

Emotional Development: 2 Year Olds

It can be difficult to follow the ups and downs of a two-year-old. One moment they're beaming and friendly; the next 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 control actions, impulses, feelings and their body.



Testing limits

At this age, your child wants to explore the world and seek adventure. They'll spend most of their time testing limits—their own, yours, and their environment's. Unfortunately, they still lack many skills required to safely accomplish everything they need to do, and they often will need your protection.

When they overstep a limit and are pulled back, they often react with anger and frustration, a temper tantrum or sullen rage. They may even hit, bite or kick. At this age, they just don't have much control over their emotional impulses. Their anger and frustration tend to erupt suddenly in the form of crying, hitting or screaming. It's their only way of dealing with the difficult realities of life. They may even act out in ways that unintentionally harm themselves or others. It's all part of being two.

Emotional milestones for your two-year-old

- Expresses affection openly
- Expresses a wide range of emotions
- Objects to major changes in routine

Why does my 2-year-old behave better with the sitter than with me?

Have sitters (</English/family-life/work-and-child-care/Pages/finding-a-sitter.aspx>) or relatives ever told you that your child never behaves badly when they're caring for them? It's not uncommon for toddlers to be angels when you're not around. They don't trust these other people enough to test their limits. But with you, your two-year-old is willing to try things that may be dangerous or difficult because they know you'll rescue them if needed.

Separation anxiety: how to react

Whatever protest pattern they developed around the end of their first year probably will last for some time. When you're about to leave them with a sitter, they may become angry and throw a tantrum in anticipation of the separation (</English/ages-stages/toddler/Pages/Soothing-Your-Childs-Separation-Anxiety.aspx>). They may whimper, whine or cling to you. Or they could become subdued and silent.

Whatever their behavior, try not to overreact by scolding or punishing. The best tactic is to reassure them you will be back and, when you return, to praise them for being so patient while you were gone. Take solace in the fact that



Separation should be much easier by the time they're three.

Boosting your two-year-old's confidence & behavior

The more confident and secure your two-year-old feels, the more independent and well behaved they're likely to be. You can help them develop these positive feelings by encouraging them to behave more maturely. Consistently set reasonable limits that allow them to explore and exercise their curiosity, but draw the line at dangerous or antisocial behavior. They'll soon begin to sense what's acceptable and what's not.

The key is consistency. Praise them every time they plays well with another child, or whenever they feed, dress or undresses themselves without help, or when they complete an activity by themselves. When you do this, they'll start to feel good about these accomplishments and themselves. With their self-esteem on the rise, they'll develop an image of themselves as someone who behaves the way you have encouraged—and negative behavior will fade.

Remember

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

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