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Turning the Terrible Twos into a Terrific Family Relationship

By Jamie Saloff

As children approach their second year of life, their parents often are teased about the oncoming “terrible twos.” Two is the age when children become more independently mobile and outwardly vocal. At this time, we begin to do more for our children than just love and care for them; we also pass on the values they will carry for the whole of their lives. It is also at age two when our children begin to question all we do by wanting to know “Why?” Often they post this question in response to an action or decision that we, as parents, have made. Before we can answer effectively, we must instill basic principles in our children from which their other values can grow.

The first principle is love. Love in a family unit can overcome tremendous woes. With love, we can forgive and forget. With love, we give from the depths of our hearts. And there is no greater human love than that of a parent for a child.

The second principle is learning how to listen to our kids. It is important to begin listening when they are very young (yes, even when they are two). Otherwise, when they get older they will quickly recognize that there is no point in trying to be heard. Children know when someone is tuned-in to them or when someone has tuned them out. Once communication breaks down between parent and child, the other principles become harder to employ, so make it a point to start listening now.

To increase your chances of really listening to your children, first stop whatever you are doing. This will show your children they have your full attention. If you watch a two-year old, you will see how nothing can distract them when something has their rapt attention. (If your child approaches you at a time when you truly are unable to stop, look him/her directly in the eye and ask the child to come back in a few minutes. Let him/her know when you will be free and make it as soon as possible.) Always make good eye contact; since the eyes are a secondary means of communication that carries subliminal messages to the heart and mind. We instinctively know how to interpret information received from eye contact, and it is vital in establishing a strong communication bond.

In addition, when talking with your children, ask questions. (Return the question, “Why?”) Respectfully ask until you fully understand whatever it is that the child wants to explain. The goal is to set a base line so that your children know they can at least discuss any subject with you, even if their viewpoints do not always win. If you establish this door of communication early on, all else will be manageable.

Communication is the vital key for learning the things you want to know about your children and for conveying the guidance that they need for a productive life. For the best results, begin good practices when they are young. Keep in mind, however, that it is never too late to start – even if your children are fully grown.

Once the first two principles have been established (love and communication) the remaining principles will help you build a strong, loving relationship that will create young men and women you will surely be proud to call your own.

- Do not be afraid to say “no” and stick to it.

- Pick your battles based on values, not ego.
- Teach your children to pay their own way. (This instills respect and responsibility.)
- Offer them respect and trust, and they will return it to you.
- Take an interest in their friends. Again, communication is the key. Talk to your kids' friends as if you are one of them, not as though you are the county sheriff.
- Ask questions about your kid's hobbies and past-times until you understand why they are so passionate about them. Participate if it is warranted or just be a supporter if that is all they need – and do not be afraid to ask them which of the two they want.
- Do not be afraid to show up unannounced. Do not do it often, just once in awhile. Establish this early on when they are still young. Let them know that it is your responsibility as a parent to make sure they are safe.
- Encourage individuality in dress and style – yes, even if their clothes are not what you would have them wear.

By doing this, you will instill within them the confidence to express themselves and the courage to stand up for their values. When it matters, they will effectively say “no” to peer pressure.

When things go bad, defer to what is most important – life, love, the ability to be one's own self. There may be a few “bad” days. Sometimes you will not see eye-to-eye. If you come to an impasse, agree to disagree and move on. If you have established good lines of communication early on – and have kept them open – the “bad” days will be fewer and not nearly as bad as what you see in the world around you.

Above all, remember that childhood is the training ground for our highest purpose. One of the greatest gifts we can give to our children is to be a parent wholly well in body and mind. The better our own paths, the easier theirs will be. And remember, no matter how excellent a parent we may be, two-year olds are bound to throw a tantrum from time to time.



Jamie Saloff is the author of Transformational Healing: Five Surprisingly Simple Keys Designed to Redirect Your Life Toward Wellness, Purpose, and Prosperity. Her website is located at www.icantransform.com, and she can be reached by e-mailing info@saloff.com. To subscribe to her e-newsletter, e-mail ictf-ezine.ck@aweber.com.