

AGES & STAGES

Emotional Development: 2 Year Olds

It's so difficult to follow the ups and downs of a two-year-old. One moment he's beaming and friendly; the next he's sullen and weepy—and often for no apparent reason. These mood swings, however, are just part of growing up. They are signs of the emotional changes taking place as your child struggles to take control of actions, impulses, feelings, and his body.

At this age, your child wants to explore the world and seek adventure. As a result, he'll spend most of his time testing limits—his own, yours, and his environment's. Unfortunately, he still lacks many of the skills required for the safe accomplishment of everything he needs to do, and he often will need you to protect him.

When he oversteps a limit and is pulled back, he often reacts with anger and frustration, possibly with a tantrum or sullen rage. He may even strike back by hitting, biting, or kicking. At this age, he just doesn't control over his emotional impulses, so his anger and frustration tend to erupt suddenly in the form of crying or screaming. It's his only way of dealing with the difficult realities of life. He may even act out in ways that unintentionally harm himself or others. It's all part of being two.



Have sitters or relatives ever told you that your child never behaves badly when they're caring for him? It's uncommon for toddlers to be angels when you're not around, because they don't trust these other people to test their limits. But with you, your toddler will be willing to try things that may be dangerous or difficult because he knows you'll rescue him if he gets into trouble.

Whatever protest pattern he has developed around the end of his first year probably will persist for some time. For instance, when you're about to leave him with a sitter, he may become angry and throw a tantrum in anticipation of the separation. Or he may whimper, or whine and cling to you. Or he simply could become subdued and withdrawn. Whatever his behavior, try not to overreact by scolding or punishing him. The best tactic is to reassure him that you leave that you will be back and, when you return, to praise him for being so patient while you were gone. He will find solace in the fact that separations should be much easier by the time he's three years old.

The more confident and secure your two-year-old feels, the more independent and well behaved he's likely to be. You can help him develop these positive feelings by encouraging him to behave more maturely. To do this, consistently set reasonable limits that allow him to explore and exercise his curiosity, but that draw the line at dangerous or antisocial behavior. With these guidelines, he'll begin to sense what's acceptable and what's not. To reinforce this consistency, praise him every time he plays well with another child, or whenever he feeds, dresses, or undresses himself without your help, or when you help him to start with the activity and he completes it by himself. As he succeeds, he'll start to feel good about these accomplishments and himself. With his self-esteem on the rise, he'll begin to form an image of himself as someone who behaves a certain way—the way that you have encouraged—and negative behavior will fade.

Since two-year-olds normally express a broad range of emotions, be prepared for everything from delight to anger. However, you should consult your pediatrician if your child seems very passive or withdrawn, perpetually unhappy, highly demanding and unsatisfied most of the time. These could be signs of depression, caused either by environmental factors or hidden stress or biological problems. If your doctor suspects depression, she'll probably refer your child to a mental health professional for a consultation.

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