Sherman, age 2, grabs the red bucket and begins shoveling sand into it. Jojo, the previous “owner” of the bucket, shouts: “Mine! My bucket!” When words don’t get his bucket back, Jojo grabs for the bucket, but Sherman pulls it away and jumps out of the sand box. Jojo follows Sherman, pushes him, grabs the bucket, and returns to the sandbox. When Sherman approaches the sandbox once more, Jojo carefully guards his bucket, wrapping his arm around it and watching Sherman closely. Their parents, who had watched the drama unfold, walk across the playground and recite the “use your words” speech for what feels like the millionth time.

The period between 18 months and 3 years is an exciting time. Toddlers are becoming aware that they are separate individuals from their parents and the other important people in their world. This means that they are eager to assert themselves, communicate their likes and dislikes, and act independently (as much as they can!). At the same time, they still have limited self-control and are just beginning to learn important skills like waiting, sharing, and turn-taking.

As toddlers are also just beginning to use words to communicate, they rely heavily on their actions to “tell” us what they are thinking and feeling. When a toddler wants a toy, he may take your hand, walk you to the toy shelf, and point to the one he wants, essentially “saying” with his gestures, “Daddy, I want to play with that toy. Please get it for me.” When he is angry, frustrated, tired, or overwhelmed, he may use actions such as hitting, pushing, slapping, grabbing, kicking, or biting to tell you: “I’m mad!” “You’re too close to me, get away!” “I’m on overdrive and need a break.” or “I want what you have!”

Like most aspects of development, there is wide variation among children when it comes to acting out aggressively. Children who are intense and “big reactors” tend to have a more difficult time managing their emotions than children who are by nature more easygoing. Big reactors rely more heavily on using their actions to communicate their strong feelings.

As parents, one of your most important jobs is to help your toddler understand and communicate her feelings in acceptable, nonaggressive ways. This is no small task. It requires a lot of time and patience. But with your support and guidance, your child will learn to manage her strong emotions and reactions over the next months and years.

To Think About

No two children or families are alike. Thinking about the following questions can help you adapt and apply the information and strategies below to your unique child and family:
What kinds of situations usually lead to your child acting aggressively? Why do you think this is?

When your child acts in ways that seem aggressive, how do you typically react? Do you think this reaction is helpful to your child or not? Why?

What to Expect

Birth to 12 Months
Lacey, age 11 months, wants a bite of the cookie her mother is eating. Lacey kicks her feet, waves her arms, and makes lots of sounds. But her mother just gives her another spoonful of squash. Lacey swings her arms and knocks the spoon out of her mother's hand. Squash on the wall! Lacey bangs her hands on the high chair and starts to cry.

One of the greatest challenges in dealing with aggressive behavior is that it can feel very hurtful to parents, both emotionally and physically. When your baby yanks on your nose and won’t let go, grabs at earrings, pulls hair, bites when breastfeeding, or bats his hand at you when you take away a forbidden object, it is perfectly natural to feel a flash of frustration or even anger. However, babies do not mean to hurt or upset their loved ones. They are simply exploring the world around them through their senses. They learn how the world works by biting, mouthing, grabbing, shaking and dropping, swatting, and seeing what happens as a result, which is usually a pretty big reaction.

12 to 24 Months
Justin, age 16 months, is having a great time with his father's cell phone. He presses the buttons and makes all kinds of pictures come up on the screen. When his father sees what Justin is doing, he grabs the phone out of his hand and says, “No way, buddy. This is not for kids.” Justin shouts back, “I want dat!” as he kicks his father with gusto. When his dad picks him up to calm him down, Justin kicks again with both feet.

Aggression (hitting, kicking, biting, etc.) usually peaks around age 2, a time when toddlers have very strong feelings but are not yet able to use language effectively to express themselves. Toddlers also don't have the self-control to stop themselves from acting on their feelings. They are just beginning to develop empathy—the ability to understand how others feel. So, they cannot yet say, “Mommy, I am mad that Zachary grabbed my favorite doll. But I know he just wants to play with me. So how about I offer him a different doll to play with?” Instead, your toddler may bop Zachary on the head with a toy truck.
A Note on Biting

To see in-depth information on biting, a common behavior at this age, click here. (insert url: http://www.zerotothree.org/site/PageServer?pagename=ter_key_social_biting

24 to 36 Months
Bella, age 30 months, is having a difficult time saying good-bye to her mom at child care. As her mother starts to leave, Bella reaches out for her, sobbing, “Don’t go, Mommy!” Chandra, Bella’s friend, comes over to try and comfort Bella. Bella surprises her by roughly pushing her arm away and running to her cubby. Bella sits curled up under her coat hook, crying. When Talisa, one of the teachers, approaches Bella to see if she wants to read a story, Bella hits her. Talisa remains calm, holds Bella close, and tells her she knows Bella is sad that her mommy left and that it’s okay to be sad, but hitting is not okay. She then helps Bella get involved in an activity with her friends.

Aggressive acts, such as hitting a parent, often emerge when toddlers are overwhelmed by a distressing situation or by difficult feelings like anger or jealousy. These moments can be extremely challenging for parents because they are hurtful. Parents often expect that as their older toddlers become more and more verbal and advanced in their thinking skills, they are capable of more self-control than they really are. This stage of development can be very confusing because while your 2½-year-old may be able to tell you what the rule is, she still does not have the impulse control to stop herself from doing something she desires. At this age, emotions still trump thinking skills almost every time.

The bottom line is that when a toddler is aggressive, it is an important sign that he is out of control and needs help to calm down before any teaching or learning can take place. Staying calm yourself is the best response as it helps your child calm down more quickly. Read below for ways to handle aggression in your young child.

What You Can Do

Step 1: Observe and Learn

Thinking through the following questions can help you see patterns and figure out what the underlying reason for your child’s behavior might be. You can use this information to decide the best way to respond.

What’s going on in your child’s world?
- Where is the behavior happening? Home? Child care? Shopping mall? Grandma’s apartment? Or is it happening in all/most of the settings your child is in?
- If it is only happening in one setting, could there be something about that environment (i.e., too crowded, bright, overwhelming) that is triggering the behavior?
- Is the behavior directed toward one specific person or a small group of people? Or, is the behavior directed, at times, to anyone in the child’s circle?
- When does the behavior usually happen? For example, right before naptime when your child is tired? At times of transition, such as going from one activity to another? These kinds of stressors are common triggers for aggressive behavior.
- What happened right before your child’s challenging behavior? For example, had you just announced it was time to stop playing and get in the car? Had another child just taken a toy out of his hands?
- Has there been a recent change in your child’s world that is making her feel upset, out of control, sad, or perhaps less safe and secure overall? Events like switching rooms at child care, moving homes, a new baby, or the loss of a pet can cause make your child feel insecure and therefore less able to control her impulses.

Other important factors to consider:

- Developmental stage. Is the behavior typical for your child’s age/stage? For example, some hitting and biting is normal for toddlers, but biting multiple times during the week would be more of a concern.
- Child’s temperament. Could the behavior be explained, in part, by your child’s way of approaching the world? For example, a very intense, sensitive child may feel overwhelmed in settings where there is a lot of stimulation, such as free playtime at child care. He may bite as a way to cope—perhaps to keep people at a distance to protect himself. A slow-to-warm-up child may hit a parent when left with a new babysitter. Fear often gets expressed as anger in young children (not to mention many adults).
- Your own temperament and life experiences. Is this behavior particularly difficult for you? If so, why? Sometimes a parent’s own past experience—for example, having had parents with very strict rules about how to behave in a restaurant—influences her reactions to her child’s behavior. She might have a short “fuse” when dealing with her own squirmy child at the diner. Being aware of these kinds of connections helps you look at and respond to your child’s behavior more effectively, and in ways that are based on her age and stage of development and her individual approach to the world.
What’s it like for you?

- How do you handle your own feelings when your child acts out aggressively? Are you able to calm yourself before you respond?
- How effective do you feel you are in helping your child to manage his aggressive feelings? What works? What doesn’t work? Why? What do you feel your child is learning from the way you respond when he is aggressive?

Step 2: Responding in Sensitive and Effective Ways Based on Your Best Understanding of the Behavior

To head off aggressive behavior:

- **Think prevention.** Use what you know about your child to plan ahead. For example, if you know that she feels very shy when meeting new people, you may want to start flipping through the family photo album during the weeks before you attend a big family picnic so she can start to recognize extended family members. During playtime, you might have a pretend picnic with her Aunt Laila and Uncle Bert. You may want to pack your daughter’s “lovey” as well as a few of her favorite books to bring along.

  When you get to the event, help your relatives connect with your daughter by suggesting that they don’t rush in for a big hug, but wait for her to warm up first. Using these strategies is not “giving in” to your child. You are helping her manage what, for her, is a very challenging situation. This helps her learn how to cope when she encounters new people in a new setting, such as school.

- **Give advanced notice of an upcoming change.** “We will read one more book and then it’s time to get in the car to go home. Which book do you want to read?” (Giving choices can help children feel more in control and reduce aggression.)

- **Help your child understand his feelings and behavior.** This builds self-awareness and helps him learn to manage his feelings in positive ways. For example, you might say to an older toddler who has a difficult time moving between activities: “It’s hard for you to stop playing to get in the car to go to child care. Why don’t you pick out a favorite book to read on the way? Or we can play ‘I spy’ while we drive. Which do you want to do?” Over time this helps your child learn strategies to cope with situations that are challenging for him. With younger children, put words to their feelings and then redirect them. “You are mad daddy turned off the TV. But look at this cool ball and how it bounces.”
**Responding to aggression:**

As you review the strategies described below, keep in mind that their effectiveness may vary based on both the age and stage of development of your child and on his or her temperament. They are not offered as prescriptions, but ideas that can be adapted to meet the needs of your individual child and family.

- **Stay calm.** This is the essential first step. Try taking some deep breaths. You can even take your own “time out” for a minute or two to calm yourself. Staying in control makes it more likely that your child will calm down more quickly. When you get agitated, upset, and frustrated at your child’s tantrum, it often increases her distress. She needs you to be her rock when she is “losing it.”

- **Recognize your child’s feeling or goal.** Let your child know that you understand what he wants to do: “You want to play with the water, but you cannot spill the water from your sippy cup onto the floor.” Or, “You are really angry. You want to stay longer at the playground, but it is not okay to hit mommy. Hitting hurts.”

- **Use words and gestures to communicate your message.** Words alone may not be enough to get your toddler to stop an unacceptable activity. To help your child understand your message, use an authoritative, matter-of-fact (not angry or screaming) voice. At the same time, use a “stop” or “no-no” gesture along with your words. You might say, “No hitting, hitting hurts,” as you take her hand and hold it by her side, firmly but not angrily. Keep in mind, it takes many, many repetitions, hearing the words together with the actions, before the words alone are enough.

- **Offer alternatives.** Tell and show your child acceptable ways to reach his goal or channel his energy. If you interrupt your child’s behavior, but do not offer an acceptable alternative, the unacceptable behavior is more likely to continue. So for a little one who loves to dump his sippy cup and play with his drink, take him outside or put him in the bath where he can happily play with liquids. For a child who loves to hurl objects, make a game out of throwing soft balls into a basket or box.

- **Try a distraction.** If your child is highly agitated, try a distraction. This is an unpredictable response your child isn’t expecting, such as asking a child who is shouting angrily to join you in a game. Or just go to her and give her a big bear hug.

- **Suggest ways to manage strong emotions.** When your child is really angry, suggest that he jump up and down, hit the sofa cushions, rip paper, cuddle up in a cozy area for alone time, paint an angry picture, or try some other strategy that you feel is appropriate. What’s important is to teach
your child that there are many ways to express his feelings in healthy, non-hurtful ways, and to help him practice these strategies regularly.

- **Have your child take a break.** Some children actually calm down much more quickly when given the chance to be by themselves in a safe, quiet place. This is not punishment. It is an important strategy to help children learn to soothe themselves and regain control—a critical life skill. Think of this safe, quiet space as a kind of “cozy corner.” It might have some pillows, stuffed animals, books, and small, safe toys. Have your child help design it with you. The more she feels she has a role in it, the more likely she will accept using it. When your child does pull herself together, it is very important that you acknowledge this big step by telling her what a good job she did calming herself down.

**To help an older toddler (2 ½ to 3 years), who is beginning to understand logic and rational thinking, learn from his actions:**

- **Point out the consequences of your child’s behavior.** “After you hit Carrie, she started to cry. It hurt. She felt sad and mad. She didn’t want to play with you anymore and that made you sad too.”

- **Brainstorm better choice(s) your child could make next time.** “If Carrie takes the doll you’re playing with, what are some things you could do besides hit?” If your child doesn’t have any ideas (this is very normal), you can suggest some strategies such as helping her use her words, “That is my doll. Please give it back,” and then offering Carrie another doll.

Remind your child that she can always come to you for help. Once you offer a few ideas, he might be better able to think of some on his own. The ability to substitute an acceptable action for one that is not acceptable is a crucial part of developing self-control. It is also an important skill for functioning well in school and throughout life. Also keep in mind that the best timing for this brainstorming process may vary for different children. Some may benefit from thinking the problem through right after the incident, whereas others need more time to cool off and will be more open to this process at a later time.

**Tricks of the Trade: Ways to Minimize Misbehavior**

- **Be consistent.** Consistency with rules is key to helping children learn to make good choices. If every time a child throws a toy it gets taken away for a few minutes, she learns not to throw toys. But when the rules keep changing, it makes it difficult for young children to make good choices. If one day a tantrum doesn’t result in getting to stay longer at the park, but
the next day her protests get her four more trips down the slide, your child will be confused about what choice to make, “Well, making a fuss worked the other day so maybe I should try that strategy again.”

- **Avoid negotiation.** This is tough. We want to make sure our children feel heard. We want them to see us as open-minded, good listeners. We want to be flexible. But negotiating about family rules is a slippery slope. A child who can negotiate for extra cookies or a later bedtime will quickly learn that this is a very effective way to get these “fringe benefits.” Soon you will find yourself negotiating everything. Having consistent rules—about things like holding hands in a parking lot, sitting in a car seat, or brushing teeth—actually helps children feel safe and secure. They come to understand that there is structure, logic, and consistency in their world.

- **Give your child a chance to problem-solve before stepping in.** Whether it is finding the right place for the puzzle piece he is holding, or negotiating with a friend about who gets to swing on the swing first, let your child try to figure out a solution first before you step in to help. (When he does come to you to solve the problem, you might help him along by making some suggestions: “Blocks can be so frustrating! How about trying to put more blocks on the bottom so that your tower doesn’t fall down?”) You may be surprised to see how capable he is at managing conflict and dealing with the challenges he faces.

- **Give your child lots of positive feedback when she shows self-control.** Children want to please. When you respond positively to their behavior, you reinforce that behavior and also build their self-esteem. “You stomped your feet when you were mad rather than hitting. Great job!” Children who feel good about themselves are more likely to be well behaved. It is important to help children experience and understand the natural benefits of good behavior. For example, if they cooperate with teeth brushing, instead of protesting it, there is more time for an extra book at bedtime.

**When to Seek Help**

Some aggressive behavior is a typical part of early childhood development (see the introduction and the age-based sections above for more information). However, if a child’s aggression is interfering in his ability to interact with others in positive ways, in his ability to explore and learn, or, if you find that because of your child’s aggressive behavior you avoid having him play with other children or taking him to other activities, it can be very helpful to seek guidance from a child development professional.

Certain behaviors do warrant additional attention when they happen often and continue over time. Examples include when a child:
• Appears fearless or reckless, taking a “daredevil” approach to life. This approach often leads to breaking things or intrusive behavior (getting into other people’s space).
• Seems to crave high-intensity sensory stimuli. Sometimes children who need lots of “touch” to feel centered get this sensory input in unacceptable ways (hitting, shoving, pushing, etc.)
• Engages in unprovoked hitting; acts aggressively “out of the blue” or for no reason that you can see.
• Shows a preoccupation with aggressive themes in pretend play.
• Begins acting aggressively following a traumatic episode or major life change.

(Adapted from Diagnostic Classification: 0–3 Revised, ZERO TO THREE, 2005.)

Common Challenges With Aggressive Behavior

Biting while breastfeeding

I’ve been breastfeeding my 5-month-old since he was born, but he just got his second tooth and I’ve just gotten my second bite. Any ideas for what works in this situation? I want to keep breastfeeding as long as possible.

Ouch! Babies may begin to bite while nursing when they get their first teeth, usually between 4 and 6 months. What’s important to know is that babies don’t bite on purpose to be hurtful. They are still learning how to use their chompers and don’t fully understand what teeth can do.

The good news is that your baby can’t breastfeed and bite at the same time. It turns out that our natural reaction to being bitten on the breast (usually a fairly loud ouch!) tends to startle the baby and sends the message that using teeth while nursing is a no-no. The best response when your baby bites is to remove him from the breast (remember to slip your finger into his mouth to disengage him or it can really hurt!). This helps him understand that biting, while nursing, is not appropriate. You’re also beginning to teach him the cause and effect of his actions: If he bites while nursing, mom will remove the breast. You can also say firmly but not angrily, “Biting hurts.” Although your baby won’t understand your words, he will respond to your tone and over time will connect the words with your actions and come to understand their meaning. After you remove your breast and wait a few seconds, try again. If you continue with this strategy, over time he will connect your actions with his behavior and stop biting while nursing.

It’s also important to think about why your baby may be biting. Babies bite for a variety of reasons. It may be a sign that they are full, have lost their “latch,” or feel restless, playful, or even curious. Some babies also bite because they enjoy or even crave the sensation of biting.
To stop bites before they happen, observe your child while he is nursing and remove your breast after rhythmic sucking has stopped. Then move him to the other breast before he has a chance to get bored or tired—the “red alerts” for biting. If you think your baby falls into the category of those who crave the biting sensation, offer him objects that are safe for him to bite throughout the day. This may make it less likely that he will use you as a chew toy! (On the off chance that your baby does bite your breast and breaks the skin—which is very rare—do see a doctor. Human bites can easily be infected and can cause mastitis, a breast infection.)

Don’t worry that biting signals the end of breastfeeding. Most babies quickly learn not to bite and are able to continue with the close and comforting ritual of nursing for as long as they and their mothers would like.

Tormenting the family dog

Now that he’s crawling, my 7-month-old has been tormenting our dog. He pulls his ears and tail and tries to crawl on top of him. The dog seems okay with it, but I’m concerned he'll lose patience. What should I do?

Join the club. This is almost as common as 10-month-olds trying to stick their fingers into electrical outlets. Both stem from babies’ intense curiosity to learn all about their world. For better or worse, animals offer some of the most enticing fodder. They have many different textures for your child to explore. They are furry and cuddly. They are more responsive than most toys. They can also make children feel special and loved. This is a wonderful relationship your baby is developing that will help him one day learn to be responsible and care for another being.

Chances are that if your dog has been this tolerant so far, he will continue to be. Nonetheless, you certainly don’t want to take any chances. Therefore, it is very important that you be present and closely monitor the interaction between your baby and dog. Limit their face-to-face contact and be on the look out for any signs that your dog is getting irritated. In addition, teach your baby to touch your dog gently and not to pull on his body parts. At his age, this will require direct action—taking his hand and showing him how to gently pet the dog while saying, “Nice, gentle pats for doggie.” While right now he won’t understand the words, in just a few months he will begin to connect your words with your actions. He will understand what the word gentle means and will be better able to control how he interacts with the dog. This is important for helping your baby learn empathy and how to lovingly interact with others. It will also make it much less likely that your dog will rebel.
When kisses turn into bites

My 13-month-old has started biting me, and I don’t know what to do. He will give me a hug and bite my shoulder or will start to give me a kiss and bite my cheek. How can I teach him that biting hurts?

For young toddlers like yours, biting is normal and often a temporary phase that ends as children realize that biting is hurtful, develop better language skills to express their strong feelings, and learn other ways to cope with challenging situations. From what you describe, it sounds like your son just needs some help expressing his loving and excited feelings in a different way.

When he bites, with a firm voice and serious face, tell him, “Biting hurts! No biting. Gentle kisses only.” Although your child might not understand the words now, he soon will. Until then, your expression and tone of voice are powerful and clear communications. Let your son know you understand that he is just trying to show you how much he loves you, and demonstrate another way he can express himself, such as by kissing you with only his lips!

With some children, biting is more than a brief phase. Watching and reading your child’s cues can help you learn more about what situations lead to biting. When and where is he more likely to bite? Is it out of frustration, stress, fear, anger, or excitement? If your child tends to bite when he is overwhelmed or upset, for instance, notice when he is showing signs of stress and help calm him before he loses it. Validate his feelings, “It feels so bad when someone takes your toy.” Then give him a firm hug, which often helps children settle down. As he grows, you can teach him to put those feelings into words, and offer him alternate ways to work them out such as banging a xylophone, stomping his feet, or making a lion face and roaring.

To read more about biting, click here. (insert url: http://www.zerotothree.org/site/PageServer?pagename=ter_key_social_biting)

Managing aggression between toddler cousins

My sister’s son is the same age as mine, 16 months, and I want them to be good friends. The only problem is my nephew is a more aggressive than my son; he’ll run over and grab my son or snatch a toy out of his hand. Now my child is scared of his cousin and runs over to me when he sees him coming! How can I get them to get along?

Ah, the politics of family relationships; so challenging, even when it comes to the smallest members! These situations are best handled by open, respectful communication and collaboration between the adults—in this case, you and your sister. First, begin with the positive: Tell your sister how eager you are for your
kids to become good friends. Then, in a nonjudgmental way, share your observations with her. It's important not to sound like you're criticizing her or her son, or she may get defensive. You might tell her that you notice that your children have very different personalities and styles of communicating; your nephew is more assertive, whereas your son is on the shy side and gets more easily overwhelmed. Ask your sister for her ideas for helping them get along better given these differences.

When you're spending time together, model how you'd like your sister to respond to your nephew without disciplining him or making it seem like he's the bad one. (It's usually a recipe for disaster when one parent starts disciplining the other's child, unless there is a clear agreement that this is okay.) For example, when your nephew takes something from your son, playfully chase after him, and perhaps say something like, “Hey big guy, Justin was playing with that! Let's get something else for you.” Then help your nephew find something else to play with. This kind of approach, which addresses the behavior but doesn't make the child feel bad, has a better chance of getting the positive results you're looking for.

When your son runs to you for protection, it's important that you support him and validate his frustration or anger. But try not to say anything negative about your nephew. Your son is an expert observer, and he will look to you for cues as to how he should feel about his cousin. Try to sound excited and upbeat when you talk about your nephew.

Focus on problem solving by coaching your son about how to handle the situation. You might say something like, “Oh no, did Andrew take your toy? Let's go see if we can get it back. I bet we can figure this out together.” Then encourage him to use whatever communication skills he has at his age—such as his gestures and sounds—to let his cousin know he wants his toy. Next you can suggest that the three of you search together for a different toy for your nephew. As the kids get older, you can also teach them about taking turns by making a game out of it: Set a kitchen timer for 5 or 10 minutes and have the boys trade toys when the buzzer goes off.

With your support and your sister's cooperation, you will hopefully be able to turn this situation around and help your son learn some important coping and assertiveness skills to boot.

**Toddler’s hitting when frustrated**

*How do I respond to my 17-month-old who has started to swing at me with her hands when she doesn’t get her way?*
It ain’t easy being 17 months. You have really strong feelings but lack the ability to use words to clearly let others know what’s on your mind. How frustrating is that?

The fact is that learning to express oneself begins in the early years by using actions. Some are totally appropriate, like the 12-month-old who raises her arms up to show mom or dad that she wants to be picked up. Others can be distressing, like hitting, kicking, and biting. But they are all efforts on the part of the child to communicate. In this case, we can hypothesize that your child is mad that she is not getting something she wants. She can’t say, “Mom, I am so mad that you won’t let me have that fourth cookie!” The best way to respond to her lashing out at you is to hold onto her arm firmly, but not angrily or roughly, and tell her, “No hitting. Hitting hurts. I know you are mad that [fill in the blank]. You don’t like it when . . . . But you cannot hit.” It is important to be clear and firm in your tone but not angry. The less emotional you are the more clear and effective you will be.

Keep in mind that your child is not purposefully misbehaving. There is no need for punishment. This is about teaching rules and limits. These moments are also important opportunities to teach your child about feelings. (Remember, feelings are not the problem, it’s what she does with the feelings that can get her into trouble.) Your job is to help your child learn to know what she feels and to make good decisions about how to deal with those feelings in acceptable ways. Putting her feelings into words is a key first step. Even though she won’t fully understand what you are saying, she will pick up on your empathic tone. This provides a good model for how to cope with feelings as she grows.

After you have stopped her behavior and validated her feelings, you can show your daughter alternative ways of expressing herself that are acceptable to you. Some parents suggest children shout in the air as loud as they can or make growling noises to get their feelings out. Others suggest stomping feet, scribbling with a crayon, ripping newspaper, or hitting an object that is safe and can’t be hurt—such as a pillow. It is up to you to decide what is okay. The bottom line is that you acknowledge your child’s feelings and help her learn healthy, nondestructive ways to express them.

Keep in mind that learning self-control is a process. Your toddler will not be able to stop her impulses and understand the consequences of her actions until she gets closer to 3. In fact, she’ll keep working on these skills through the teen years. So your daughter will need your consistent, patient support for a while yet. Being able to manage and cope with strong feelings is a critical skill for lifelong success, so don’t fear these moments. Instead, see them as great opportunities for teaching your child an essential life skill.
Toddler’s grabbing from others

My 19-month-old daughter and I go to a playgroup once a week. Last week my daughter grabbed a car out of her friend’s hands. Her friend started to cry. When I made my daughter give the car back, she started to cry. It was a mess. How can you get little kids to share?

Toddlers are a determined group who know what they want and work hard to get it. Unfortunately, they don’t yet have the words they need to express their strong feelings, so they communicate largely through actions. Although children this age are starting to understand that others have feelings that can be different from theirs, they are still driven by their own impulses, “I want that car and I want it now!” Most children don’t really learn to share consistently until they’re at least 2½ to 3 years old and have greater self-control.

However, you don’t have to nor should you wait until your child is 2 to start helping her learn this important skill. When you are playing, show her how to take turns: She adds a block, then you add one. At cleanup time, take turns putting the toys back on the shelf. At bedtime, alternate who gets to flip the pages. Through these interactions, your daughter will experience sharing as part of a positive, loving relationship that sets the stage for turn-taking in other relationships.

Here are some strategies to try to help your daughter and her friends practice sharing:

- Before a friend comes over, let your child put away a few toys that are special and that she does not have to share.
- Provide several of the same kinds of toys so there’s enough for everyone.
- Comment when the children are playing cooperatively, “I like how you gave Ellie the doll she wanted.”
- Let them know you understand how difficult it is to share. Tell your daughter and her friends that grabbing is not okay and offer alternatives such as helping them choose another toy while they wait their turn.
- Provide activities that don’t necessarily require sharing—like art projects or playing with water or sand. Playing with open-ended materials is calming and gives children a break from the stress of sharing.
- Keep the turns short and use a timer to help children know when their turn will come. (Often kids become so amused by the idea of the timer that they forget about the fight over the toy.)
- As they grow, include the children in the problem solving. When your daughter and a friend are having trouble sharing, ask for their ideas on a fair resolution.
Toddler challenges in the grocery store

It is impossible to grocery shop with my 22-month-old. She wants to grab for everything and struggles to get out of the cart . . . help!! What can I do?

One option is to simply leave her home. But for most of us, this is not possible. Fortunately, the grocery store can be a very rich learning experience for your child. That’s why in many children’s museums, preschool classrooms, and child care centers you see a pretend grocery store as one of the learning centers.

Start with some preventative measures you can take to minimize the need for lots of “No!”s. First, try to do your bigger shopping trips without her, if possible. While you’re out loading up on groceries, she can have special, one-on-one time with your partner, grandparents, or other family or close friends. Or you can share babysitting with a friend who has children the same age as yours. You can watch her kids while she does errands, and vice versa.

Have your child choose one or two toys or books she can take with her to distract her while you shop. Talk with her about what she’s “reading” or doing while you shop.

Bring a few healthy snacks. Just like for us adults, it is difficult for children to resist wanting to eat all the yummy food staring at them aisle after aisle. Or, you can let her choose one item from the shelves that doesn’t have to be washed or weighed that she can eat, such as crackers or cheese sticks, while shopping.

Here are some strategies you can use to make grocery shopping fun for your child (while also helping her learn as you go):

- When she’s reaching out to grab, if it’s something she can’t damage (like a box of rice), hand it to her. Talk to her about what it is, what it’s used for, the color of the box, and so on.
- Engage her in counting the number of potatoes, cucumbers, and apples that you are picking and hold the bag while she puts them in. The more you actively include her, the more she will learn and the less she will likely fuss.
- Talk to her about all the colors you see and ask her what colors she recognizes. Teach her about big and small as you compare the size of the oranges or apples. She can learn about high and low, and up and down, as you point out where different items are on the shelves.
- If you are up for it, let your child out of the cart and get her engaged in some games. (If she’s having fun, she is less likely to run wild!) Ask her to find something on the shelf that you have at home. Have her find her favorite cereal or the one with the sun on the box. See if she can find your
brand of milk. These are great ways to build memory skills and to build self-confidence as she finds the right object.

- Have her help you place the items on the conveyer belt, with lots of supervision of course. Count the items together.
- Take every opportunity to comment on how helpful she is being. Kids love to contribute. It makes them feel important and builds self-esteem.

Shopping this way does require a lot of energy and patience, and may make your trip to the store longer. But keep in mind that when children learn concepts through everyday, hands-on experiences, they are able to understand the concepts more easily and the learning is more meaningful.

**Two-year-old’s hitting when angry**

My 2-year-old is pretty physical—he will slap his sister if he gets angry or grab toys out of her hands. I never saw this behavior in my daughter (who's now 5). How should I handle it?

That's the beauty, and challenge, of having multiple children—no two are the same. The behavior you describe is actually very common at this age, especially for children who are feisty and physical like your son. Why? Two-year-olds do not yet have the impulse control necessary to stop themselves from going for something they desire, even if they have been told countless times to “be gentle” or “take turns.” In addition, most don’t yet have the language skills to verbally express their thoughts and feelings, so their primary means of communication is still through their actions. The fact that your son is physical means he is also more likely to use his body to express himself.

The good news is there is a lot you can do to help your son learn to communicate and meet his needs without being hurtful to others:

- **Practice prevention.** When you see your son in a situation in which he is likely to feel angry or frustrated, try to head it off. If he is eyeing a toy your daughter is playing with, acknowledge that he might like to play with that toy too, but that he has to wait his turn. Then help him choose another toy.

- **Validate his feelings.** Get down on your child’s eye level and firmly, but not angrily, let him know, “It’s okay to get angry. Everyone gets angry.” Try your best to show as little emotion as possible. The more intense your reaction, the more intensely he is likely to respond.

- **Set the limit.** “It’s not okay to hit or grab. It is a rule in our family that we can’t hurt others.” Help him give the toy back and choose another one.

- **Suggest other ways to express anger** that are acceptable to you. He might draw out his anger with a red crayon, stomp his feet as hard as he
can, or bang on a pillow. The idea is to teach him how to express anger and frustration in ways that are not hurtful to himself or others.

- **Practice sharing.** Get a kitchen or other timer and set it for the amount of time each child has to wait his or her turn. This can be a very useful tool for helping children learn to wait as it gives them a more tangible sense of time passing.

The combination of your son developing more language and your consistent limits and guidance will help him learn to manage his emotions and cope with the challenge of sharing as he grows.

**Worries about toddler head banging**

*When my 2-year-old gets really angry and has a tantrum, she will bump her head against the wall. This is really upsetting to us, and we usually end up just giving in and letting her have her way because we don't want her to hurt herself. I'm worried we're setting a bad precedent.*

Who could blame you for giving in? It is very upsetting to see your child hurt herself. Reactions like this make limit setting even more difficult. But from your daughter’s point of view, her behavior works, which makes it unlikely she will give it up. So the challenge is to find a way not to reward the behavior.

First, it is important to note that pediatricians assert that 2-year-olds cannot bump their heads with enough force to cause them any harm, unless they are bumping against sharp surfaces like the edge of the table or have a medical condition that makes them more vulnerable (e.g., bleeding disorder). So, if you feel assured that your daughter is not going to hurt herself, you can ignore the behavior. For some children, once they discover that a behavior does not get the reaction they were seeking, especially a behavior that hurts, they stop. Other children—on the basis of their temperament and intensity level—may just hit their head harder and longer than you are comfortable with. In this case, you might want to find a safe way for them to continue the behavior (e.g., putting a pillow under their head or move them to a carpeted area), then just ignore it.

It’s also critical to acknowledge your daughter’s feelings. Helping her recognize when she is angry is the first step in teaching her how to manage these feelings. For example, if she throws a tantrum because you are setting a limit about TV watching, you might say, “I know you are really mad that you can’t watch another video. It’s okay to feel mad. But that’s the rule. When you are done being mad, we can draw together.” Giving her an image of a fun activity she can do next can help focus and calm her down.

Then go about your business while staying close to keep an eye on her. (You might leave her “lovey” or another favorite object next to her while she tantrums
so it is there if/when she needs it to soothe herself.) When she does calm down, give her lots of credit for doing such a good job pulling herself together. Soothing herself is a very important life skill that you help her learn by giving her the chance to calm down on her own. After you consistently respond in this way a few times, she will likely give up the head bumping simply because it isn’t getting her what she wants.

Later, during a calm moment in your day, you might also talk with your daughter about the fact that everyone gets angry and that feeling angry is okay. Parents are often afraid of their children’s anger, which can lead to squelching those feelings. Instead, look at these events as “teachable moments” for you to help your daughter learn how to manage difficult feelings in healthy ways.

**Two-year-old’s hitting themselves when upset**

*Ever since my second son was born, my older son (29 months) has started hitting himself when he gets mad or frustrated. It breaks my heart to see him do this, and I don’t understand it. He could not be kinder or more loving to his brother, so I'm not sure what is going on. Is this a sibling rivalry thing or is there something more serious happening?*

Who could blame you? We spend so much time trying to protect our kids that when we see them actually hurt themselves it’s very upsetting.

Children hit or hurt themselves for a range of reasons. It can be a way to vent frustration or to get attention. Some children hit themselves when they feel they have done something wrong and feel ashamed. Figuring out what the cause of the self-hitting is important.

As the behavior began after your baby was born, it may be related to his promotion to “big brother.” Having a new sibling is a major life change. When a baby arrives, older children often wonder, “Will mommy and daddy still love and take care of me? What else will change in my world?” Although your son is loving to his brother, it is likely that he harbors some negative emotions like anger and jealousy. Those feelings—so difficult to put into words for a toddler—are totally expectable and normal and may be the root of the self-hitting. Your son may sense that having negative feelings about his brother is somehow “wrong” or “bad” and hits himself for feeling this way. If you think this may be true for your son, you can help him by letting him know that he can express any emotions with you—whether they’re happy or angry or sad. Validate how difficult it is to have a new baby in the house.

If you do sense that he may be angry or jealous, empathize while also setting limits, “I know you don’t like it when [baby’s name] takes your toys or takes up mommy and daddy’s time. It’s okay to feel angry, but it’s not okay to [be too
rough, scream, etc.] You can tell me when you feel that way and then I can help you.” This lets him know his feelings are normal and understandable, not shameful, and teaches him to express them in acceptable ways. This will help him understand that he doesn't have to punish himself for these emotions. As hard as this is, know that teaching your son to deal with difficult feelings is a gift you give him.

If this behavior does not decrease as your older son adapts to having a new sibling over the upcoming months, it would be helpful to consult a child development specialist who can assess whether some intervention is necessary to help him cope better.

**Older toddler being aggressive toward peers**

**My 2½ year-old's child care teacher has been telling me that my son hits and is very aggressive with the other kids. He's not talking very much yet, so it's hard for me to know what is going on with him and to discipline him. What can I do?**

Aggressive behavior in toddlers is not uncommon. They have strong feelings that they express in many different ways, often through action. Aggression can be the result of many different things—frustration that they can't do or have everything they want, difficulty managing strong emotions, recent changes in their lives (new baby, parent on a business trip)—and countless other reasons. The key to effectively addressing the behavior is understanding why your child is feeling angry and “acting out” at this time.

One hypothesis, based on your description of your child, is that his behavior is connected to his language development. By age 2½, most children have a growing vocabulary and can string several words together, such as, “I want truck!” to communicate what they are thinking and feeling. Sometimes children this age don't have the words, but are able to communicate through gestures (such as pointing) and vocalizations or single words (such as, “Mine!”) that let others know what they want.

Children who are limited in their ability to communicate with words often use actions to express themselves, like hitting the child who has the truck they want. In addition, when a child is unable to let others know what he needs, that in itself can be frustrating and lead to aggressive behavior. The classroom environment can also be a factor. For example, sufficient open space, having many of the same toys, and teacher availability are critical for helping a child learn to wait, use his words, and manage frustration. Spending time in the classroom to see the situation from your son’s point of view may help you determine the next best course of action.
If you are concerned about his language development, you may want to consider seeking an assessment by a speech therapist who can help determine whether your son’s behavior is related to a delay in language development. You can get referrals to a speech therapist from your child’s health care provider or from a local child development center. Typically, a speech therapist will assess a child through play and other activities. You should be an important part of this process—sharing your observations of and ideas about your child (indeed, you know him best)—and be present in the actual session(s). These assessments can be very useful in identifying if your son needs help in developing language and for making a plan to help him learn good communication skills that will hopefully lead to his learning to “use his words” to express his anger in nonaggressive ways.

**Limit setting with older toddlers**

Sometimes, when I try to explain to my 35-month-old the reason why we have certain rules (like no touching the stereo, or why we can’t go to the park right now), she seems to understand and accept it. Other times, she just throws a tantrum. What should I expect from her regarding understanding limits?

Between approximately 2½ and 3 years, children begin to understand the logical connection between ideas—the why of things—which is the reason they start to ask "Why?" about almost everything. It is a major milestone in their overall development and in their understanding of how the world works.

However, this stage can also be very confusing and exasperating for parents, as older toddlers’ grasp of logic is still pretty shaky. One minute they seem very reasonable and wise and the next act totally irrational. This is coupled with the fact that children this age are not in full control of their strong emotions that can interfere with, and often trump, their ability to act as rational beings.

At this point, it is best to explain the rule matter of factly and to be consistent in the follow through. If your child throws a tantrum, validate her unhappiness/anger/frustration but don’t give in, as this will just make the tantrum a successful tool for her. It will also confuse her about what the rules really are. When your actions match your words, she will learn the rules much more quickly.

These interactions help set the stage for the negotiations she will try to engage you in from here forward. Just wait for the déjà vu you’ll feel in 12 years when you try to explain curfews. Until then, bear with your passionate 3-year-old, and rest assured that understanding logical connections and family rules is a skill that gradually unfolds over the next few years.
Writers:
Rebecca Parlakian and Claire Lerner, L.C.S.W, ZERO TO THREE

Contributors:
Margaret Briggs-Gowan, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor
Department of Psychiatry
University of Connecticut Health Center

Amy Hunter
ZERO TO THREE