She’s two! Now what should I do?

Working with the zero to 3-year-old population, I am frequently asked, “What do I do with her?” She’s already in the “Terrible Twos.” There has to be help for parents who want to experience “Terrific Twos!”

As adults, we refer to this age as cursed, the Terrible Twos who are pushing our buttons. Oftentimes we are faced with power struggles, temper tantrums and hysterical crying, sometimes by both the child and the adult! In reality, we should be embracing this new found sense of a child’s growing independence and exploration with all their strong opinions. It’s important for us as the adults to remember these little people are learning, exploring and testing boundaries of their independence. This is developmentally appropriate behavior. We should nurture our twos by celebrating their new found sense of a child’s growing independence and exploration with all their strong opinions. I know you are thinking, “Are you crazy? Embrace and celebrate?!”

Not every situation has to be a battle. Make sure you give your little one as many choices as you can, choices where you are happy with both options. For example, “Would you like your milk in a blue cup or yellow cup?” or “Would you like to brush your teeth or put your pajamas on first?” Either way, you’ll get the results you are wanting, but you’ll save the battle and crying.

At the age of two, children are developing problem solving skills and learning how to manage their emotions. When a two-year-old becomes upset, they might have a hard time calming themselves, which can lead to physical aggression such as pushing, hitting, kicking or biting.

In our Head Start and Early Head Start classrooms, we provide an area in the classroom where children can go to calm themselves and relax, if needed. We identify this area as a “safe place” or calming zone with pillows, stuffed animals, and feeling books. Our teachers also teach and model different breathing techniques for children to help calm their body. These techniques can be used in the home too.

Behaviors caused by strong emotions can be challenging for adults in knowing how to comfort a child or understand why they are so upset. As adults we need to know how to manage our emotions before we can help two-year-olds learn to manage theirs. We need to become calm so we can help our two’s become calm. Then we can help them work through the problem.

For example, Susi is building with blocks, when Joey comes along and takes two blocks. Susi responds by pushing Joey as she tries to get the blocks back. A technique to try is from Conscious Discipline. First walk over to Susi, name her feeling and acknowledge why she feels that way. Try saying, “You seem angry because Joey took some blocks from your tower.” Next, help Susi know what words to use, “Tell Joey, Stop! My blocks.” Teach Joey an acceptable way to get some blocks by modeling for him what to say, “Joey, you wanted some blocks. If you want some blocks, say to Susi, ‘Blocks, please.’” Now you try.

Susi might not want to share; this is often the case with 2 year olds. This is where you can offer those choices again. “Susi, Joey would like a turn. Would you like to share now or in 3 mins?” Either way Joey will get a turn, Susi has ownership of the choice and Joey can practice waiting for a turn.

Modeling for children helps them develop the skills they need to manage how they feel. Next, you want to celebrate by stating to Susi, “You did it Susi. You said, ‘Stop. My blocks.’” As for Joey, say, “Joey you said ‘Blocks, please.’” Model how children can play together, helping each other build with the blocks.

For non-verbal children, use phrases such as, “Look at his face. It is saying stop.” This technique helps children read cues from other children who are non-verbal.
When your little toddler expresses big feelings, slow down, breathe, and know it really will be okay.

Carmen Requa is a Birth to Five Innovation Specialist and Roxann Malmberg is the EHS Development Mentor/Mental Health Coordinator for UMCHS. Both are partners with the Blue Mountain Early Learning Hub, which works to bridge early childhood resources and prepare children for kindergarten. For more information visit www.bluemountainearlylearninghub.org.