

STUBBORN TODDLERS

DEFINITION

Negativism is a normal phase most children go through between 18 months and 3 years of age. It begins when children discover they have the power to refuse other people's requests. They respond negatively to many requests, including pleasant ones. In general, they are stubborn rather than cooperative. They delight in refusing a suggestion, whether it's about getting dressed or taking off their clothes, taking a bath or getting out of the bathtub, going to bed or getting up. Unless understood, this behavior can become extremely frustrating for parents. Handled appropriately, it lasts about 1 year.

DEALING WITH A NEGATIVE, STUBBORN TODDLER

Consider the following guidelines for helping you and your child through this phase.

1. **Don't take this normal phase too personally.** By "no" your child means "Do I have to?" or "Do you mean it?" A negative response should not be confused with disrespect. Also, it is not meant to annoy you. This phase is critical to the development of independence and identity. Try to look at it with a sense of humor and amazement.
2. **Don't punish your child for saying "no."** Punish your child for what she does, not what she says. Since saying "no" is not something you control, ignore it. If you argue with your child about saying "no," you will probably prolong this behavior.
3. **Give your child plenty of choices.** This is the best way to increase your child's sense of freedom and control, so that she will become more cooperative. Examples of choices are letting your child choose between a shower or a bath; which book to read; which toys to take into the tub; which fruit to eat for a snack; which clothes or shoes to wear; which breakfast cereal to eat; and which game to play, whether inside or outside, in the park or in the yard. For tasks your child doesn't like, give her a say in the matter by asking, "Do you want to do it slowly or fast?" or "Do you want me to do it, or you?" The more quickly your child gains a feeling that she is a decision maker, the sooner she will become cooperative.
4. **Don't give your child a choice when there is**

none. Safety rules, such as sitting in the car seat, are not open to discussion, although you can explain why the rule must be followed. Going to bed or to day care also is not negotiable. Don't ask a question when there's only one acceptable answer, but direct your child in as kind a way as possible (e.g., "I'm sorry, but now you have to go to bed."). Commands such as "do this or else" should be avoided.

5. **Give transition time when changing activities.** If your child is having fun and must change to another activity, she probably needs a transition time. For example, if your child is playing with trucks as dinnertime approaches, give her a 5-minute warning. A kitchen timer sometimes helps a child accept the change better.
6. **Eliminate excessive rules.** The more rules you have, the less likely it is that your child will be agreeable about following them. Eliminate unnecessary expectations and arguments about wearing socks or cleaning her plate. Help your child feel less controlled by having more positive interactions than negative contacts each day.
7. **Avoid responding to your child's requests with excessive "no's."** Be for your child a model of agreeableness. When your child asks for something and you are unsure, try to say "yes" or postpone your decision by saying "Let me think about it." If you are going to grant a request, do so right away, before your child whines or begs for it. When you must say "no," tell your child that you're sorry and give your child a reason.



CALL OUR OFFICE

During regular hours if

- You or your spouse can't accept your child's need to say "no."
- You or your spouse have trouble controlling your temper.
- Your child has several other discipline problems.
- This approach doesn't bring improvement within 1 month.
- You have other questions or concerns.