VETERAN PARENTS WITH TODDLERS

(1-3 YEARS)

VETERAN PARENTING TOOLKIT: TOGETHER BUILDING STRONG FAMILIES

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgments 3

Welcome 4

Did You Know? 5

What Should You Expect in Your Child's Toddler Years? . . 6

Reconnecting With Your Toddler After Deployment . . 8

How to Talk to Your Toddler About Your Deployment . . 9

Tips for Strengthening Your Relationship With Your Toddler. . 10

Specific Issues With Toddlers

- Separation Anxiety 12
- Toilet Training 14
- Whining, Tantrums, and Other Irritating Behaviors . . 17
- Managing Aggressive Behaviors 19
- Effective Discipline and the Power of Praise . . . 20

What Are Red Flags for Concern With Your Toddler? . . 22

Who Should You Call if You Have Concerns? . . . 23

Taking Care of Yourself as a Parent 24

Reconnecting With Your Partner After Deployment . . . 26

Additional Resources on Issues With Toddlers . . . 31

Note: This booklet is intended to provide general information only and is not intended to serve as a substitute for individualized mental health services. If you have concerns about a specific situation, contact your health professional directly.

If you feel depressed for more than a couple of days, are unable to care for your child, or have thoughts of hurting your child or yourself, please call your doctor or pediatrician immediately.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The creation of these toolkits has depended on the work and support of many people to whom we wish to express our sincere gratitude.

The creation and dissemination of the toolkits were supported by a Clinical Educator Grant sponsored by the VISN 16 South Central Mental Illness Research, Education, and Clinical Center (MIRECC) under the leadership of Greer Sullivan, M.D., M.S.P.H., and Michael Kauth, Ph.D.

We wish to thank out content reviewers, Jeanne Hoffman, Ph.D. (Tripler Army Medical Center), Susan Schmidt, Ph.D. (University of Oklahoma Health Sciences Center), and Michelle Kees, Ph.D. (University of Michigan) and our copy editor, Sonora Hudson, M.A., for their excellent review and editing of the manual. We appreciate the graphic design work created by Zac Logsdon of Old Hat Design.

We also wish to thank and applaud all of our service members, their families and their children. Thank you all for your service.

Michelle D. Sherman, Ph.D.
Director, Family Mental Health Program, Oklahoma City Veterans Affairs Medical Center
Affiliate Research Investigator, South Central MIRECC
University of Oklahoma Health Sciences Center

Ursula B. Bowling, Psy.D.
Family Mental Health Program, Oklahoma City Veterans Affairs Medical Center
University of Oklahoma Health Sciences Center

Jeffrey Anderson, Ph.D.
Family Mental Health Program, Oklahoma City Veterans Affairs Medical Center
Oklahoma City Community College

Karen Wyche, Ph.D.
University of Oklahoma Health Sciences Center

August 2010

WELCOME

Congratulations on raising your child through infancy and into the exciting toddler years! Having a toddler in the house can be exciting yet also busy and stressful. Hopefully, you have adapted to the joys and challenges of being a parent (if this is your first child), but get ready! Big changes are ahead in the next couple years as your child develops, and they are sure to bring opportunities for you to learn, grow, and strengthen your relationship with your child.

Toddlers are busy finding their independence, and parents often have lots of questions. This is normal. This guide is designed to help Veterans and their families better understand and relate to their toddler, especially following deployment.

Having a toddler challenges parents to work together as a team, as you need to negotiate and communicate about many daily decisions. As you share and juggle the household and parenting duties, don't be surprised if you sometimes have different opinions about how to perform these tasks. That's common and ok. There's no one "right" way, so respect each other's approach. When families are welcoming a parent back into the family after a deployment, parenting a toddler can be extra challenging.

We created this booklet to remind you that:

- You are not alone.
- Many families are experiencing similar challenges.
- Resources are available to support you in being the best parent you can be.

Congratulations on your commitment to parenting and your interest in learning more about your child!

DID YOU KNOW?

Toddlers have active imaginations. They can become easily confused about what is real and what is imaginary.

Toddlers are starting to develop their independence. Be ready: they say "NO" many times a day.

By the end of the toddler years, your child's brain will be almost the size of an adult brain.

Toddlers are incredibly curious. Everything is new and exciting, and they are eager to learn what the things in their environment are and what they can do. They are learning as many as five to ten new words a day.

Do you feel like your child is always on the move? He/she probably is! Toddlers tend to be extremely active, and parents may run out of energy before their toddlers do.

Toddlers can be picky eaters. It may take you offering a new food many times before your child will try it, and multiple tries before he/she will enjoy it.

WHAT SHOULD YOU EXPECT IN YOUR CHILD'S TODDLER YEARS?

As a parent of a toddler, it can be helpful to know what new skills and behaviors to expect in your child during this developmental stage. Your child is constantly growing, gaining new skills, and learning about the world. Here are some typical changes that occur for toddlers.

Please note: No child follows exactly these milestones, and no two children develop at exactly the same pace. The timetables are just a guide for what "average development" looks like. If you have any concerns about your child's development, please talk to your doctor.

Physical Development

Toddlers are going through unique physical changes, and you will see them acquire many new skills during this period, such as the ability to:

- Walk (forward and backward), run, and jump
- Climb up and down stairs (one foot at a time for quite a while)
- Pedal a tricycle (by the end of the toddler years)
- Kick a ball and throw a toy (most likely not overhand)
- Feed themselves and drink from a cup (but expect accidental spills!)
- Turn pages in a picture book
- Begin to develop hand and foot preference
- Show curiosity about their body parts and ask questions about them (don't be afraid to answer)

Other Big Changes for Toddlers

Your child is not just growing bigger and stronger. Toddlers are learning about the world and the people in it. By interacting with your child and providing a healthy home environment, you are helping your child learn. Consider the many new skills your toddler develops during this time period:

Emotions

- Display new feelings: pride, love, jealousy, shame, and doubt
- Can get frustrated easily but prefer to do things without help
- May have rapid and frequent mood swings from happy to sad, and back to happy again, sometimes over seemingly minor triggers
- Tend to see things only from their own point of view

Speech

- Learn many new words
- Understand more words than they can actually speak
- Put two- to three-word sentences together by around age 2

- Imitate sounds or words and memorize short sayings, songs, rhymes, or sections from books

Play

- Enjoy playing near other children but not necessarily with other children (usually not too good at sharing)
- Use imagination during games (your child can become confused about what is real and not real)
- Engage in pretend play with simple themes
- Enjoy doing the same thing over and over again during play, such as singing the same song and reading the same book
- Start to understand basic rules and directions and respond to simple rewards and consequences

Interacting with Parents/Adults

- Show independence by saying "NO" to parents, or doing the opposite of what the parent asks
- Want to help and imitate adults

Behaviors

- Physically identify what they want and enjoy having choices
- Desire predictable routines, such as bedtime routines
- Start being interested in toilet training (but this is often not accomplished until 3-4 years old)
- Throw tantrums (this is a normal part of development!)

A note about boys and girls: Although every child is unique, in general boys and girls develop at different rates. You may notice differences between your children, and understanding these gender differences can be useful. For example:

- Girls usually develop the skills and abilities described in this section slightly before/earlier than boys.
- Boys are generally more active and aggressive than girls. They are more willing to take risks and explore new things.
- Girls tend to use words and speak more than boys.

Adapted from: www.mayoclinic.com/health/child-development
www.nncc.org/Child.Dev/todd.dev.html
www.healthychildren.org

RECONNECTING WITH YOUR TODDLER AFTER DEPLOYMENT

So, you get off the plane, run into the arms of your family, enjoy all the homecoming festivities, greet your wonderful child, and suddenly have this amazingly close connection to your toddler, know everything about your child's unique routines and needs, and are ready to jump into 24/7 parenting (potty training, temper tantrums and all), right?

> "The homecoming was amazing. But then it's the day after and the day after that, and this feeling of what now?"
>
> Sergeant Major Jason Peach quoted in *The Guardian* (2007, December 1) by Dave Hill. 'We won't know for a long time what this has done to us.'

Typically, NOT! This may feel like a culture shock for you, and it's important to give it time. For some families, the adjustments go smoothly, but it takes longer for others. With time and some effort, you and your child can create a strong, happy relationship.

Just like adults, children vary in how they react to their returning parent. It may help to know that:

- If your child is young, he/she may not recognize or remember you at first. Don't worry, as children learn quickly and will get to know you with time.
- Don't be surprised if your child is timid, pulls away, or clings to the person who cared for him/her while you were deployed. This can be tough, but it's important to avoid taking the rejection personally. Your child also needs some time to adjust. Strive to be patient and understanding
- The strong emotions surrounding homecoming can be both exciting and confusing for a young child. Your toddler may temporarily show changes in eating or sleeping routines, or lose skills he/she had previously learned.

HOW TO TALK TO YOUR TODDLER ABOUT YOUR DEPLOYMENT

Can toddlers really grasp where you were during your deployment, what you did, or how long you were gone?

OF COURSE NOT!

Can they clearly put into words how they felt about your departure and absence?

PROBABLY NOT TOO WELL.

But should you talk to your toddler about your deployment?

DEFINITELY!

It is very important to talk to your toddler about deployment, but remember that he/she cannot understand lengths of time. You can say you are sad that you missed his/her birthday party and trick-or-treating together for Halloween, (etc.), and that you are happy to be home now.

You can explain (in child-friendly language) that you were protecting our country to keep us safe. You may share some of the positive things you did during your deployment, such as re-building a school or helping children.

When you talk about your deployment, strive to speak in an unemotional, calm way and to avoid giving details about dangerous situations you may have encountered.

It's important to be open to hearing your child's feelings about your absence—both the pride in your service and the sadness at your absence.

You may read books to your toddlers about parental deployment (see examples in Resource List at the end of this booklet). As a family, you may write your own story book about your family's experience with the deployment(s). Your toddler can color pictures, and you can write a short story about your family's life before, during and after deployment.

You might also look through pictures together of events that took place during deployment – both pictures you took while overseas (not anything that may upset your child) and those taken back at home of your preschooler/family. Pictures can be a great way to start a conversation and to share memories.

If you may be re-deployed, emphasize that right now, you are here, and that you will tell him/her if you need to leave again. Also stress that someone will always be there to take care of him/her—and say who that person will be.

Remember that toddlers' attention spans are usually very short. Follow your toddler's lead in answering any questions, and don't over-explain. Questions may seem repetitive or out of the blue – this is normal. Your patience and reassurance are just what your child needs!

TIPS ON STRENGTHENING YOUR RELATIONSHIP WITH YOUR TODDLER

Toddlers enjoy being able to explore and try new things, and they often want to do things on their own. They may seem to bounce from one activity to another, playing with a toy/game for only 5 to10 minutes. They learn by exploring, experimenting, and asking questions…so be ready for all sorts of questions (some that you might not even know how to answer!). Toddlers love to use their imaginations, mimic adults, and repeat games and activities over and over.

> For Colonel George Brandt, behavioral-health chief at the base hospital…"being able to get on the floor and play with your kids. Then you know you're home"
>
> McGurk, T. (2009, November 30). How one Army town copes with posttraumatic stress. *Time Magazine*.

With your partner's help, become involved in the daily routines with your toddler. Routines are a great time to connect with and care for your child. As a returning service member, you have unique strengths in creating an environment that is predictable and safe.

Try to spend some one-on-one quiet time with your child every day, even if just for a few minutes. Get down on his/her level and listen carefully to what he/she wants to tell you. Figure out what your child likes doing (such as his/her favorite game/toy) and play together often.

So what specifically can you do with your toddler? What might he/she enjoy?

Toddlers enjoy playing active games, such as the following:

- Running through the lawn sprinkler
- Building a snowman or making snow angels
- Playing games in the bathtub
- Playing catch, kicking balls, and running (not only are these great exercise, they also give kids opportunities to work on motor skills, coordination and teamwork)
- Cheering on your family's favorite sports teams (put on your favorite team's colors, get out some healthy snacks, and cheer together)

Toddlers enjoy playing with textures, which they can do in these activities:

- Finger painting or working with Play Dough
- Playing in shaving cream
- Playing in a sandbox or with a tray of uncooked rice

Toddlers like using their imagination in play.

- Children learn through play…their memory, creativity, and ability to solve problems are shaped and developed through their play.
- Great toys include blocks, play kitchens, dolls, puzzles, dress-up clothes, pegboards, simple board games and books; but toys don't need to be expensive or fancy. Pots, pans or an empty big box can spark a toddler's imagination. Just be sure that your child is safe and cannot hurt him/herself or anyone else.
- Talk and interact with your child as he/she plays—toddlers love for adults to describe and mimic their play behaviors.
- Join in your toddler's imaginary world. Let him/her take the lead during playtime, and don't be afraid to be silly. Encourage your child's healthy imagination.

Toddlers want to be independent. Instead of fighting your toddler's normal desire to be independent, roll with it!

- Invite your child to help around the house.
- Give your child simple tasks that he/she can do with few directions, such as putting the toys in the toy chest.
- Turn family chores into a game or a learning experience. You can sing a song or play "musical chairs" during clean-up, ask your child to count the number of toys he/she puts away, or help him/her sort clothes by colors.
- Many children will be happy to do tasks with a little help from their parents. Toddlers like to feel helpful, and will usually keep helping if you praise them for their assistance.

Special Tips for Partners/Family Members

- Support your Veteran in getting to know your toddler again. This can be a special time for the two of you as you share in the joys of your child's spirit, endearing behaviors, and energy.
- Your Veteran may have some great ideas about how to parent. Your toddler may respond to these new techniques well, so be creative and try them out! As long as the toddler is safe, it is ok for your Veteran to do things differently than you.
- Work together with your Veteran to include him/her in your child's daily routines. For example, you may decide that the Veteran always reads books to your child before bed. Tricky as it may be for you, try to let him/her create his/her own routines and ways of doing a task instead of jumping in with, "No, that's not the way I do it…"

Adapted from: www.welcomebackparenting.org

SPECIFIC ISSUES WITH TODDLERS

Parenting a toddler comes with a unique set of challenges (and rewards). This section contains suggestions for dealing with some of the most common issues faced by parents of toddlers: separation anxiety, toilet training, whining/tantrums, managing aggressive behavior, and discipline and the power of praise. If you have concerns about other issues, talk to your child's healthcare provider and/or look at the resources listed in the back of this booklet.

Separation Anxiety

As every military family knows, separations are a part of life, and they can be particularly challenging for young children. Separation anxiety can develop when children become upset when a parent or primary caregiver leaves. Although not all children experience this, it is a common developmental stage. Separation anxiety is often strongest when children are developing new independence and skills (such as learning to walk or run), and when there are changes in the family (such as deployments, a new childcare situation, or a new baby).

Although this can be a difficult stage for parents and children, here are some helpful suggestions for dealing with separations:

1. Stay calm yourself. Having your child cry, cling to you, or scream when you leave can be tough, so take some deep breaths. Remind yourself that your child will be just fine a few minutes after you leave, and try to distract yourself after you leave.

2. Prepare your child for upcoming separations. When getting ready for the day or riding in the car, talk through the day's activities so that your child knows what to expect (including that you will be picking him/her up later). Avoid talking about these things at bedtime, as upsetting discussions can disturb sleep.

3. If your child is entering a new situation, spend some time together in that setting before you leave. For example, spend 10 minutes playing with your child in the new daycare class before leaving.

4. Create a consistent, predictable routine for transitions in your child's day (such as when dropping him/her off at daycare). Reassure your child that you will be back, give him/her a hug or kiss, say a brief goodbye such as "After awhile, crocodile" or "Have a great time," and then leave quickly. Although it may be tempting to sneak away without your child noticing, this will create more, not less anxiety in the long run.

5. Engage other adults in helping your child transition from you to another setting. Identify someone to whom you can hand off your child when you leave. He/she can distract your child, get him/her engaged in another activity, or join in your routine for leaving (such as watching Daddy through the window and waving goodbye).

6. Once you leave, give your child time to ease into his/her new setting. Repeated trips back to be with your child are upsetting for everyone.

7. Consider giving your toddler a “linking object” such as a bracelet, special blanket, picture or other item that he/she can look at and touch when he/she misses you.

8. If you worry about your child after leaving, it is ok to call and check on him/her. Typically, you will discover that he/she was comforted shortly after you left and is now playing happily.

9. Keep your promises. It is important to be honest with your child about the length of the separation and to return when you say you will.

10. Through separation, your child learns that you will come back, and that he/she can count on you.

Special notes

If your child is upset with only one childcare situation but seems to do better in other settings, it may be time to take another look at that setting/environment to make sure that it is a good fit for your child.

You may want to “practice” separations for short periods of time at home through pretend play. Practice saying goodbye to your child at home, leaving him/her briefly (a couple minutes) in a safe room alone, and then coming back in to celebrate. Alternately, have your child pretend to drop you off at school and head to work. This type of play can help your toddler prepare for and practice coping skills for necessary separations.

Check out the Resource Section of this booklet for a listing of great books to read to toddlers about separations.

Finally, if these ideas don’t work, or if you are concerned about how upset your child becomes when you leave, talk to his/her healthcare provider. You should also contact your child’s doctor or a counselor if your child appears to be having high anxiety or nightmares, does not calm down shortly after the separation, or seems very worried about being separated from parents.

Toilet Training

Learning to use the toilet is a big event in a young child's life. Most children want to learn how to use the "potty" and are proud of their achievement.

Toilet training is easiest when children are physically and emotionally ready, which is typically between the ages of 2 and 4. Girls usually gain physical control over their bowel and bladder muscles before boys do. On average, most girls are potty-trained between 2 and 3 and most boys between 3 and 4. Don't be alarmed if your child doesn't follow this pattern closely; individual children mature physically at different rates.

The secret to potty training success is patience and timing. Emotional readiness also is important. Many bright, normal, healthy, 3-year-olds may not be interested in learning to use the toilet. Learning is a full-time job for most toddlers, and learning to use the toilet may not be as important to them as learning to climb, jump, run, and talk. A toddler who resists toilet training now may be ready in 3 to 6 months, often learning almost overnight.

How to Tell if Your Child Is Ready

Check the following that apply to your child in the past few weeks:

• Follows simple directions	• Is dry after nap time
• Remains dry for at least 2 hours at a time during the day	• Walks to and from the bathroom, can pull down and up his/her own pants
• Has regular and predictable bowel movements	• Seems interested in the toilet or potty chair
• Seems uncomfortable with soiled or wet diapers	• Has asked to wear “big kid” underwear

If you placed a check mark beside most of the items, you may want to introduce toilet training. If you left most of the items unchecked, be patient a while longer. Rushing a child through the toilet-training process will result in tears and frustration. Starting too soon may actually slow down the process. Toilet training will be easier when your child is ready.

Ten Steps to Toilet Training

Step 1. Relax! A calm, easygoing approach to toilet training works best. Learning to use the toilet takes time, and each child is different.

Step 2**.** Show your child what to do in the bathroom. Toddlers imitate adults or older children. The next time a toddler follows you into the bathroom, talk about what you do when you use the toilet.

Step 3**.** Teach your toddler the words your family uses for body parts, urine, and bowel movements (but expect that others are sure to hear these words from him/her). There is nothing quite like a toddler loudly announcing in the grocery store check-out lane, "Go poo-poo!"

Step 4**.** Help your child recognize when he/she is urinating or having a bowel movement. Most children will grunt, squat, turn red in the face, or simply stop playing for a moment. Children must be aware that they are going to the bathroom before they can do anything about it.

Step 5**.** Borrow or purchase a potty chair or a potty attachment for the toilet. If you purchase a potty attachment, be sure to get one with a footrest. This allows a child to sit more comfortably and makes it easier to push during the bowel movement. The American Academy of Pediatrics suggests that parents and caregivers avoid urine deflectors because they can cut a child who is climbing on or off a potty chair. You may want to let the child get used to the idea by sitting on the potty while fully clothed.

Step 6. Read potty books to your child. Many good books have been written about learning to use the potty and may be found at your local library or bookstore. Reading a book together helps children understand the process and understand that other children also learn to use the potty. Several excellent books are listed at the end of this booklet.

Step 7. Purchase training pants and easy-to-remove clothing (clothes that don’t have buttons, zippers and belts). Just getting to the potty on time is a major task for most children, so choose clothes your child can take off quickly.

Step 8**.** When your child tells you that he/she needs to use the potty, help with taking off clothing and sit him/her on the potty for a few minutes. Stay with him/her. Reading a book together helps pass the time and takes the pressure off an immediate result.

Step 9. After 4 to 5 minutes without results, help your child off the potty. Give hugs and praise for a successful effort. Comment simply that he/she can try again later if the effort wasn't successful. Don't be surprised if your child has a bowel movement or urinates right after being taken off the toilet. This is not unusual. Accidents and near misses generally are not an act of defiance or stubbornness. It simply takes time to learn this new skill. If accidents seem to be frequent, it may be best to try toilet training a few months later.

Step 10. Wipe your child carefully. Wipe girls from front to back to prevent infection. Teach children to always wash hands with soap and water after using the potty. Set a good example by washing your own hands.

More Ideas

- If possible, plan to spend as much time and energy as you can for at least 3-4 days to begin toilet training. Maintaining the same routine for 3-4 weeks can also be helpful.
- Some parents find it helpful to establish a routine by putting a child on the toilet for 3-4 minutes right after snack time, before naps, after naps, and after meals. However, a child will not always use the potty at these times.
- If your family is undergoing a major change - anticipating a new baby, moving to a new home, starting a deployment – it may be best to wait a few months. Toilet training is easiest when everyone can give it full attention.
- It's ok to keep your child in diapers or disposable training pants for sleeping. Nighttime control generally comes many months after daytime control.
- Treat accidents casually. Avoid punishing, scolding, or shaming; rather, keep a positive attitude.

The Big Flush

Children often have one of two reactions to flushing. Either they are fascinated by it (and will do it repeatedly), or they are afraid of it. Children who enjoy flushing like to empty the potty chair into the toilet, wave bye-bye, and watch everything "flush away."

Children who are fearful prefer that parents take charge of this process. Before flushing the toilet, make sure the child is off the potty. Many children not only fear the noise and swirling water but also think they may be flushed down, too. Reassure children that they are safe and that only body wastes and toilet paper will be flushed away.

Reprinted with permission from the National Network for Child Care - NNCC. Oesterreich, L. (1995). Guidance and discipline. In L. Oesterreich, B. Holt, & S. Karas, *Iowa family child care handbook* [Pm 1541] (pp. 242-245). Ames, IA: Iowa State University Extension.

Whining, Tantrums and Other Irritating Behaviors

Every day your toddler is becoming more independent and able to let the world know what he/she wants, likes, and dislikes. You can communicate and play more with your toddler as he/she becomes more confident and assertive, but you can also experience a side of your child you've never seen before, the dreaded tantrums and whining. From simple complaining to full-blown melt-downs when your child is screaming at the top of his/her lungs and throwing him/herself down on the floor, these tests of independence can be quite challenging for parents.

You've probably heard people say that ignoring problems won't make them go away. While this is generally true, it is not the case for tantrums. In fact, the best way to eliminate tantrums and whining is to IGNORE them. When you do so, your child will probably scream louder or whine more at first. However, he/she will soon discover that escalating the "fit" doesn't work in getting your attention, and gradually the whining and tantrums will happen less often.

Practical suggestions on how to ignore irritating behaviors include the following:

- If you are at home, make sure that your child is safe and then leave him/her alone during the tantrum. Do not talk to, scold, look at, or interact with your child.
- If you find it difficult to ignore, try counting to 10, singing yourself a song, or listening to music.
- Some parents gently move their children to a "whining room" and tell the child that he/she can come out when ready to speak in a non-whiny voice. Notice and praise your child when he/she cooperates and uses a polite voice.
- It may be helpful to pretend that you can't understand your child when he/she acts in an irritating manner. Don't speak directly to him/her, but say out loud, "*I sure wish I could understand Susie, but I just don't know what she's saying when she whines. I'll be ready to help her when she uses her words.*"

- If you are out in public, it's ok to ignore the irritating behavior and carry on with your activity (as long as you know your child is safe).
- If you can't ignore your child in public, remove yourself and him/her from the situation. Calmly let him/her know that kids who are screaming can't go to the store or other special places.
- Don't give in. If you respond to your child's whining or tantrums by giving in, he/she will learn that doing so works to get what he/she wants. Although it may seem easier at the moment to buy that candy bar or stay at the park for 5 more minutes, you can bet that your child will whine and throw tantrums even longer in the future.
- To prevent future tantrums, it can be helpful to try and figure out why your child became upset. What was happening before the tantrum? Try to problem solve ways to prevent future tantrums. For example, does your child have more problems when tired, out to eat, or at the grocery store? If you notice your child is becoming upset, he/she may benefit from a little extra attention, support, and praise.
- Whatever way you choose to deal with whining and tantrums, remember to be consistent and do things the same way every time.

Managing Aggressive Behaviors

Ignoring whining, tantrums and other irritating behaviors usually works to stop the behavior; however, you need a different set of skills to deal with aggressive behavior (hitting, kicking, biting). Children at this age are exploring their world and discovering what happens when they act in different ways. Part of their experimenting is testing your limits as a parent. You probably hear the word "NO" a lot (and maybe even very loudly!)—your child is discovering what happens when he/she doesn't follow the rules.

Some aggressive behavior is normal for toddlers, but you should not let them hurt others or damage property. Although toddlers are usually not intentionally trying to hurt someone else, they need for you to redirect them. Use of effective discipline now can help your children grow up to become confident, polite, caring individuals.

Here are some suggestions for managing aggressive behavior:

1. The best defense is a good offense. Try to make sure that your child is not too tired, hungry, bored or over stimulated, as these states tend to make children more likely to misbehave. . Young children have a lot of energy and need good ways to use it, such as running and playing outdoors.

2. Stay calm. When your child behaves inappropriately, use a calm, low voice to describe the problem behavior, the impact it has on others, and the consequence. For example: "*When you hit Timmy, it hurts him. That makes him sad. It's not ok to hurt others, so now you need to sit in timeout*." Then pay attention to the child who has been hurt, not the offending child. After your child has successfully completed a brief timeout period (typically 1-3 minutes for toddlers), remind him/her that he/she needs to follow the rule (whatever the rule might be) and that he/she now needs to say "*I'm sorry*" to the person whom he/she hurt. Help your child make the apology and praise him/her afterward ("*Thank you for apologizing to Timmy. Now you can play*.").

3. Set clear limits. Be clear about the rules and your expectations for your child's behavior. For example, "*Hitting is not okay. We use our hands to be gentle."*

4. Teach your child good ways to communicate feelings or needs. A few words, such as "*Stop*" or "*Don't touch*" can help children let other children know when they feel attacked, crowded, angry, or upset. Helping children use their words can greatly reduce biting, hitting and other aggressive behaviors.

5. Lead by example. Your child is watching you and learning how to manage anger and frustration. Model respectful, calm behavior (even when you are upset), and your child will learn to do the same. Do not use violence when you are angry or upset.

6. Limit exposure to violent TV, video games and movies. Research is clear that the more violence children watch, the more likely they are to behave aggressively.

Effective Discipline and the Power of Praise

"Discipline" comes from the Latin word "to teach" and effective discipline is just that – teaching your child how to behave in the world and interact with others. Many people think of discipline only in terms of punishment or consequences, but effective discipline is much more.

Effective discipline requires three things:

- A positive, loving relationship with your child
    - Your child is more likely to mind when he/she feels close to you.
    - Especially if your child is having behavioral problems, spend time every day playing with him/her and building your relationship.
    - Model the behavior you wish to teach.
        - ✓ Want respectful children? Speak respectfully.
        - ✓ Want children who work hard? Let them watch and help you as you work.
- Praise, praise, praise
    - You get more of what you notice. Pay attention only to bad behavior, and you will get more bad behavior. Pay attention to the moments (even if they seem rare) when your child is behaving well, and those moments will become more frequent.
    - Children love to be praised, especially by you! When your child is doing something you like, specifically and clearly say so, such as, "*I love the way you are being gentle with your sister,"* or "*Thank you for using your words to tell me what you want*."
- Using clear, consistent, immediate consequences
    - Creating rules and sticking with the consequences is a tough but important part of parenting. Here are some suggestions for doing this well.
    - Decide (as a team with your co-parent) what your rules and expectations are in advance. Make sure your expectations for your child fit his/her age and level of maturity.
    - Give consequences immediately after the bad/wrong behavior and relate the consequence to the behavior. (This approach is more effective than spanking.)
        - ✓ Is your child using a toy to hurt others? Take the toy away, and move your child away from other kids.
        - ✓ Is your child throwing food? It may be time to end the meal.

- Clearly enforce the consequences every time. Being consistent is key.
- Remain calm and speak like a robot (with no emotion in your voice). Instead of reacting to your distress, your child will learn that his/her misbehavior produced the unwanted outcome, and he/she will want to avoid that behavior in the future.
- Don’t lecture. A clear, simple message about what he/she did wrong is best.

Reference: Pediatrics 1998; 101(4):723-28 American Academy of Pediatrics
Guidance for
Committee on Psychosocial Aspects of Child and Family Health

WHAT ARE RED FLAGS FOR CONCERN WITH YOUR TODDLER?

Sometimes it's really tough to know if your toddler's behavior is "normal" or if you should call the doctor. You know your child the best, and you know when his/her behavior has changed from what is "normal" for him/her.

Research has found that the following behaviors may indicate difficulties in toddlers:

- A change in your toddler's level of clinginess, crying or whining
- Having more difficulty calming down and being comforted by you
- High levels of aggression (hurting toys, pets, other children, themselves)
- Considerable changes in eating or sleeping patterns
- Losing skills that had previously been mastered (such as talking or toilet training) or experiencing significant delays in milestones discussed in the development section of this pamphlet

Remember: Toddlers (like adults) have bad days—this is normal! You may see more difficulties during times of higher family stress such as when a Veteran returns after a deployment; these short-term reactions usually go away with time. However, if problems last more than a couple of months, your child and family may benefit from talking to a healthcare professional.

Adapted from: www.welcomebackparenting.org

Note: If you find yourself struggling with anger, substance abuse, depression, or post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) symptoms, parenting a toddler will likely be more challenging. One of the most important things you can do for your toddler is get support for yourself. It may be valuable to seek professional help if you find yourself reacting poorly to or feeling overwhelmed by your toddler.

WHO SHOULD YOU CALL IF YOU HAVE CONCERNS?

If you need moral support or a "listening ear" about parenting, you may want to contact

- A friend (especially one who has children!)
- A relative
- Someone from a community organization (such as your church, book club, etc.)

If you want to gather more information about a specific issue, you can

- Check out a book at the library.
- Look online at the helpful websites in our resource list.
- Ask your pediatrician for information on the topic.
- Talk to your childcare providers or your child's teacher.

Other helpful resources include your

- Pediatrician or child's doctor
- Nurse line
- Mental health professional
- Department of Human Services
- Community/county health department
- WIC (Women, Infants and Children) offices

TAKING CARE OF YOURSELF AS A PARENT

Being a parent is probably one of the most difficult jobs you will ever have, but also one of the most rewarding. You are truly the most important person/people in your child's life—an amazing opportunity, but a big sense of responsibility, too.

It's easy to glamorize the job of parenting when you see pictures or watch movies of happy families, with everyone smiling, a beautiful baby bouncing in someone's arms, and the family off for a fun day at the zoo. Those special times are great--but you usually don't see the many loads of dirty laundry, the exhausted parents due to middle-of-the-night feedings, the dozens of dirty diapers, the worry about the child's first ear infection, and the decreased patience you sometimes feel with your partner. All those parts of parenting don't look quite as exciting, but are very real and can be stressful for all parent(s).

So, it's incredibly important that you as a parent take good care of yourself. What energizes one parent may not work well for another, so you may experiment with different options. Remember that you're being a good parent by taking time for you! Here are some suggestions that other parents find helpful:

- Remember that this is a phase of your life. You will eventually have more time for yourself. Try to enjoy this time with your children!

- Make time for regular physical exercise. You can be creative and include your child (like walks to the park), or explore childcare options (like Mom's Day Out) for a solo workout at the local gym. Physical exercise is the very best technique for managing your stress.

- Eat a balanced diet.

- Try to get enough sleep (7-8 hours per night). Consider taking a nap when your child is resting.

- Work to create some "alone" time every day. Perhaps your family or friends can help with childcare to allow for this time in your schedule. Also, establishing (and following) a set bedtime for your children can give you some much-needed alone time or time to share with your partner in the evening.

- Connect with supportive friends and family members. Although exchanging text messages and chatting on Facebook can be great, there's nothing like spending quality time together, even if it's just a short chat over coffee.

- Practice regular relaxation techniques, such as deep breathing, prayer/meditation, and muscle relaxation. You may find relaxation audio CDs to be calming as well.

- Be creative about ways you can include your children in the things you love or enjoy. Like cooking? Get them a stool to stand on in the kitchen and have them "help" you. Toddlers can scoop oatmeal from one container to another, and as they get older they can be involved in pouring and stirring. Enjoy gardening? Get your child a small shovel to dig with, or have him/her help pick out bulbs. Enjoy reading? Take your kids to the library. There are hundreds of ways to introduce and include your children in the things you love.

Part of being a good parent involves knowing when you feel overwhelmed and need a break. What can you do when your stress level is high?

- Ensure that your child is safe and go into another room for a few minutes to calm down.
- Take a walk or a jog
- Take several deep breaths.
- Schedule an activity you enjoy (for you alone or with your partner/ a friend).
- Talk to a trusted friend or family member. Ask for help!
- Remember that this is just a season of your life. Although things may feel overwhelming or out of balance right now, it's not always going to be like this.

RECONNECTING WITH YOUR PARTNER AFTER DEPLOYMENT

Just as it's important for parents to take a break from the stress of parenting for "alone" time, it's also vital that you take time to nurture your relationships. As you are adjusting to having your family back together, your relationship with your spouse/partner will need attention, time, and energy. Keeping a relationship strong takes work, and the well-being of your relationship is important for you and your children. That's true whether you and your partner are currently married, single or divorced.

> "I'm just excited…I'm ready to start the next chapter of our lives."
>
> Joy Lindgren (whose husband was returning from his third deployment). Slipke (2010)

When you're exhausted from caring for your child(ren), it can be easy to neglect these relationships. However, research shows that having people you can count on is important for your physical and mental health.

When encouraged to make time for adult relationships, parents often say, "But we don't have time….we can't afford it…we're too busy!" Guess what? We understand—but we challenge you to be creative. For example, some couples have found these ideas helpful:

- Try Mother's Day Out and meet your partner for lunch
- Get a babysitter and have an evening out (or maybe try to trade babysitting with another family you know)
- Ask extended family to watch your child(ren) for an evening, or maybe even for a get-away weekend for the two of you!
- Commit to spending 10 minutes as a couple every night after you put the kids to bed. Focus this time only on the two of you (not on the kids, bills, schedule, etc.) and use it as a time to re-connect.
- Join a couples Sunday School class at your church / synagogue / house of worship.
- Join a gym/YWCA (pick one that has good child care!) and regularly exercise together.

Tips for Communicating With Your Partner

When a service member comes home, most families are filled with excitement and have high expectations. Often partners have very different expectations of what life will be like. Sometimes, the reality of a homecoming does not exactly meet both partners' expectations.

It is important to talk about the changes that have taken place during this time apart. Spend time talking with each other – you've both been through a lot during the deployment, and you both have changed. Talking openly can help you get to know each other again, gain a sense of intimacy, and rebuild family routines. If you struggled with issues of closeness and communication before the relationship, this can be an incredible opportunity to strengthen and develop those skills.

Some Veterans quickly figure out that the way they talked to others in the military doesn't work very well in family life!

Military communication is often marked by:

Giving orders

Requiring obedience without question

Avoiding emotions (other than anger)

Expecting an immediate response.

Such communication does not encourage skills that are essential elements of intimate relationships, such as:

Listening

Give and take

Compromise

Negotiation

Consideration of the other's feelings

Expression of vulnerability (such as sadness or fear)

Comforting your partner

Therefore, you, as a Veteran, may want to think about using "home-front" communication skills instead of "military" communication. We expect those close to you will greatly appreciate your efforts, and your relationships will grow closer. Of course, these changes do not happen overnight—you've been gone for many months. However, if you keep these ideas in your mind and work with them, you can improve your communication quite quickly.

You both may find some of these communication skills to be helpful reminders:

- Take turns talking and sharing thoughts and feelings.

- Take responsibility for your own feelings and actions by describing specifically how you feel (such as, "I feel . . . .", "I'm concerned about . . . .").

For example, instead of yelling, *"You never listen to me!"* you could say, "*I feel frustrated when you text message other people when I'm trying to talk to you.*"

- Listen and avoid interrupting when your partner shares his/her feelings and opinions.

- Don't assume you know what your partner is thinking or feeling or that he/she knows what you are thinking and feeling.

- Always show respect! If either of you is feeling out of control, take a time-out and return to the discussion at a later, calmer time.

Helpful Strategies for Couples during the Reintegration Process

- Go slowly - don't try to make up for lost time. Be patient with yourself, your partner, and your children. You cannot rush this process.

- Accept that your partner has changed during the time apart. Take time to get to know each other again!

- Keep talking. Talking can help you reconnect as a couple and as a family.

> "Lt. Col John Zenker told the soldiers their mission was almost complete, but first they needed to finish one more step: Reintegrate with their families, friends and jobs… You need to be patient with yourselves and your loved ones."
>
> Slipke, D. (2010, January 10). Oklahoma soldiers rejoin their families, lives. *The Oklahoman.*

- Discuss openly what you expect and how you want to handle household responsibilities, parenting responsibilities, and other matters that changed during the deployment(s). Now may be a time to get rid of a chore that you really hate (maybe your partner wouldn't mind mowing the lawn), and you can take over balancing the checkbook. Be flexible!

- Work on skills to deal with painful feelings rather than lashing out. You both may have developed some strong feelings during the deployment, and these may emerge now that the Veteran is home. Check in with yourself if you see this happening. Use healthy ways of managing strong feelings (exercise, journaling, prayer/meditation, etc.), and share your emotions with your partner when both of you are calm.

- Tell your partner how he/she can help you. Be specific. Then, be sure to say THANKS when you notice him/her being supportive.

  For example,

  "*I need to talk about some things. Do you have some time now to listen?*"

  "*I know you're trying to be helpful when you give me advice, but I really don't need that right now. If you could just listen for now, it would mean a lot to me.*"

  "Thanks so much for taking the kids to the park this afternoon. I really needed some time to myself, and it was great to have some peace and quiet. I enjoyed this evening with you and the kids a lot more because of it!"

- Seek professional help if you need to do so. If your relationship is not improving after a couple of months, you may need help from a professional, preferably one with experience in working with families dealing with deployment.

Special note for family members/friends: Don't force your Veteran to talk about the experience of war, but be open to it if/when the time is right. If your Veteran does not want to talk about his/her experiences in Iraq/Afghanistan, don't push him/her. It may be helpful for the Veteran to discuss his/her tough experiences first with a mental health professional or chaplain.

If your Veteran wants to share his/her painful experiences with you, try to listen without judging. The key is to gain his/her trust, so he/she feels that it is safe to talk with you. However, if you become overwhelmed yourself, gently and lovingly tell him/her that you need a break. It may be best for the Veteran to seek professional assistance at that time.

Adapted from: www.welcomebackparenting.org

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES ON ISSUES WITH TODDLERS

Books to Read to Toddlers

Separations

Benjamin Comes Back. (2000). A. Brandt. Monarch Books.

Bye-Bye Time. (2008) E. Verdick. Free Spirit Publishing.

Don't Go. (2001). J. Zalben. Clarion Books.

I Love You All Day Long. (2002). F. Rusackas. HarperCollins.

Mommy in my Pocket. (2008). C. Senderak. Hyperion Book.

The Kissing Hand. (1993) A. Penn. Tanglewood Press.

Will You Come Back for Me? (1988). A. Tompert. Albert Whitman & Company.

Aggressive Behavior

Feet Are Not for Kicking. (2000). M. Heinlen.Free Spirit Publishing.

Hands Are Not for Hitting. (2000). M. Agassi. Free Spirit Publishing.

Teeth Are Not for Biting. (2000). M. Heinlen. Free Spirit Publishing.

Toilet Training

Going to the Potty. (1997). F.Rogers. Penguin Putnam Books.

KoKo Bear's New Potty. (2003). V. Lansky, J. Prince. Book Peddlers.

Once Upon a Potty. (1999). A. Frankel. HarperFestival.

Your New Potty. (1989). J.Cole. William Morrow & Company.

Books for Parents

American Academy of Pediatrics Guide To Toilet Training. (2003). M.L. Wolraich & S.Tippins. Random House Publishing.

Baby Book: Everything You Need to Know about Your Baby from Birth to Age Two, 2nd ed. (2003). W. Sears & M. Sears. Little, Brown & Company.

Becoming the Parent You Want To Be: A Sourcebook of Strategies for the First Five Years. (1997). L. Davis. Broadway.

Emotional First Aid for Parents: Helping Children and Adolescents Cope with Predictable Life Crises. (2010). G. Koocher & A. LaGreca. Oxford University Press.

Sleeping Through the Night, Revised Edition: How Infants, Toddlers, and Their Parents Can Get a Good Night's Sleep. (2005). J. Mindell. Harper Collins.

Toilet Training: A Practical Guide to Daytime and Nighttime Training. (2002). V. Lansky. Book Peddlers.

1-2-3 Magic: Effective Discipline for Children 2-12, 3rd ed. (2004). T. Phelan. ParentMagic, Inc.

Websites

American Academy of Pediatrics: www.healthychildren.org

Zero to Three Organization: www.zerotothree.org

American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry:
www.aacap.org/cs/root/facts_for_families/facts_for_families

US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention – Child Development:
www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/child/