

Growing Concerns
A Question and Answer Column with Dr. Marti Erickson
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Question: Our two-year-old is becoming really selfish and demanding. Especially when it involves food, he wants what he wants when he wants it. For example, if we tell him he can't have a donut for dinner, he throws food on the floor or even at us. How should we handle this?

Answer: Two-year-olds are indeed selfish, although that does not mean they will grow up to be self-centered. At this age your son is just beginning to discover that he is not the center of the universe, and he doesn't like it one bit. Like other two-year-olds, he hasn't yet developed patience or the ability to control his impulses. So when he can't have what he wants right now, he expresses his frustration with abandon. Two-year-olds haven't yet learned social rules or how to balance their own wishes with the needs and wishes of others. Your job at this stage of your son's development is to help him learn what is acceptable, knowing that it will happen slowly and gradually. Your son will learn best if you can follow these steps calmly and consistently:

- Be clear and firm about the limits you set. For example, if your rule is no donuts for dinner, simply say "no donuts" and then don't be swayed by his tantrum. (Of course it might be easier to keep the donuts out of sight in the first place! It's awfully hard for a two-year-old to see something so inviting and not be upset that he can't have it.)
- Offer a substitute. This is a basic rule of parenting: when you deny a child something or stop an unacceptable behavior, always balance that by redirecting their attention to an acceptable alternative.
- When your son starts acting out his anger and frustration, put words on his feelings. Simply say, "You're really angry about that." At this age he doesn't have the words to tell you how he feels, but as you help him develop a vocabulary of feelings, he'll be able to use words instead of actions.
- When he throws food, firmly and calmly tell him, "Food is for eating, not throwing." Then remove the food from his tray until he's ready to eat nicely. The first couple of times you do this he may fuss or scream, but over time he'll come to understand that you have clear expectations about mealtime behavior. Consistency is the key.
- Be careful not to respond to his tantrums with anger. A calm but firm response is much more effective in helping him settle down, and your anger will only escalate his frustration.
- Catch him being good, a cardinal rule of parenting. When he's sitting calmly in his high chair, tell him that you like the way he's eating so nicely. As he gets older and learns to tell

you, "I'm mad," instead of throwing food on the floor, tell him you're glad he's using words to tell you. Young children often are bombarded with messages about all the things they're not supposed to do, so it's important to recognize when they do the right thing.

Understand that your son doesn't enjoy these tantrums, and probably feels overwhelmed by his own emotions. It's not unusual for a toddler to collapse into sobs when he realizes he can't have his own way. If that happens, comfort him and, as he calms down, engage him in a story or game, leaving the battle behind you. Over time he'll learn more civilized behavior and will learn to manage his frustrations in more appropriate ways. And, through it all, he'll learn that you are always there to give him the love and limits he needs.

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