

# Getting Past “No!”

Toddlers often put up a fight, but understanding what’s behind your kid’s negativity will help you survive this phase. BY RACHEL HARTMAN

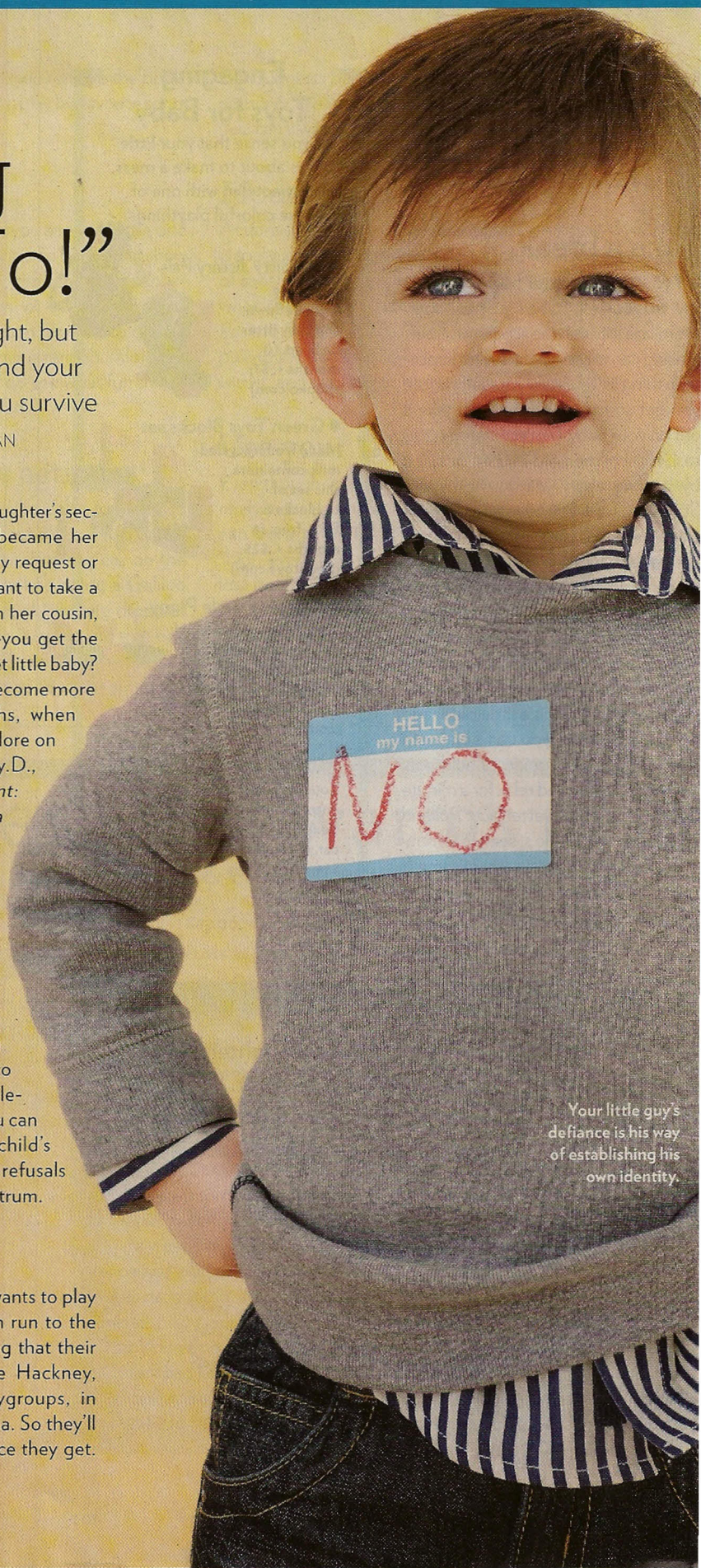
**I**n the months leading up to my daughter’s second birthday, “No!” suddenly became her standard response to nearly every request or suggestion I made. No, she didn’t want to take a bath, no, she didn’t want to play with her cousin, or go to bed, or hold my hand, or—you get the idea. What had happened to my sweet little baby?

A lot, it turns out. Most children become more defiant starting around 18 months, when they’re beginning to toddle and explore on their own, notes Fran Walfish, Psy.D., author of *The Self-Aware Parent: Resolving Conflict and Building a Better Bond With Your Child*. “During this phase, your little one needs to claim herself as a separate being from you,” she explains. “Responding with ‘no’ is one way to declare her independence. It’s her way of saying, ‘I’m not you. I’m me!’”

While your child’s newfound sense of self is exciting for her, it can be exasperating when she refuses to cooperate. The good news: By implementing just a few key strategies, you can decrease the frequency of your child’s negative responses—and keep her refusals from escalating into a full-blown tantrum.

## Offer Choices

If you simply ask your toddler if he wants to play outside, he may say “No!” but then run to the door. “Kids this age are just learning that their language has power,” notes Rene Hackney, Ph.D., founder of Parenting Playgroups, in Alexandria and Falls Church, Virginia. So they’ll try to assert themselves every chance they get.



Your little guy’s defiance is his way of establishing his own identity.

To help your child feel more in control, avoid phrasing questions so that they require a “yes” or “no” answer; instead, give him options so he can decide between them. Rather than asking if he’s ready for lunch, for example, ask him if he’d like to have his meal on the blue plate or the red plate this time. Then, would he like grapes or kiwi today? He’ll soon be in his seat and ready to eat.

## Pick Your Battles

While your child’s constant vetoing might be frustrating, it’ll ultimately be easier if you can let some of the smaller stuff go, says Devra Renner, a clinical social worker and coauthor of *Mommy Guilt: Learn to Worry Less, Focus on What Matters Most, and Raise Happier Kids*. Before digging in your heels, ask yourself: Does this really matter? If, say, your daughter refuses to wear the outfit that you’ve chosen for her visit with Grandma, is it that bad if she picks a polka-dot shirt and striped pants—especially if it means she’ll be happy?

Of course, some things are just non-negotiable, but your toddler probably won’t understand your logical and grown-up explanation about why she can’t have her way. If she puts up a fight—for instance, about putting on her shoes before going to the park—you may be able to win this one simply by putting off the task. “Grab the shoes, scoop her up, get in the car, and go,” suggests Renner. “By the time you get to the park, she’ll probably have forgot-

ten all about going barefoot and will let you put her shoes on.” Distraction is another great standoff-stopping technique. In the same situation, you might simply say, “Let’s read a book,” and nonchalantly slip her shoes on her feet while you’re reading to her.

## Set an Example

Children mimic adults’ behavior—and their vocabulary too. “Toddlers tend to hear the word *no* more often than yes so they start saying it frequently as well,” says Erin Floyd, Ph.D., a clinical child psychologist in Atlanta. So make an effort to give your kid lots of positive instructions (“Please sit on the floor”) rather than negative ones (“No jumping on the couch”). You can also encourage good behavior by praising your child for cooperating (“Thank you for putting the crayon down when I told you to”), suggests Dr. Floyd. Another benefit: If you say “no” less often, your child will be likely to listen when you use it for safety reasons, like when he breaks away from you at the grocery store.

## Read Between the Lines

Your child’s vocabulary might be growing by leaps and bounds right now, but she still can’t always articulate what she’s thinking. If she refuses to let you put her hat on her head, for instance, it might be because the hat feels really itchy. To figure out what might be be-

hind your kid’s balking, take a quick inventory of the situation. Could something be frightening her? Does she want to play with her favorite stuffed animal rather than the blocks you suggested? If you can’t find the cause right away, consider how your child’s day has gone so far. Hunger, lack of sleep, boredom, overstimulation, or coming down with a fever or a cold can all contribute to an increase in “no’s,” explains Dr. Floyd. If she’s running on empty, a good nap or some relaxed play may help improve her mood.

## Show You Care

When it comes to keeping “No!” from turning into a major meltdown, a little TLC can go a long way. “First start by validating your little one’s feelings,” says Dr. Hackney. If he refuses to leave a playdate, get down at his eye level and say, “I know you don’t want to do this right now.” If he’s already past the point of no return and has started to kick and scream, hold him and describe the situation in terms that he can understand (“Mommy said it’s time for dinner and Sammy wants to keep on playing”). Then talk about how your child feels (“Sammy is mad, very mad”). Keep a soothing, empathetic tone in your voice, says Dr. Walfish. “You’re relating to your child on his experiential level,” she explains. That alone can help him calm down (and, you hope, comply) because it lets him know that you understand him. □



### We’re moving to a new city soon. How can I help our 20-month-old adjust to her new child care?

Help your toddler visualize her new routine in a fun way, suggests *Parents* advisor Jenn Berman, Psy.D., author of *SuperBaby: 12 Ways to Give Your Child a Head Start in the First 3 Years*. Snap some photos of her at her current day care, and ask the director of the new one to e-mail some

photos of activities, toys, and caregivers, along with a description of what she’ll be doing there. Then assemble the photos into an album (or create a bound book online at [shutterfly.com](http://shutterfly.com) or [snapfish.com](http://snapfish.com)), and note the differences between her current day and what her future one will be like. Make sure you talk about the things that will remain the same: “After Mommy picks you up, we’ll have dinner with Daddy, playtime, bath, and stories, and we’ll tuck you in just like we always do.” After the move, visit the center together a few times before her actual first drop-off. By then, it should feel like home to her.