grabs a car out of Sarah's hand.
4. Nicky's mom says goodbye to him and leaves for work. Nicky cries and calls "Mama, Mama."
5. It is time to come inside for lunch from the backyard. Sam sits in the middle of the lawn and pulls up grass, with no intention of moving toward the door.

Problem-Solving Checklist

Toddler Characteristics

- Seeing the world from their own viewpoint, feelings, and needs
- Having limited verbal skills
- Showing physical expressiveness
- Working hard to do things without adult help

Misbehaving or Making Mistakes

- Responding to social mistakes with kindness and understanding
- Seeing the opportunities for exploring feelings, hearing a variety of views, and discussing ideas for solutions

The Six Steps for Resolving Conflicts with Toddlers

- Approaching calmly, stopping any hurtful actions
- Acknowledging children's feelings and describing those feelings
- Gathering information and describing the conflict
- Restating the problem
- Asking for children's ideas for solutions or offering a choice or solution
- Being prepared to give follow-up support

Remaining Neutral

- Avoiding taking sides
- Maintaining neutral body language
 - Neutral position
 - Comforting gestures
 - Eye contact
 - Tone of voice
 - Facial expression

Acknowledging Feelings

- Stating feelings concretely
- Describing the conflict
- Stating a limit with an acknowledgment: "It is not okay to hit — I know you want the car"
- Holding the disputed object
- Watching for signs that children have fully expressed feelings
- Acknowledging feelings throughout the problem-solving process, if needed

Making Plans

As I consider supporting toddlers when they have conflicts, one idea I am excited to try out is: