



## **DELAWARE MODERN PEDIATRICS, P. A.**

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### **The Word “NO”!**

After the age of 9 months or so, most infants can learn the meaning of the word, “no.” Here’s how it plays out:

*The infant sees an object that attracts her, but that she should not have. She reaches for the object; but her parent says, “No!” Then the child draws away, looks right at the parent, grins, then reaches again for the object.*

Here are 4 steps to teach your infant to respond cheerfully to your command, “No.”

1. **Follow through.** You should be prepared to enforce each instruction you give to your child. Don’t say “no,” then back away and decide the battle is not worth fighting. If you set a rule, but the rule is not enforced, then the child will learn that the only way to find out whether the next rule will be enforced is to test it. I am sure that you have been in homes in which the children have learned to test each rule set by the parents; this is no fun to be around. So don’t set a rule unless you are ready to enforce it consistently.

2. **Give only 1 warning.** Infants can’t count, of course, so if you give 3 warnings, the infant will think that you did not follow through with the first two, and your discipline will seem inconsistent.

If the child does not respond to a command, it seems natural for the parent to repeat herself more loudly: “TOMMY, I SAID, ...” Unfortunately, the child then learns that the parent “didn’t mean it” the first time, and the discipline appears inconsistent.

On the other hand, it is important to give the (one) warning, then wait a few seconds for the infant to respond. If you simply shout and immediately jump to restrain the child, then he may learn to respond to your physical restraint instead of your spoken command.

So, give only one warning, then follow through.

3. What should you do if your infant grins at you, then ignores your warning? I suggest that you “**remove and distract.**” If when she reaches, you say “no”, but the infant ignores you, immediately (but gently) move the object (or the child), and distract her with a toy.

Avoid physical punishment, even something as mild as a tap on the wrist. It doesn't work. Unfortunately, though, physical punishment does teach kids that it's ok to hit people when you're mad at them; but I think we already have too much violence in the world.

4. What should you do if your infant cooperates with your warning? Give him **praise for good behavior.** “That's right, good boy, thank you!” Have you seen children misbehave in order to get attention? Such children have not learned that they will be praised for cooperating. But if your infant learns that he can expect praise for good behavior, much of the “terrible two's” might be avoided.

So, teaching an infant how to respond to the word “no” is straightforward:

1. Say no, then follow through;
2. Give one (and only one) warning;
3. “Remove and distract” if the warning is ignored; and
4. Praise each instance of cooperation.

If you teach your infant over several months to cooperate with the word “no” at this early age, then the groundwork will be laid solidly for the next stage of discipline, in the toddler years. (I describe this next step in my handout, “[Cooperation and Responsibility.](#)”)