

Do You Have a Diva Baby?

By Julie Knapp; Photo by Alexandra Grablewski

With toddlers, sometimes it's all about "Me!" Follow our guide to teaching cooperation and sharing. Your baby is a diva if...



"No!" "Gimme!" "I don't want that!" Sound familiar? Sometime around her first birthday, your child's adorable "Mamas" and "Dadas" give way to words that aren't so cute -- and a whole lot of meltdowns to match. Her sudden divalike demands may leave you wondering what happened to your pleasant child. "At this age, kids start to understand cause and effect, and they realize that certain words and actions get a bigger reaction," says Rahil D. Briggs, PsyD, a psychologist at The Children's Hospital at Montefiore, in New York City. "As they discover this power, they'll delight in asserting their newfound authority and in testing your limits."

But this defiance isn't just about pushing your buttons. Your toddler is also developing her own preferences in everything from clothes to daily activities. Unfortunately, she lacks the language skills to communicate what she likes and dislikes, and this can be even more frustrating for her than it is for you. Make things easier for both of you by knowing how to handle these common diva behaviors.

She loves to say "No!"

You ask for the blue crayon, and your child says "No!" You tell her it's time to go to bed, and she throws herself on the floor and cries "No!" "No!" "No!"

How to help: Is it really a big surprise that *no* is one of your toddler's favorite words? Think about how often kids hear "No, don't do that!" They pick up a lot from simply watching and listening to you, says Dr. Briggs. You can't cut this behavior out entirely, but you can rein in your "negative Nelly" by changing the way you respond. Simply rephrasing a "No, we can't go to the playground" to a "Yes, we'll do it tomorrow" can go a long way.

You should also pick your battles. If your kid is digging in her heels over something minor, consider giving in. But remain firm on the big stuff: If you let her stay up because she cries "No!" to bedtime, you can expect a fight every night.

She refuses to share.

At playdates, your child won't let anyone near his toys, but he'll scream "Mine!" and snatch away his friend's playthings.

How to help: Around 15 months, kids begin to develop a sense of their own identity. When another child takes one of his toys, he can feel as if he's losing a part of himself, says Bette Alkazan, a parent and a family coach in Thousand Oaks, California. Taking turns is the easiest way to introduce sharing: Have your child and his friend each play with the prized toy for a minute to reassure him that he's not giving it up forever. Supply things that encourage cooperative play, like a ball or blocks. If all else fails, try distracting him with another toy or activity. And don't forget to model sharing at home. If your child is hogging crackers, split some with his older sister: When he gives you one, smile, say "Thank you!" and then share yours. If you make it look like a game, your little one will want to join in on the fun.

She turns her nose up at meals.

Your child takes picky eating to another level -- like refusing a sandwich because it's cut into squares instead of triangles.

How to help: In 1-year-olds, this behavior often has more to do with wanting to be in control than actually disliking the food. So start the meal off by giving your child some power. Pass her the bread basket, and let her choose a piece. If she pushes food away, don't make a big deal. "It's a mistake to pay too much attention to a kid who won't eat something or to assume she hates the meal," says Natalie Vona, PhD, a child and family psychologist in Englewood, Colorado. Instead, wait a couple of days and serve her the food again. It can take as many as 10 tries to get toddlers to eat something new. Be patient, and pretty soon your little diva will become a cooperative kid.

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