**TODDLER TIPS**

Tips From Dr. Talmi, Early Childhood Psychologist at Children’s Hospital Colorado

The meltdown: what’s appropriate and how can parents handle emotions?
Meltdowns don’t happen out of the blue. Although it may seem like toddlers tantrum often, it is one way they express their feelings because it’s often hard for them in other ways. Throwing a tantrum communicates:

a) Something happened  
b) I don’t like it  
c) I need a grown-up to pay attention to me  
d) I’m tired, hungry, sad, scared, frustrated, disappointed, confused, etc.  
e) I don’t have other tools to let you know how I feel or I can’t quite get myself to a place to use those tools.

When tantrums happen, you can do the following:

- Take a deep breath and choose a response carefully.
- Figure out why the child is melting down. Is he or she tired? Hungry? Over-stimulated? Address that basic need before trying to consequence the tantrum.
- If the meltdown is about wanting a toy at the store, for example, there are a number of responses. If the child is safe, can you ignore the child? Paying attention to any behavior increases that behavior, even if it’s negative attention. Toddlers learn that things that don’t get attention aren’t worth the trouble.
- If you need to remove the child, don’t threaten them with something you aren’t willing to act on. If you threaten to leave the store but do not intend to leave, that toddler learns that you don’t mean what you say. They also learn that the meltdown was effective because they got what they wanted.
- Validate the feeling. Say something like, “I can see that you’re really mad that you aren’t going to get this toy.” Don’t try to talk them out of their feelings, but do guide them: “When you can calm down, we’ll be able to go back in the store.”
- Consider whether specific situations are more likely to result in tantrums. If there are patterns to your toddler’s tantrums, think about strategies that can help decrease the tantrums. For example, you can bring a fun toy from home for your child to have only when you get to the checkout line at the grocery store. Of, you can engage your child in an activity before you make a phone call.

What are some good strategies for discipline?

- Ignoring is an excellent choice for behaviors that don’t compromise safety and that want to decrease. If your child is making annoying sounds, ignore them. As soon as your child stops
making those sounds, pay a lot of positive attention to your child. When the sounds start again, resume ignoring.

- Model those behaviors you’d like to see your toddler do. Toddlers do what they see. They imitate and copy, and at the same time, figure out the rules of the world.
- Implement timeout. The core elements of time out involve removing attention. When timeout is executed well, it is a straightforward process of “You did x, you need to take a timeout.” When timeout goes awry, there’s usually a lot of conversation about the timeout and rebuttal from the toddler, and all of a sudden, you’re giving attention to the very behavior you were trying to stop.

When is it an appropriate time to reward children and what are some appropriate rewards?
Rewards, like punishment, reinforce behavior. If you want to see a behavior happen, give a reward—such as verbal praise or a star on the sticker chart or an M&M—each time it happens because it’s likely to increase the behavior. To maintain a behavior, switch to inconsistent reinforcements where the child does not know when he or she will get the reward. Sometimes the reward comes after one time, sometimes after four times. The behavior continues because the reward is unpredictable and toddlers are motivated to get the reward. I encourage parents to think about natural and doable rewards, like verbal praise or stickers on a “good behavior” chart. The best reward for children is getting attention from their caregivers, such as special time or an extra story at night.

What are some ways parents can encourage toddlers to express themselves in constructive ways?
Be a sportscaster in your child’s life by narrating everything they do. Our tendency, as caregivers, is to teach, ask questions or give commands to young children. “Put the blue block on the red block. What color is that? Count to 10.” While such interactions teach important academic skills and increase knowledge, they can limit exploration, creativity, and self-expression. It’s different than if someone says, “Wow, you’re building a tall tower. You put that red block on the blue block.” What matters is that someone is paying attention, listening and that they experience what it’s like to lead. By following your child’s play, you let the child know that they are important and effective. It is pretty cool when you’re a young child and you have an adult following you, one-on-one and you get to be the boss.