



When Toddlers Declare Their Independence

They need freedom to explore, but they need limits, too

During the first year of life, babies are physically dependent upon adults. They must be fed, carried, dressed, bathed.

They are at the mercy of the responsiveness and attention of those caring for them. Any urges toward independence are limited by their physical competence.

When children enter the second year, however, they begin to be able to act out their desires to “do it for themselves.” They are ready to take the first steps toward independence.

When they learn to walk, they become aware that they have the ability to leave a spot and come back. They test what it means to leave the warm attention in which they have spent the first year.

Once children discover that they can control the distance from home base, they decide how far they can afford to go. They must learn that even if they go, they can come back.

A child’s first fear of separation will surface at this age: “Will my parents still be there for me if I leave them?” The child must balance this fear with the drive for independence.

This inner conflict makes life with toddlers full of drama. They can be difficult and negative one moment and warm and cuddly the next.

Families Today

Unless children are given support while they work out this ambivalence, they may never dare to become independent.

Testing Permanence With Toys

At this time when children begin to test ideas of performance—first with objects and then people. Toys give them a chance to learn

about the permanence of objects that are out of sight. They can hide a toy and then leave it, and learn that it will still be there when they look for it.

Then they test concept with people. They leave their parents in the living room, and when they return, their parents are still there.

Finally, they can see their mother and father go away and learn that they will come back.

As children test this concept, they become aware of a whole new kind of independence. They are in control.

No longer must they depend on being handed food. They can get it themselves.

No longer can toddlers simply be put to bed and left. They don't have to wait until parents come to them; they can climb out of bed and go to their parents.

They can also decide when they will cooperate, for they have found the ability to say no—to have a tantrum, to control their parents through their negativism.

But they are aware of this control long before they master it. And mastery of all the steps toward independence will take a long time—the rest of childhood and even into adulthood. The most turbulent, churning period, however, it is between the ages of 1 and 3.

It can be a painful struggle for the child, with bouts of negativism that lead to temper tantrums. No toddler is quite ready for the big step of independence, for it brings with it the threat of separation:

“Will Mommy go away if I push too hard?”

Learning Parents' Expectations

Every time a child says “no” or responds negatively to a demand, he is learning about his parents and about himself. He also learns about his parents' expectations as he sees how they react to his behavior.

A spoiled child is an insecure one. He doesn't know what to expect. No one ever says “no,” so he must tease and tease to find secure limits. A parent who wants to reassure a toddler will be reliably firm. While a child is learning to conform to limits set by his parents, negativism becomes a first line of defense, to stall for time to make a decision.

Although a toddler's answer to a question may be an automatic “no,” what he wants is the chance to decide whether he must conform. But he must try out all his newfound strengths—negativism, provocativeness, and exhibitionism.

If he can muster the courage to meet the situation head-on, he will gain self-confidence.

If, however, his usual defenses don't work, the child will gain self-confidence.

If, however, his usual defenses don't work, the child will be at a loss. He must use another defense: regressing to infantile behavior. He soon learns that this too can be a way to deal with an overwhelming situation. Such “crutches” as thumb-sucking, rocking, blankets of other “loveys” are necessary and even healthy ways to ease that struggle toward independence.

All young children must wage this painful struggle. It's important for parents to realize this, and be patient and understanding during this period.

Though this conflict may not be resolved completely until later in life, the more autonomy a child can achieve at this age, the better able he or she will be moved on to the next stage of development.