

“Terrific Two’s”

Using Empathy with Toddlers

“Want this one! Want this one!!”

I’m looking at my 22 month old, whose face is red with emotion, tears streaming down her cheeks.

What she wants is the sharp knife I’ve been using in the kitchen to cut the veggies for dinner. I have been using this knife for the past ten minutes. It is big and has a bright red handle, so it must look very appealing to her. From her perspective, this is probably a fun, “must have” item.

I know from past experience that sometimes substitution works in this situation. Offering Helen something that’s similar or related to the activity I’m involved in. In this case I offer her wooden spoons, plastic cups and a bowl.

Sometimes though, it doesn’t work and the crying and screaming begins anew. So I try a different approach.

I kneel down to her level and say "Helen, do you want the knife? This one? I know you want this knife."

And suddenly she stops crying for a moment, while looking intensely into my eyes. It’s almost as if she is relieved. I think what has happened is that she realises that I *heard* her. I “got” her; I really listened to what she said and I understood her intent.

I choose, of course, to not give the knife to her, but I’m first making sure that she knows and feels that she has made herself clear to me.

So I continue in a calm manner: "I know you want the knife, but Mummy says no".

She starts crying again, but not as hysterical as before. And I kindly repeat the same sentence: "I know you want the knife, but Mummy says no".

Then I add: "And Helen is feeling sad, because Helen wants to play with the knife, I know. You are disappointed, aren't you?"

"The knife is dangerous, so Mummy says no".

My toddler looks a little puzzled. She continues to sob and sniff, but is visibly calmer. I feel a sense of fulfilment as I experience what 'empathy' can do when dealing with tantrums.



Empathy is the ability to feel and understand the emotions of others. Toddlers can struggle with verbalising what it is they want and feel. When using empathy, a parent can firstly recognise and then verbalise their child's needs & feelings. As a result children feel understood, listened to and validated.

An empathic approach can help children differentiate between the various feelings they are experiencing and start to build their "emotional vocabulary". It also provides a role model for behaving empathically, a skill that children can take forward into adult life.

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