

Where's the Love?

He wriggles out of hugs, ignores your requests, and only wants Daddy to give him a bath. Your kid may be little, but he sure knows how to diss you big-time.

BY CHERYL LOCK

Ah, remember when your sweetie was just a baby? All you had to do was make a funny face and he'd coo, smile, even let loose some giggles. He couldn't have shown his devotion and adoration any more clearly. Now, your little one—who's not even 3—is turning away from your smooches, sometimes going so far as to blurt out, "Go away, Mommy!" You sort of expected this at some point down the line, but so soon? Before he can tie his own shoelaces?

In a word, yes. Two-year-olds are just becoming aware of themselves as separate from you and are also beginning to understand that they have their own emotions distinct from yours. They're experimenting with all sorts of new social skills, and part of that process involves testing the relationships that are most important to them. In other words, your little kid is growing up, and any pulling away or acting out at this age is developmentally appropriate behavior.

Okay, but how do you not take the brush-off personally? Keep in mind that the moods of toddlers change quickly and without apparent meaning, so you'll be back in his



That snub stings, but it's healthy kid behavior.

Playing With Food

You can expect your kid to be especially hands-on when she's exploring the different textures, colors, and flavors of foods. "Toddlers need to feel the Jell-O slip through their fingers to learn about it," Dr. Acredolo explains. "They're also curious about cause and effect at this age." If they drop food on the ground, will it roll, splatter, or make a loud noise?

LIMIT THE MESS Place a large wipeable mat underneath the high chair so you're not worried about her messy eating. If you jump up to clean every time she spills or drops, it will make you nuts—and tempt your toddler to play a game of "Let's see how many times Mom will pick up my cup!" But be sure you know when enough is enough. "If she begins to throw more food than she's eating, it's time to end the meal," Dr. Acredolo says.

Emptying Your Cupboards

Pots, pans, and cooking utensils are fun toys for your kid—and they're also great developmental tools. Placing containers inside each other improves dexterity and spatial awareness, while banging on pots builds hand-eye coordination.

LIMIT THE MESS Keep one kitchen cabinet filled with safe cookware your child can play with, and babyproof the rest with latches. Remember to fill the special cupboard with items you seldom use so you don't have to wash them frequently. □

Q & A

Every morning, my 18-month-old watches *Sesame Street* with his big

brother. Is it okay to let the younger one take part in this joint TV time?

The answer depends on whom you ask. The American Academy of Pediatrics officially recommends against any TV for kids under 2. But lots of other experts think it's fine in cases like this. "An hour of high-quality TV is not doing anyone any harm," says Alison Gopnik, Ph.D., author of *The Philosophical Baby: What Children's Minds Tell Us About Truth, Love, and the Meaning of Life*. So ask yourself, "Am I happy with how my kids are engaged in this particular way at this particular moment?" If you are, then leave them alone. And if your child is participating in what's going on during an episode—he's counting with Elmo, trying to suss out Mr. Noodle's actions—all the better.



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good graces again soon. Meanwhile, don't sulk or ignore the snub. Instead, tailor your response to the type of diss your kid's dishing, and teach him that even if he's not feeling all huggy and kissy at that moment, you'll always be there for him.

Playing Favorites

Your daughter loved climbing into your lap for a reading (or ten) of *Go, Dog. Go!* Now she begs for Daddy. Only Daddy.

WHAT GIVES Kids this age are learning to assert their preferences. "When a child chooses one parent over the other, it's just like when she says she wants this type of cookie and not that one, or this toy and not the other one. It's how she begins to take control of her environment," says *Parents* advisor William Doherty, Ph.D., professor of family social science at the University of Minnesota and author of *Take Back Your Kids*. "Unfortunately, a toddler is still too young to understand how her actions could make another person feel sad or hurt."

THE RIGHT RESPONSE It's okay for your child to favor one parent, but you need to make sure that each of you is still spending some quality time with her. "What you want to avoid is having her decide that there's only one parent in her life for everything," says Dr. Doherty. If she consistently only wants Daddy or Mommy to make her dinner, give her a bath, and read to her at bedtime, you need to be clear about who will do what with

her. You might say, "Mommy is relaxing tonight, so Daddy's going to put you to bed," and leave it at that. You might think about taking on specific roles. For instance, Mom does sing-alongs at bathtime and Dad's in charge of stories.

Resisting Affection

Cuddle time used to be the highlight of your day together, but now your toddler acts as if hugging you is a form of torture.

WHAT GIVES He's setting his own game plan these days and might refuse your affection just to show his independence. "You might be feeling all lovey-dovey at the time, but your child may simply not be in the mood to be affectionate," says *Parents* advisor Fred Volkmar, M.D., director of the Yale Child Study Center and professor of child psychiatry, pediatrics, and psychology at the Yale School of Medicine in New Haven. Also, 2- and 3-year-olds get so absorbed in what they're doing that they can tune out everything else (yes, even you, Mom).

THE RIGHT RESPONSE Time your cuddles carefully—not when he's in the middle of building a really cool block tower, for instance. If he rebuffs your attempts at closeness, let him know that you understand how he's feeling. Say, "You're not in the mood for a hug right now, but maybe you'll want one later." Another way to get close: Try hanging around when your child's playing and wait for an opportunity to join the fun.



Hitting Mommy and Daddy

You turned off the television, and your toddler whopped you because she wanted to watch one more episode of *Dora*.

WHAT GIVES There are a couple of reasons why your normally sweet child has suddenly gone Muhammad Ali on you. "Two-year-olds hit when they're overtired and unable to control their emotions," says Dr. Doherty. She's angry that she isn't getting her way, and you're the target because you're the one who laid down the law. Your daughter also may have resorted to smacking because she doesn't have the words yet to communicate what's bothering her.

THE RIGHT RESPONSE Validate your child's feelings, but make it clear that it's never okay to strike another person. Tell her in a calm and firm voice, "I know you're feeling angry, but don't hit. Hitting hurts." You may even want to give her a time-out so she can calm down. Then work on teaching your child non-aggressive ways to express her anger. Give her words she can use to describe her emotions, or let her know that when she gets frustrated she can simply walk away, stomp her feet, or shake her arms all about to get the "meanies" out. Another idea: Take out some paper and crayons, and tell her to scribble out her anger. Later, take a walk around the block together, treat her to an ice cream, or snuggle on the sofa to remind her how good it feels when Mommy shows her love. Chances are good she'll want to do the same. □

Q & A

My 3-year-old daughter screams many times during the day. I've tried to explain the concept of indoor voices, but it doesn't stop her. What should I do?"

Try to figure out the root cause, and then come up with a firm response. "See whether there's a pattern to her outbursts," says Martha E. Edwards, Ph.D., director of the Ackerman Institute's Center for the Developing Child and Family, in New York City. Is she shouting because she's tired? Frustrated? Wanting attention? For example, if she's having trouble with a task, give her a word for what she is feeling ("frustrated") and offer help. Also, explain that when she screams you can't hear what she actually wants. Then practice using an indoor voice with her. Tell her that when she screams, you won't respond. She'll test you, so when she starts shouting you'll need to ignore her. The behavior will eventually die out if it's not reinforced.

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