

toddlers

The *twos* Terrific or *Terrible?*

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They've been so awful, for so long, for so many people, that the phrase 'terrible twos' has become fearfully familiar phraseology in the dictionary of parenthood, along with 'teething toddler' and 'temper tantrums'.

So why are they so terrible? Why do they fill even the most stalwart of parents with dread and throw normally competent mums and dads into incompetent messes? And can we see through the mist of terror to appreciate the terrific theatre the Year of the Two can give us?

The main reason the terrible twos are just that is because our little, precious, smiling, amenable wobblers have now become little, precocious, screaming, ambivalent warriors; tearaway terrors who

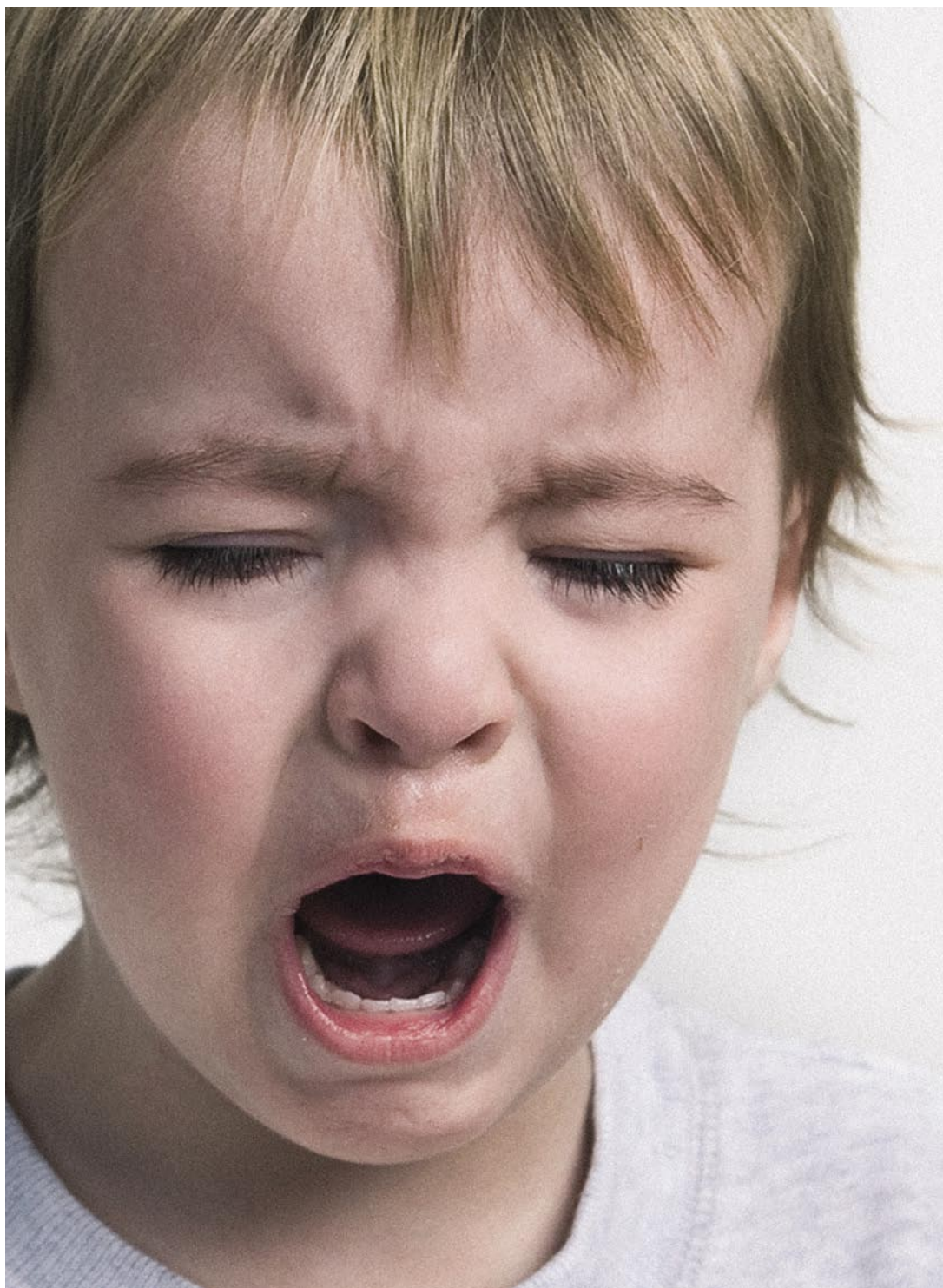
have all the exuberance for exploration, all the indignation for independence and all the delight for discovery, but none of the fear or restraint yet required to keep a parent's sanity intact. The second reason is, of course, our little babies have now become mere bundles of emotion. Extreme emotion is always difficult to handle and with the terrible twos there is nothing done unless it is extreme – extreme upset, extreme anger, extreme frustration, extreme unhappiness and extreme jealousy. And that's just you. Your beloved has more emotion building up inside than their little bodies can contain, so it explodes like a gas – hot air and pressure escaping in a teary tirade of tantrum.

Our toddlers have also discovered a vital

piece of human physiology – willpower. And once they've got their little brains around that minefield, they aren't letting go of it anytime soon. I bet I'm not the only parent who hears 'I do it!' a hundred times a day. And with willpower comes another important lesson – for both of you. Testing of boundaries. They have to push you and push you and push you, and by doing so (if they haven't pushed you over the edge of sanity) they will learn valuable lessons of life – right and wrong, good and bad, safe and dangerous.

A lot of tantrums are borne out of frustration – and again, I mean the kids here! On the cusp of communicating, they know what they want and they know what they like, but it's not always that easy to make you understand.

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It's also one of the trickiest ages to discipline. They've got all of the ingredients for bad behaviour – energy, enthusiasm, temper and willpower, but none of the reasoning and rationale needed for easy obedience. Let's face it – the naughty step is a game to them, reward charts are meaningless because they can't count their stars, and good old fashioned begging is a poor last resort. But the main reason the terrible twos are so hard is the plain fact that they are getting smarter and much harder to fool! Up until now you can tell as many little white lies as gets you through the day – It's broken; There are none left; I promise we'll go tomorrow! Now they know that it just needs a new battery, that there are plenty left – and, of course, they remember your

promises the next day. After promising my little girl she could have an ice-cream if she went to bed quietly, her first words the next morning were 'ice-cream!' They were also her second, third, fourth and fifty-fifth.

Is it all bad though? If you catch us at a good moment, most mums of two-year-olds will smile warmly and claim it to be such a wonderful age! They are bursting with energy and enthusiasm for everything around them – so the exuberance can be a bit overwhelming for everyone, but who can resist laughing with joy as they splash through puddles, roll down hills and bounce on the bed all with enchanting squeals of delight. It is only now, after months of being a 'baby' – all toothy grins and immobility – that their half-hidden personality is bursting through as they

make jokes, perform to captive audiences and know just how to get you grinning despite yourself. Best of all, because their communication is developing, the connection between you is increasing, and there is no drug in the world to beat the feeling of love and elation when you teach your little one to do something for the first time and they look to you for approval, clapping their hands with joy and your eyes engage in the moment ... it's magical. For me the most amazing thing about this time is the incredible amount they are learning every day – new words, new understandings, new excitements.

So how do we cope? How do we minimise our desperation and maximise our delight when our bundles of joy become bundles of emotional overload?

We have to let them win occasionally – there have to be some times for 'yes' amid the torrent of 'no's. We have to become masters of deception – up the mental agility to deceive to achieve. We have to understand their frustrations and try and put ours aside a little. They are learning, they are on the bottom rung of the command chain, constantly being told what to do, what not to do, being pulled and pushed this way and that. Let them be the boss (when it suits you!), make some choices and decide what cereal to have for breakfast. Help them up the first rung to becoming a little person in their own right. Be strong and firm, though, and make sure their boundaries are clear and consistently kept. You won't be doing anyone any favours (especially them) by giving in to them all the time.

They have to learn what is acceptable and unacceptable behaviour – that's your job. You are a parent first and a friend second.

Finally, you have to find the humour in everything they do. Even in the midst of a temper burst, they can be a one-person entertainment show. It's not going to last forever... so take a deep breath, and take it all in. Before you know it they'll be moody teenagers and you'll be wishing they were two again!

Like all things in motherhood, it's a little terrible and a lot terrific. Enjoy it when you can. It will only last a year. For every time your toddler throws a tantrum there'll be plenty of other times they'll make you laugh – often at the same time!