



Grandparenting

When the Answer is No: Setting Limits with Love for Toddlers

In order to follow rules and understand limits, children need to have self-control. Self-control is the ability to cope with strong feelings and stop oneself from doing something that is not allowed. Learning self-control begins at birth and continues to develop throughout childhood. Young children learn self-control through interactions with peers and guidance from parents, teachers, and other loving adults.

The Power of Prevention: Heading Off Misbehavior

- **Be consistent.** Setting and enforcing clear rules is key to helping children learn to make good choices. If every time a child throws a toy it gets taken away, he quickly learns not to throw toys. But when the rules keep changing, it is confusing for young children to know which rules they can count on.
- **Give your grandchild tools to help her cope with waiting.** Need 10 minutes to fold some clothes? Set a kitchen timer. This helps your grandchild feel more in control and therefore better able to cope.
- **Help your grandchild with daily transitions.** For example, if you notice your grandchild has a hard time dealing with transitions, such as going from lunch to nap, you can give him a warning 5 minutes before. It is also helpful to establish a routine that helps him make the change, such as starting a favorite book that you finish when he wakes up.
- **Give choices that head off misbehavior.** For example, when your child is having trouble sharing a ball, you might say: *You have a choice to make. You can choose to take turns with the ball or we can put the ball away.* Be very matter-of-fact and use simple language. Taking the emotion out of limit-setting helps children focus on the choice they have to make and not on the anger of the other person or feeling bad about themselves.
- **Look for ways to help your grandchild practice self-control.** Turn-taking games can help children learn to wait and control their impulses. Take turns hitting a soft foam ball off a tee. Have each of you choose an instrument to play and set an egg-timer for 1 minute. When the timer goes off, switch instruments and set the timer again.



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Responding Sensitively and Effectively to Misbehavior

- **Stay calm.** The calmer you are, the calmer your grandchild will be. Children need you to be their rock when they are falling apart.
- **Set the limit.** Be matter-of-fact. The less emotional you are, the more effective you will be. *Throwing blocks is against the rules. No more blocks now. You can have another chance with blocks in the afternoon.* (It is important to give children a chance to make the right choice fairly soon after the “violation.”)
- **Set the limit, but show your grandchild that you understand his feelings :** *You were angry that Damon took one of your blocks, but it’s not okay to throw them. That could hurt someone. My job is to keep everyone safe.*
- **Avoid shaming:** Let your grandchild know you believe that she doesn’t want to be hurtful. (This is critical so that children do not develop a sense that they are “bad”.) *When you are angry, sometimes your feelings are so strong and you lose control. I know you don’t want to hurt Damon.*
- **Tame the tantrum.** Once you’ve set the limit, your work is done. If your grandchild throws a tantrum, he is simply having trouble dealing with his disappointment, frustration, or anger. Try to stay calm and ignore the behavior. As your grandchild is kicking and screaming, do something unpredictable. Pick up one of his favorite books and start to read it aloud. Or just go about your business. He will see that his behavior is not drawing you in and is more likely to give it up and move on.
- **Provide a safe place for your grandchild to take a break.** Another option for when your grandchild is “losing it” is to provide a safe space (it might have some pillows, stuffed animals, and books) where she can take a break and calm down. This is not punishment. Instead it gives your grandchild a safe place to calm down. *It’s not okay to be screaming in the middle of the family room. You are having a hard time and need a break to calm down. When you are calm again, I can’t wait to blow bubbles with you.*
- **Discuss what happened and problem-solve.** When children are in the middle of a tantrum, their strong emotions make it difficult for them to think clearly (just like most adults!) So don’t try to reason with your grandchild when he is having a tantrum. Once he is calm, problem-solve together: *You were really angry and you kicked your brother. It’s okay to be angry, but it’s not okay to kick. Kicking hurts.* Then see if he can come up with some better solutions. If not, offer some ideas: *Let’s give your brother some of his own cups to play with so he won’t mess up yours.*
- **Reconnect.** When your grandchild has calmed down, let her know what a good job she did soothing herself and then move on.

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