

Cherubs Preschool
Information Sheet – Wilful Behaviour

Wilful Behaviour: Why it happens and what to do about it



Why 2-year-olds disobey their parents

What a day: Your 2-year-old starts the morning by screaming, "No, me do it!" when you pour the milk on their cereal and then refuses to put away any of the toys they have taken out to play with.

Later, when you've had about all you can take, your child has a full-fledged tantrum because they happen to be playing with their friends when you arrive to pick them up from preschool or nursery. Is this little one trying to drive you nuts?

The truth is dealing with a defiant 2-year-old is a notoriously difficult part of childrearing. They don't call it the "terrible twos" for nothing.

When your child shouts, "No!" or hurls themselves on the ground, kicking and screaming, it's no fun for you, but it *is* a normal reaction for a child this age - and for children a little younger or older, too.

Think about it: Your child is caught up in the excitement – and frustration – that come with their growing independence. They want to explore their world and test their limits. At the same time they are struggling to learn how to control their actions, impulses, and feelings.

Maybe their baby brother needs more attention at the moment than they do, or maybe they do not like it when they are supposed to drop everything at

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your request. Your child's challenging behaviour may not always be appropriate, but it's to be expected at this age.

You may end up with a few grey hairs when it's all over, but you'll survive largely intact by trying to understand where your child is coming from – and by handling these difficult reactions with care.

What you can do about disobedience

Be understanding. When your child screams and cries because they do not to leave the playground, give them a hug and tell them you know it's hard to go home when they are having so much fun. The idea is to show them that instead of being part of the problem, you're actually on their side.

Try not to get angry, even if you feel embarrassed in front of the other parents. Be kind but firm about making them leave when it's time.

Set boundaries. Young children need – and even want – boundaries, so set them and make sure your 2-year-old knows what they are. Spell it out for them: "We don't hit. If you're angry, use your words to tell Adam that you want the toy back." or "Remember, you always have to hold my hand when we are out."

If your child has problems abiding by the rules (as every 2-year-old does) work on solutions together. For instance, if they hit their baby brother because they are feeling left out, let them help you feed or bath him, then find a way for them to have their own special time with you. If they get out of bed because they are afraid of the dark, put a nightlight in their room.

Reinforce good behaviour. Rather than paying attention to your child only when they are misbehaving, try to catch them acting appropriately: "Thanks for playing with Charlie while I change his nappy. That's very helpful!"

And though your instinct may be to reprimand your child when their behaviour is unacceptable, choose your words carefully so it's clear that you disapprove of the behaviour, not the child. Where did we ever get the idea that in order to make children do better, we first have to make them feel worse?

Shouting and shaming may only produce more negative behaviour. They just may follow your example and yell back at you, and you'll find yourself teaching the very behaviour you want them to change.

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Your best tool as a parent is to teach by example. Speak calmly, clearly, and firmly – not with anger, blame, or threats. Sure, that's tough to do when you've lost your temper or your nerves are frazzled, but remind yourself that your child is unlikely to adopt a behaviour you can't carry out yourself.

Remember, too, that disciplining your child doesn't mean controlling them – it means teaching them to control *themselves*. Punishment might get them to behave, but only because they are afraid not to. It's best for your 2-year-old to do the right thing because they *want* to – because it makes the day more fun for them or makes them feel good.

Use time-outs – positively. Some parents like to use time out and a short time-out can be used with children this age if nothing else works. Use it more as a chance for your child to calm down and get themselves under control, not to punish them for lacking the emotional control they are too young to have. When your child is ready to explode because they are not getting their own way, a time-out can help them calm down.

If you feel yourself getting too worked up, take your own time-out – just to calm down and gather your thoughts. You'll not only set a good example, you might get a much-needed break. Once you both feel better, that's the time to talk about appropriate behaviour.

Empower your 2-year-old. Providing opportunities for your child to make their own choices allows them to try out some of their newfound independence in a controlled environment. Instead of demanding that they put on the jeans you've selected, for instance, let them choose one of the two pairs you've laid out. Ask if they would like peas or green beans with dinner, and which of two stories at bedtime.

Another way to help your youngster feel more in control is to tell them what they *can* do instead of what they can't. Rather than saying "No! Don't throw that ball in the house!" say, "Let's go outside and throw the ball together." If they want an ice cream cone before dinner, tell them she can choose between a slice of cheese and a banana.

Choose your battles. If your fashionable 2-year-old wants to wear their striped jumper with their polka-dot trousers, does it really matter? If they want cereal for lunch and a sandwich for breakfast, what's the harm?

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Sometimes it's easier to look the other way when they splash in a mud puddle on the way home, for example, or stuffs their puppet under the bed instead of putting it on the proper shelf.

Respect her age. Try to avoid situations that are sure to send your 2-year-old into a meltdown. Why risk taking them to a fancy restaurant when you could just meet your sister for a picnic in the park? How realistic is it to expect your child to behave in a clothing store or sit quietly during an hour-long meeting?

If you find yourself in a tricky situation, do your best to avoid a confrontation with your child. At this age constant supervision and redirection are the most effective parenting tools. Remove your child kindly but firmly from what they cannot do and give them an activity they can do.

Finally, respect the unique world your 2-year-old lives in, especially the way they perceive time (or don't). Rather than expecting them to jump up from a game, give them a few minutes warning and help them switch gears. ("Kate, we're leaving in five minutes, so please finish up.")

There's no guarantee that your child will break away from their fun without complaint. But as long as you're patient and consistent, your child will eventually learn that disobedience isn't the way to get what they want.