

When your toddler hits you: a new perspective

When Your Toddler Hits You

Does your toddler suddenly haul back and hit you in the midst of a sweet and playful time together? Or does he impulsively smack other children, even his own siblings? If your toddler hits, let me reassure you that you haven't failed at parenting. And when your toddler hits you, your little one isn't under a mysterious spell. There's nothing bad about your child.

Whenever a toddler hits, there are unseen forces at work. Emotional forces. Although your toddler may have a poker face, or might even be laughing when he hits, his aggression is being driven by emotion. Usually, that emotion is fear.

First and foremost, you need to know that your toddler doesn't want to hurt you or anyone else, and he certainly doesn't want to become "the bad kid" in your mind. When your toddler hits they don't need punishment; in fact, punishment and time out can easily make it more likely that he will hit in the future. He needs you.

Sometimes when a toddler hits it's experimental. That will subside. Toddlers are young and eager scientists. They experiment night and day—that's how they learn how things work. It's how they build their storehouse of understanding about their parents, their playmates, and how the world around them works. So, toddlers hit, it's one thing almost every toddler will experiment with.

If it's your child's first or second or third hit, take it easy. The thing to do is to gently, calmly move his arm away from the person he's hitting, so he can't hit again. You can let him try. Just keep his arm from landing on you or anyone else. Mild words like, "No, that doesn't feel good," or, "I can't let you do that," might be helpful. You want to give him information, not a blast of reaction. If you don't react wildly (and as long as he's not witnessing hitting in his daily life), his hitting experiments will play themselves out. After a few tries, it will lose its novelty, and he'll move on to climbing, or running, or throwing balls, or playing with the kitty. This video explores how to stop aggression with play.

If you respond with harshness when your toddler hits, his hitting behavior will persist.

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Odd though it may seem, if you come down hard when your toddler hits, you are likely to nail his hitting behavior onto his daily routine, making it more likely to reappear. When we react with upset to our children, they internalize our upset. We add our upsets to the number of things that frighten them. Your child will feel driven to try hitting again, because he didn't understand why you yelled, or hit back, or grabbed his arm hard and dragged him to a seat in the corner. His mind can't make sense of your behavior. It scared him, so he returns to try it again and again in some effort to make sense of it. Pretty soon, any time he starts feeling alone or scared, his mind will tell him, "Hit. That's what you do when you feel badly—you hit." So the discipline methods many parents consider to be "natural consequences" or "deserved punishments" become part and parcel of a behavior cycle your child falls into more and more often when he isn't feeling good.

Our children's fears cause hitting.

Not all children hit when they're scared—it's not the only instinctive human reaction to the feeling of fear. But it is one of our innate fear responses. So whether your child smiles while he's hitting, or looks impassive, or only hits when he's clearly upset, you can safely assume that if your child is hitting, it's because he's feeling scared.

Laughter is one of the ways children release their feelings of fear, so hitting is sometimes accompanied by laughter—your child is trying hard to release tension, but can't laugh it away fast enough to stop himself from launching a hit or two.

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Most children hide their feelings of fear at an early age. They pick up on our uneasiness with their big feelings. We try to get them not to cry, we distract them when they're upset, we try to fix things so they won't have an upset.

Here are 6 tips to ease the transition to toddlerhood that can help prevent stuck feelings.

Feelings that are repressed don't go away

I would wager that most of us parents give at least ten strong signals a day that we don't like our children to show us how they feel. So their fears go underground, where these powerful feelings cause trouble. They eventually surface not in crying or clinging or a full-out screaming response, but in hitting and biting and pushing other children.

Hidden feelings cause trouble. Hitting is just one sign that a child is troubled by his fears. Waking in the night, tantrums, refusing to try new things, thumb-sucking, and generally picky behavior all can be signs that your child has had to swallow his feelings, and that the stored emotions are hard for him to manage.

Step One when your toddler hits: Offer a gentle, attentive barrier.

It's pretty simple to help a toddler stop impulsive, repetitive hitting. Get close at a time when you think she is likely to hit—anticipating her behavior will help you to respond without reacting. That means you have to notice when your mind starts telling you, “Oh, I wonder if she'll hit. She's getting pretty close to that younger child...I hope she doesn't!” That thought is your signal to calmly get to your child, and to be ready. Hope won't get you to the solution. Preparedness will.

The “friendly” patrol

So do a friendly patrol with your child—get close, be warm, don't give verbal warnings. Those do nothing to douse the heat of the fear inside her that makes her want to hit.

When her arm reaches out, parry her thrust with your own arm or hand. Or just hold her hand or arm gently as she approaches a playmate, so she can't strike suddenly. You are the safety manager. It's your job to insure that no one gets hit.

As she tries to strike, just keep her hit from landing, and say gently, “I can't let you do that.” Then offer eye contact. Stay there. Don't huff off, don't scold, don't say anything else at all. Just hold her arm, gently, and be with her.

Upsets find another way out

If you're quiet and calm, and you've gently prevented her from hitting, the feelings that drive the hitting will bubble up. She'll feel intensely uncomfortable. She'll begin to cry, or sweat, or tremble, or fall down in a tantrum. This, we know, is an odd perspective, but it's one that makes all the difference: you want her feelings to tumble out in a great big emotional wave. You want all that negative energy out of her, not hiding in the corners of her mind, waiting to cause trouble.

Listen. Your support is a powerful antidote to the fear that causes hitting.

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While your child is upset, it helps her greatly when you can be loving and calm. She doesn't have to be afraid of your impulsive behavior or your disapproval. Your child can concentrate on letting all that tension tumble out. Maybe she'll cry. Or she may begin to perspire while she screams. Your child might arch her back in your arms, or throw herself on the ground. She might kick and flail. Believe it or not, the more vigorous her reaction, the better the outcome of her emotional episode. She is expelling bad feelings—fear, in particular—using your calm presence as her signal that she's free to let go of the feelings that have infected her behavior.

What to say

Here are some of the things you can say, gently, interspersed with long intervals of simple supportive listening, when your toddler hits. Just talk a bit now and then, to let her know you see how hard she's working to get her fears out of her system

“I know you like Jasper and I won't let you hit him.”

“No one is mad at you. You're my special girl, and I will stay right here with you.”

“I'm right here, keeping you safe.”

“You're going to have a good morning with your friends. I'll stay until things are just right with them.”

“I'm sorry this is hard. Your day will go well after this.”

“Whatever scared you is over. It's not going to happen again.”

“No, we don't need to go home. I think you can have a good time here, in just a while. It's OK to stay here.”

Listen for 80% of the time, speak with warmth in your voice and a big heart for your struggling child.

It's a natural process

Your child is doing what she was born to do—she's getting rid of stress in a wild but efficient way. If you can anchor her while she does the emotional work, she'll be a very different little person when she's done. The emotional bad dream will be over.

Her fear will evaporate—perhaps not all of it, but most likely enough of it that she’s able to be happy again, and to have a better day than usual.

Stay listening to your child simplifies your life as a parent. Toddlers hit because of “emotional gunk.” You help to clear your child’s mind of emotional gunk, so your child can think more clearly. This means that you don’t need to lecture her, you don’t need to recite the principles of proper treatment of friends, you don’t need to enumerate the rules in your household or in the play group, either before, during, or after a hitting incident in which you step in to hold a good limit. You can trust that your child knows how to treat others well. When she’s in her right mind, she will. She knows how to be a friend. And by bringing a healthy limit, then Staylistening, you help her to reclaim the chance to be in her right mind, free from leftover feelings of fear.

Tosha Schore on Joyful Courage Podcast Episode #65 talks about getting into “good parenting shape.” Listen in if you find it hard to Stay listening when your toddler hits.

Here’s how it can work.

I went to the park one afternoon with the baby, my toddler son, and his friend. At some point, the friend tried to hit my son when he was on the slide. I gently picked her up off the slide, telling her that I couldn’t let her hurt him or anyone else. She arched back and wailed at the top of her lungs.

I continued to calmly talk to her and tell her that I couldn’t let her hurt herself or anyone else, and tried as gently as I could to maintain physical contact with her body. She screamed, “I want my mommy!” over and over. Certainly if her mother was right there, that would have been fine, but I didn’t feel totally safe walking home with the three kids with her in that state. It was a few blocks and I had the baby in a carrier. I was concerned that she wouldn’t listen to me if I needed her to hold my hand or not run so fast. I softly told her these things.

There was a moment where I tried to give her a little more physical space and she took off running out of the playground towards our home. So I gently gathered her back up, telling her that I couldn’t let her go home by herself. The crying, holding and talking went on for quite some time, maybe 20-30 minutes, ebbing and flowing. I wasn’t sure what other parents were thinking. At one point one of the parents looked at me, smiled, and said, “I’m taking notes.”

Additionally, I was intermittently attending to my baby and my son, who sat close to me with a concerned look on his face.

We were now sitting on a bench and she started to tell me that she wanted to go on the swing. I told her that we had to wait until there were two swings available, for both toddlers, and she started to wail again. This ebbed and flowed a few times.

Finally, I felt like we could at least wander over to the swings, and as we got there, the other kid left so she and my son went on the swings together, with me pushing.

When it was time to go home, I asked them if they wanted me to stop the swing for them, or just let it stop by itself. The girl said that she wanted the swing to stop by itself, and slowly, slowly the swing came to a quiet stop. There was something deeply moving about everyone waiting patiently for the swing to stop.

As we walked home, she took my hand. When we got home she easily went to her parents. I took her mother aside and gave her a brief description of what had happened, and the next day I checked in about how her daughter had been that evening. Her mother said that she was super calm and very tired at bedtime. When I saw her playing in the backyard the next day, she gave me a big hug.

– Laura Podwoski, Berkeley, CA