



by Karen Stephens

Two Year Olds: In Search of Identity and Independence

I have a battle-weary friend who's living through her two-year-old son's defiant stage. His behavior is typical. His moods frequently fluctuate between terrific and trying. (These days the scale is tipped steeply toward trying . . .)

Her child is negative. She says, "Let's go," he says "Not now!" She says, "Yes," he says, "NO!" She coos, "Good morning," he declares, "Go away!" You get the picture?

Yes, she knows this is normal. And yes, she's heard the two year olds' rap sheet: stubborn, volatile, unreasonable, dogmatic, and exasperating. Despite the warnings, she asks why the road to age three has to be so rocky.

The answer is rooted in basic human development. Infants are born completely vulnerable and therefore dependent on parents. Think about it. Kids need parents for food, mobility, emotional warmth, and social interactions. Because of that dependence, infants perceive themselves as extensions of parents rather than separate, individual entities.

And by the way, the same holds true for parents. Parents often say, "We got our shots today," when actually only the child received immunizations. If parents can't separate "me" from "you," think how hard it is for kids!

Two year olds are at a turning point in life. Either they remain immature and dependent, or they embark on the road toward separation and independence. There's no way around it. To become mentally healthy adults, toddlers must distinguish themselves from others, but especially from mom and dad. Therefore, children rarely challenge others as much as they do their parents. Young parents have to endure comments like this: "Well, he's just a little angel with me. You walk into the room and I don't know what comes over him." (That doesn't sound very supportive, does it?)

The hard part to swallow is that it's true; but it doesn't mean your child is abnormal, and it doesn't mean you're a terrible parent. It makes sense that a child will be a more argumentative and contrary with parents. How can he be his own person if he doesn't try out being different from mom and dad? It's different with caregivers, grandparents, and family friends because kids already feel a separate identity from them. So, ironic as it sounds, kids typically rebel against those to whom they feel closest — mom and dad. (Lucky you, huh?)

In their struggle for autonomy, twos are eager to assert a mind of their own, to have their own say. They yearn to be individuals, not just clones of their parents. It's a great step toward self esteem! So while the terrible twos may not feel like cause for celebration, it really is a sign of psychological growth and personality development.

Certainly, the struggle for independence begins before the age of two. Parents trigger separation when they wean children from breastfeeding and when they encourage children to crawl and walk. But toddlers' steps toward independence

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have a very different feel. Why? Because the child initiates — forces — the separation, not the parent. The child has a burning desire to be her own person, and that's why all the power struggles and acts of defiance take place. When children siren their individuality, they're giving us notice that they are growing up and, in some ways, away from us. We want to say, "Hey, slow down, don't grow up so fast!" We miss the cuddly little pumpkin who used to hang on our every word and treated us like superheroes. In a very dismissive way, two year olds remove us from our pedestal. What a jolt to the ego! We feel deflated because we're no longer in sole control of the balance of power between parent and child.

There are many ways twos force separation. They try to be everything we're not, and refuse to do anything we want them to do. They say *no* to our *yes*, and *yes* to our *no*. They really like to make parents look ineffectual in front of grandparents. (I know it's not ethical, but it takes time for kids to develop that trait, too.)

Life is tumultuous for twos. They intensely feel frustration and anger. They are just learning to use language to express strong feelings, so they reveal them through their actions. Parents see a surge in annoying, exasperating, and confusing behaviors, such as crying, temper tantrums, and biting.

How can parents make the road through toddlerhood less bumpy for kids — and for themselves? Encourage and allow as much independence as possible. Encourage developmentally appropriate decision-making; it builds character. (After all, it takes lots of practice to responsibly handle independence.)

Unfortunately, some parents get so exhausted from power struggles that they give up and hand over inappropriate decisions to children. Kids end up calling all the shots. They whine until they get Twinkies for supper; wail until bedtime becomes a three hour ordeal; and scream in stores until you break down and buy them the candy.

It's times like those that parents have to be especially strong, otherwise they abdicate parental responsibility. What's wrong with that? First, it conveys an uncaring attitude, leading children to feel unloved and insecure. Second, it gives kids a false sense of superiority. Third, it's lousy role modeling.

If children are to become autonomous and competent adults, they must develop a clear sense of self. The foundation is laid during their toddler years. Only then can children develop traits such as self-motivation, pride, self-respect, and accountability.

The search for identity is a recurrent theme throughout life. But I'll give you fair warning; expect your child's next critical crescendo during adolescence. Uh ohhhhhh . . .

Books for Inquiring Minds

- *Toddlers and Parents: A Declaration of Independence* (revised edition) by T. Berry Brazelton, MD (New York: Dell Publishing, 1989).
- *Touchpoints: Your child's emotional and behavioral development* by T. Berry Brazelton, MD (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley Publishing, 1992).
- *Your Two Year Old: Terrible or Tender* (revised edition) by Louise Bates Ames (New York: Dell Publishing, 1997).
- *The Emotional Life of the Toddler* by Alicia Lieberman (New York: Touchstone Publishing, 1995).
- *Parenting Your Toddler: The Expert's Guide to the Tough and Tender Years* by Kate Ballen (Cambridge, MA: Perseus Publishing, 1995).
- *What to Expect: The Toddler Years* by Arlen Eisenberg, et.al. (New York: Workman Publishing, 1996).

About the Author — Karen Stephens is director of Illinois State University Child Care Center and instructor in child development for the ISU Family and Consumer Sciences Department. For nine years she wrote a weekly parenting column in her local newspaper. Karen has authored early care and education books and is a frequent contributor to *Exchange*.