

The Terrible Twos

Almost every parent gets one sooner or later. The adorable infant becomes a delightful toddler but then changes into a "terrible two." It's like the less than appealing caterpillar metamorphosing into a beautiful butterfly, only in reverse.

What is a terrible two and why are they so terrible? The main characteristic of this stage is a general contrariness. Terrible twos are stubborn, can be ornery, and may have a tantrum when they don't get their way. They have discovered the word, 'No,' and they love to use it, often with an exclamation mark. They say, 'No!' to parents, other people, the pet dog, plants, or the television set. They sometimes say 'No!' so often it's almost as if they are practicing the ability to disagree and be contrary.

It turns out that the terrible two is practicing but not simply practicing to be contrary or stubborn. The terrible two is practicing to be independent. A child starts out in the womb literally attached to its mother. After birth that physical attachment is broken but an emotional and psychological attachment develops between the baby and the people who provide for its moment-to-moment needs. The bond that develops between a baby and its primary caregivers is intense and powerful because these people, usually her parents but can be others in her life, are there when she needs comfort and care. An infant's life literally depends on these people. They feed her, soothe her, and entertain her. But gradually the baby develops her own abilities; she begins to crawl and walk, can feed herself finger foods, and she learns how to amuse herself by watching the mobile hanging over the crib and playing with the rattle in her hand. She learns how to put sounds together into words to make her wishes known and then one day she discovers the word, 'No.'

What is the 'No!' and contrariness of the terrible two really saying? It is actually a statement of separation and identity. The child who is emotionally and psychologically attached to a parent is saying, exclaiming, that she is a separate and independent being. She is saying that she no longer needs this primary caregiver for everything, that she is able to go where she wants to go, say what she wants to say, and do what she wants to do. If you think about it, is there any better way to proclaim your independence from another person than to disagree by saying, 'No'?

It's called the stage of the terrible twos because this contrariness emerges at roughly the age of two and will last for a year or so. Parents who have lived through it, however, will tell you that it can begin earlier and some parents may even say that it lasts right through adolescence - or beyond. As difficult as it may be for parents, and it can be a very unpleasant and challenging phase of life for parents, it is a necessary stage of development for children. The intense attachment and bond that develops between children and parents provides them with the security and strength to deal with the world on their own and the time of the terrible twos is when they begin their journey into independence. Some of their behavior during this time will be unacceptable and they can't always have things their way but the sensitive parent will realize that the battles that may occur are necessary ones for the child to wage. They are battles for selfhood and identity and when this phase of life passes, both children and parents are better off for having lived through- and survived - the terrible twos.

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