

What is so terrible about two?

What indeed, and do they need to be that way at all? **Jeremy Clarke** tells us more.

The term 'Terrible Twos' is undoubtedly well known by parents, family members, friends, those in the childcare profession, and anyone who has had contact with parents of a young child. But why would this be the case? It is perhaps an indication of how powerless parents can feel when trying to manage their child's rapidly growing independence, movement and language that it is accepted that tantrums are 'the way children behave at this age', and there is not much that can be done about it? But what is different about this time in life that is so terrible? And if terrible things begin to happen, then why are they happening and what can be done about it? This article aims to look at what the terrible twos are, what Montessori and Erikson theorised in regards to children's development at this stage, and how parents can respond and adapt to ensure a minimal number of terrible times occur.

The terrible twos are not thought to begin at the age of two but around eighteen months old, lasting until the child turns three. They are characterised by actions of defiance – saying no, refusal to follow instructions and screaming/crying tantrums. The triggers for these responses can be incredibly varied, and sometimes could remain a complete mystery to the adult, especially as the child may be unable to verbalise what has happened that has upset them so much. Being asked to wait next to an adult in the queue at a supermarket could trigger the same response to a parent moving a teddy bear from the floor to a bed. To compound the parents loss of understanding of the situation, that

response could vary from a shout of "No!" to a child throwing themselves on the floor whilst kicking and screaming in inconsolable distress. Whatever the event, the underlying factor that is causing distress to the child is the loss of control over their lives. So why is this happening to them now?

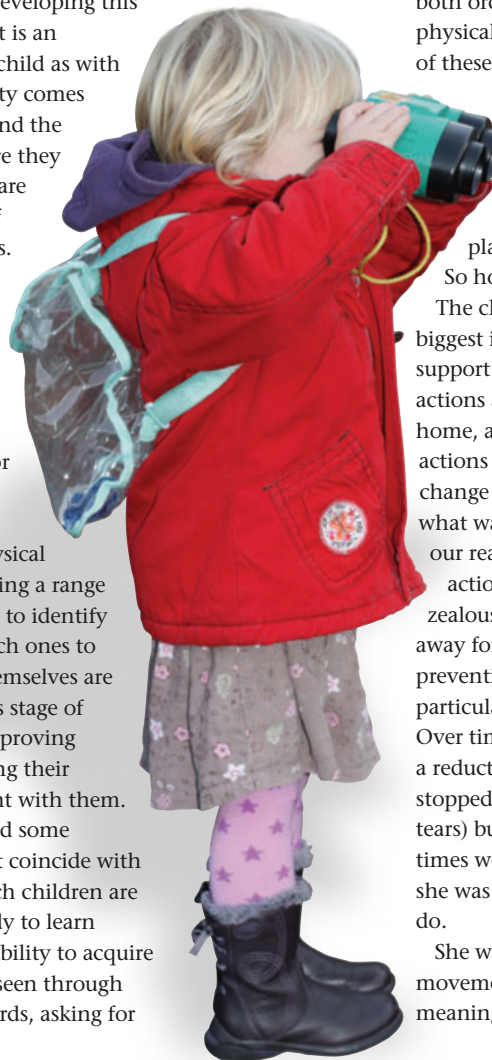
From around eighteen months of age the majority of children will begin walking, and will be developing this skill on a daily basis. It is an amazing time for the child as with their increased mobility comes access to new places and the ability to choose where they are going to go. They are gaining a great deal of control over their lives. In the home these choices will largely be independent – where to move to within a room, and between rooms, and movement in a yard or garden will usually be completely free. This activity is not just physical as the child is employing a range of cognitive functions to identify desires and select which ones to follow. The desires themselves are also developing at this stage of their lives, and the improving movement is increasing their access and engagement with them.

Montessori identified some 'sensitive periods' that coincide with this time, during which children are predisposed to be ready to learn something new. The ability to acquire new language can be seen through children repeating words, asking for



Above: Absolute joy for the cost of a stamp - so much better than saying no

Below: To solve the problem of getting out the house, ask the child to pack a bag of items to take with them – then they have gained some control



objects to be named, and beginning to construct sentences. Sensitivity to small objects at this stage coincides with the child's ability to take themselves to the objects and manipulate them skilfully in their hands – indeed the child may be operating in a sensitive period for movement as they easily learn and develop this skill. The final main sensitivity that occurs during this time is the sensitivity to order. This can be both order through routine, or physically ordering objects. Being aware of these sensitivities will enable parents to have a greater understanding of the choices and behaviours of their children. Being aware of how the child has gained control can help the parents plan and react to a loss of control. So how can they do this?

The change that I believe had the biggest impact on our daughter was to support and enable her choices and actions as much as possible in the home, and only say no when her actions were unsafe. We made this change gradually, after reflecting on what was and was not 'allowed', and our reasons for not allowing some actions. Sometimes it was over-zealous caring such as putting things away for her, or misjudging risk and preventing her from exploring particular spaces or using certain tools. Over time we began to notice not only a reduction in the number of times we stopped her activities (often resulting in tears) but an increase in the number of times we were delighted and amazed as she was able to show us what she could do.

She was soon able to express her movement in ways that were meaningful to her – transporting

objects around the house, putting them in various containers and organising them as she wished. She was also able to take as much time as she needed to do this. This supports her sensitivity to movement by enabling repetition, and her sensitivity to order through her self-directed organisation. Earlier I wrote of the potential upset of a child having a teddy bear moved – this is a real example that demonstrates how a child may have created order even though to an adult eye there is none to be seen. Getting into the habit of talking to children about when you are planning to ‘tidy up’ and involving them in moving things themselves will not only give the child feelings of inclusion and ownership, but also

be queuing up a few minutes before it happens, and talking about how they can do this, can help the child prepare.

The developmental theorist Erik Erikson (1968) believed that children between the ages of eighteen months and three years are passing through a phase that has a great impact on their self esteem that he termed ‘Autonomy vs. Shame’. During this time they are more aware of what they are able to do, and they are now finding out what they should and should not do. He proposed that a child’s independence would blossom if they were sensitively handled in this stage, but if they were not then there could be a negative impact on the child’s self-image and confidence. Imagine a child who is able

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enable them to communicate the order that exists in their mind.

It would be very difficult to run a household to the timetable of a two year old; involving them in the timetable and giving them prior warning of events such as getting ready to go out will give back some control to the child. Knowing what is going to happen may not make the child like it, but it will encourage them to plan ahead thereby reducing the element of surprise. In a situation such as a supermarket queue, where a child may have a desire to be active and move around exploring the interesting and accessible items, telling them they will

to open a fridge, take out a milk bottle and remove the lid. They are able to collect a cup from a cupboard and know they are able to pour. This is a confident and able child, but what happens if their milk pouring goes wrong? Imagine now that the milk is poured into the cup, but the child does not stop and the milk then spills all over the floor. What may be a minor annoyance to the parent can have quite an impact on the child, depending on how the adult responds. An angry reaction from the parent could easily lead the child to feel ashamed that they were unable to pour successfully, or that they tried to do it by themselves.



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Playing in a fountain – an amazing experience for the child as long as the parents allow it



On its own this event may be recovered from, but it is when the child is led to feel shame in their efforts and actions on a regular basis that damage to their self-esteem becomes more serious as the effects can last a lifetime.

The sensitive response would ensure the child felt no shame in their effort, and continued to feel safe and secure when trying new things for themselves. A calm response to the spill that acknowledges something went wrong, coupled with support in pouring the milk so the child can build on their autonomy, would bolster their self-esteem.

The defiance shown during the ‘terrible twos’ can be very trying for parents, but the underlying reasons for the defiance must be kept in mind. The child is at a new stage of their life journey and it is both very exciting and potentially frightening. The sensitive parent will understand that their child is vulnerable at this stage and will support them through calm responses, involving them with decisions, and sharing in the joy of their many achievements.

Bibliography

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Jeremy Clarke began his early years teaching career in 1999. He has been a Montessori trainer for three years and is currently a distance learning tutor at MCI, and MEAB assessor.