

The young couple in my office was anxious about their two year old. The next baby was due in a few months and they had come in for a consultation about how to manage their young son. The problem? How to get their toddler to listen to them.

How to have your child accept structure and limits, and learn the rules of their environment, is an important task for parents.

What comes first.

From the day your baby is born, she is responding to information inside her (grumbling belly, painful ear) and around her. The facial expressions, the tone of voice, the touch and smell of the people interacting with her all give her lots of information to process. Over time, your child makes sense of this information. She will start jumping in her crib when she hears your footsteps in the hallway, cry when she visits the doctor, and run to the highchair when you open the refrigerator. Her responses are based on the predictability and consistency of your behavior. That's how we teach, and that's how they learn.

Kids are reactive

Researchers have filmed infants and measured their responses to the facial gestures of their parents. It is remarkable to see a four month old get agitated at his mother's failure to smile back at him, or spit up and fuss when she ignores his signals for attention. When kids can't figure out what parents want, or are confused by the messages they see, they act up. They whine, cry, sulk, fight and look pretty unhappy.

What parents need to do

When kids learn how to walk it seems that the first thing they do is run away from you at a heart stopping pace. When your two year old starts talking up a storm, his favorite word seems to be "NO", whether he means it or not. As exhausting as these early years are, parents can help their children listen by talking in a way they can hear.

- Be clear--- Instructions to your child should be logical and simple, for example,
 "Big containers are for big hands—mommy will pour you some milk into a smaller pitcher"
- Be patient --Just because you say something once doesn't mean your child will learn it, or want to. Expect that you will have to repeat a rule many times.
- Be firm- When you give in, or change your mind, the rule that your child learns is that you give in,or change your mind. Your child doesn't learn not to hit, or to share nicely, unless you are committed to teaching it.