

A DIFFERENT WAY TO LOOK AT THE TERRIBLE TWOS

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By Amanda Lafferty, Registered Psychologist.

“Is ‘no’ your favorite word?” That is a question I jokingly ask my two-year-old, who frequently answers “nnno!” As parents, we often dread the terrible twos, and it often evokes shame (I’m a bad parent) in us when our children throw a tantrum in public or in situations where we feel our parenting is being judged. We live in a society that demands perfection and instant gratification. The

terrible twos bring many struggles, as children often present as grandiose, omnipotent, with a strong sense of entitlement (“You must attend to my needs, but I do not need to listen to you”), and have magical thinking.

Sandy Hotchkiss, LCSW, states that every child is psychologically hardwired to become a narcissist. How does this

look in the real world? A toddler darts off bravely on a solo journey in a store, hitting or flying into a rage when their way is not accepted. This behaviour demands a parenting response to help move out of this stage. How we respond to these early moments is important to the development of the child’s sense of self and their ability to be compassionate, respectful adults.

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So, why are children so enraged when they hear the word “no”? As babies, their survival is determined by their primary caretaker caregiving. Tantrums are a survival skill. The child sees the mother as an extension of him or herself – a means of getting needs met. Around the age of two, the child is capable of more independence but can still remember the good old days. Really, wouldn't it be great to be the center of attention, with everyone catering to your needs at the drop of a hat?

Unfortunately, life does not work that way, and self-centeredness is a barrier to meaningful connection in our adult lives. Therefore, as parents, we need to go through these tough moments with our children and help them develop a separate sense self (“I am me, and you are you”) and healthy boundaries (“There is a space between us”). A child's brain needs practice in learning how to manage his or her own feelings, toning down distressing and intense feelings without assistance from others.

Each time a child has a tantrum is a learning opportunity. An attuned caregiver will help tone down a distressed child, but also know when to permit the extra bit of tension that allows the child to work through the feeling, thereby developing more emotional tolerance. Compassion is needed towards the child; as the child's brain is learning how to handle really big feelings without acting on them or having someone else calm them down.

Parenting is an imperfect process. In these tough moments with our little ones, we need to not give in to their rages or, alternatively, provide shaming messages (bad girl) to control them. Developing a healthy sense of self is knowing your needs, but realizing they are no more important than anybody else's. The choices we make and how we use our bodies and words are important lessons at this stage – hands are not for hitting, and words are not for hurting!

Our society provides unrealistic expectations of who we are supposed to be and how we are supposed to live. I believe that we often neglect to teach our children that suffering and imperfection are a part of the shared human experience. This lesson begins at the terrible twos. Remember, children are our most valuable resource.

I will leave you with some of my favorite lines from Brené Brown's “Wholehearted Parenting Manifesto”:

Together we will cry and face fear and grief. I will want to take away your pain, but instead I will sit with you and teach you how to feel it. . . . I will not teach or love or show you anything perfectly, but I will let you see me, and I will always hold the sacred gift of seeing you. Truly, deeply seeing you.