

Toddlerhood – The first stage of adolescence



The author Fitzhugh Dodson has very aptly called the toddler stage “The Stage of First Adolescence” - because there are so many similarities to the actual Adolescent stage.

The main developmental task for the toddler is to begin to separate from parents and to exert their emerging sense of willpower. They need to develop a sense of autonomy and they do this by behaving in all the ways that are so difficult for parents to handle! They say “no” - in fact, this is usually the first word they utter – maybe after “mamma” and “dadda”!

They refuse to co-operate with what you want them to do. They are egocentric – feeling as if they are the centre of the universe. They are unable to share. They are illogical and irrational. In short, just as is the case with teenagers, they rebel in order to assert their independence and to develop their own sense of identity. At

least parents can usually have verbal discussions with their teenagers – who do have the ability to be verbal. Toddlers still have very immature verbal ability, and this makes things very frustrating for these little people. They have strong feelings – and yet have no appropriate skills to express them.

This is all normal toddler behaviour. A 2 year old having a temper tantrum is not being intentionally naughty – she is having an emotional blown fuse – and has no skills to get rid of the pent up rage and frustration. If adults then react to this behaviour by punishing the child too harshly, it can be compared to putting a heavy lid on a pressure cooker and not releasing the steam-vents. It leads to a major blow up!

Sensible, effective parents of toddlers will work hard at developing their management skills – they will have realistic expectations and will understand that this little person needs to be guided and channeled. The most effective way to achieve this is to develop the skill of verbalising the underlying feeling while simultaneously limiting the unacceptable behaviour.

“ I can see that you are very angry – but we do not hurt people when we feel upset”

How else will this toddler ever learn how to label his own feelings? We have no trouble labelling objects for our toddlers. We happily label all the objects around us – yet have a problem labelling feelings. It is never too early to develop this communication skill – and is very rewarding when a little one suddenly says “ No. I am very cross”! The core of emotional intelligence is to be able to label our feelings. The toddler stage is the ideal starting point.

The issue is that allowing the feelings, does not mean allowing unacceptable behaviour, Feelings are always acceptable. Behaviour often is not.

Setting Limits

Toddlers need very firm, calm, consistent boundaries. They do not need parents who over-react, become over-punitive – have adult temper tantrums.

Setting limits for toddlers is very necessary – these need to be clear – but gentle and age appropriate. If a toddler has toys all over the lounge, the parent needs to make the point that the toys need to be put away before they may play outside. If they resist putting the toys away, they simply do not play outside. No shouting, no smacks, no threats – just firm, calm limit – setting.

The essence of toddler discipline is to understand that the rebellious behaviour is normal for this age and stage, and that the toddler needs calm and consistent containment which will gradually help her develop into a socially acceptable pre-schooler.

Discipline and punishment are not synonymous. Discipline derives from the word “disciple” - someone who guides, teaches and socializes. Effective discipline means learning from the consequences of choices. Right from this “Stage of First Adolescence” it is essential that parents see that this little person can be guided and socialized without harsh, punitive methods.

It is a challenge – but it is essential if we want to raise happy, confident, self-disciplined children in this 21st century.

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