

Setting Limits With Toddlers – The Choices They Can't Make

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‘Respect’ is vital to parenting, but the word can confuse us, especially when it comes to setting limits with toddlers.

Children need lots of opportunities to be autonomous and have their choices respected. At the same time, they also need to know they’re not in charge, and we demonstrate that through our confident, decisive, gentle leadership. It can be tricky figuring out how to balance these seemingly opposing needs. How do we know when our children should choose and when they need *us* to?

If our toddlers could let us know when we are giving them too much freedom and causing them to feel uncomfortably powerful, they probably wouldn't...at least, not verbally. But these uneasy feelings are usually expressed through our toddlers' behavior as they become more resistant, whiny, distracted or clingy, or continue to test until we give them the help they need. Meaning, until we make a choice *for* them.

It might seem ironic (and unfair!) that giving our children freedom to choose can cause them to test our boundaries even more, but there we are.

Is this the thanks we get?

Two year olds aren't terrible — they're torn. As much as they appear to want to be in charge, the reality of that power is frightening and can severely undermine their sense of security.

Most of the choices toddlers can't comfortably make are about **transitions**.

This makes sense. Toddlers are already in the middle of a massive transition, growing and changing at a dizzying pace. Even the most minor transitions mean giving up the temporary balance they've managed to attain and finding their footing in a new situation. And when we give toddlers more than one brief choice during times of transition, we invite them to dig their heels in.

Here's an example...

Your two year old has been invited to a party and suddenly, mysteriously puts on the brakes as you approach the host's door. "No want to!" he whines.

You're thrown, or perhaps you've begun to expect this kind of behavior. "Well, what's the hurry?" you say to yourself. "After all, we're only here for my boy to have a good time. I don't want him to be upset."

So you wait with your child while he wanders around the front yard. You wait, wait and wait some more for your child to tell you he's ready. You certainly don't want to enter your friend's house carrying a screaming child. And this should be his choice, right? But because you are human, you're losing patience and getting annoyed (which is usually a sign that you need to set a limit). You try coaxing him with delectable descriptions of balloons, games, and yummy cake, all of which you know he adores. Still, he refuses.

Should you...

- a. Keep waiting, coaxing and getting more peeved
- b. Go back home
- c. Let him know it's time to go in, carry him inside and face his possibly explosive negative reaction.
- d. Give him the choice of going in now or in three minutes (or perhaps the choice of walking or being carried) and then follow through with c.

As you might have guessed, I recommend d. Once you're inside I'd **allow the child to choose** to stay on your lap for as long as he wishes or participate in the party, and be prepared to possibly repeat d. when it's time to leave (the joy!).

When we project calm, our children usually release their upset feelings quickly and feel free to move on.

Which reminds me of a parenting rule of thumb: **Fear (or even slight reticence) about upsetting, disappointing or angering our children will cloud our vision and negatively affect our judgment.**

The parents I know who have the most difficulty taking decisive action (even when they understand intellectually how much their children need it) are gentle, sensitive, and sometimes over-identify with their children's feelings. (Ahem, do I seem to know this type well?)

[Magda Gerber](#) warned, *"A parent's ambivalence, guilt feelings, and areas of confusion in his or her role will be picked up and used amazingly fast by young children. They seem to have a sixth sense for it. Any ambivalence from a parent will produce a nagging response."*

Is this what we want for our children? Absolutely not. Our kids are going to resist our agendas, [explode](#) and meltdown on us regularly. *That* is the freedom they need most. So, our job is to be a solid leader who can remain calm and empathetic in the face of our child's storms, and not waver, get angry or pitying, or take his or her feelings personally.

"It's easier to say, "Yes, okay, have your own way." But then what has been accomplished?" – Magda Gerber

Here are some other instances when I believe children need us to gently and firmly overrule their choices and follow through...

Hurting themselves or others is an obvious one. Sometimes we can offer the child the choice to hit or kick something safe, stomp their feet, or do something else to encourage them to safely get their feelings out. [Always acknowledge the feelings](#), no matter how overly dramatic or inappropriate they might seem.

Repetitively taking toys is [usually a sign that the child is asking for help](#) with boundaries and needs to be gently stopped.

Car seats are a [common source of struggle](#) for parents. I don't believe that children feel comfortable choosing when (or if) they should get into the car seat. They *can* choose to get into the seat themselves or be helped.

Choosing clothing should be the child's prerogative within reason. But I don't believe in allowing children to go out in uncomfortable, revealing or otherwise inappropriate clothing. For me, this is neglect, not respect.

Leaving our child to go wherever we need to go must be non-negotiable. Again, always acknowledge the child's feelings, assure her you'll be back and then [separate with calm conviction](#). It is torturous for a child to be in limbo attempting to keep us there longer while we waver.

If our children aren't getting the clear, consistent boundaries they need in one of these areas, their general sense of comfort and security can be diminished, which often causes them to [test boundaries in other areas](#) as well.

Navigating this [delicate balance between freedom and boundaries](#) is never easy (especially for those of us who aim to please), but these endless hard choices we make each day with our toddlers are a sure sign of our love. Deep down our children know that...and how much they need it.