

## **Giving you Permission to Be the Parent!**

By Natalie Ebrill

This topic has been prompted by the many parents who are contacting me asking for help "because my daughter/son doesn't like.....sitting in the bath/eating in the high chair/sleeping in their cot or big bed/sitting in the stroller/wearing a sleeping bag!" My response is usually as tactful as possible "Who gave them a choice?"

I appreciate and encourage parents in the first twelve months to get to know and understand their child's personality to effectively predict and meet their child's needs. In the first 6 months the routine can change each day and if we don't ensure the baby eats, feeds and plays effectively then we pay with an unhappy overtired baby. So we learn very quickly to make them happy and act quickly. From the age of 6 months their routine becomes a little more predictable (except for power naps) and we can plan to ensure a good day but still jump to attention when they are upset to fix whatever's wrong. The baby with responsive parents learns very quickly "I cry/scream, they come and fix the problem" which is how it needs to be. We want and need to respond to our children's cries for help.

It is usually from the 12 month and over mark that I aim to "give parents permission to be the parent" and start to set some guidelines for behaviour and routines. I am not talking about discipline here just guidelines for acceptable and safe behaviour which is very individual for each family. The problem occurs when our baby who knew if they called, you came and gave them what they wanted, now are developing a will and desires and know exactly what they want, but it might not be appropriate, safe or the right time. Hence mum and dad who were jumping to the baby's needs are having a hard time pulling back and putting limits on the now toddler's needs and battles are starting.

In exploring the previous examples:

- Your baby can now stand independently and doesn't want to sit in the bath anymore, they want to stand because they can. When you start insisting they sit in the bath for safety reasons, they start screaming, so you let them against your better judgment because you don't like the screaming.
- Your baby is so mobile on the floor and doesn't like the idea of sitting still and eating in the high chair so a battle begins and ..... mum or dad can't stand the screaming. Often this leads to eating in the bouncer, in the walker, on someone's lap, or heaven forbid...chasing the toddler around the house begging them to eat!
- When baby starts crawling and cruising on the furniture they can stimulate themselves easily and delay or prevent sleeping in the cot/big bed. The increased mobility

and in particular the ability of baby to stand up in the cot or get out of the big bed can lead to increased crying and parents thinking that baby doesn't like the cot or big bed. It only takes two sleeps to create a habit and short term survival strategies such as allowing your baby to sleep in other places to avoid the screaming often lead to more screaming and other problems developing.

- When baby/toddler starts walking, get older and stronger they enjoy their freedom and really put up a whinging/screaming fight against sitting in the stroller. However it is still sometimes necessary for safety, convenience and portability in daily activities to require your baby/toddler to sit in a stroller even if they don't want to. It's ok for the occasional escape and walk around when it suits you and the toddler is cooperating, but chasing a toddler through a shopping centre, away from the road when walking or potentially losing them at showground is not enjoyable!

- Parents often report that their babies/toddlers 'don't like' wearing a sleeping bag. It is natural for the sleeping bag to be a new experience especially since the baby/toddler was usually wrapped before the sleeping bag was introduced. Some toddlers may protest at the feeling of having their legs contained and being unable to stand up so quickly, but that is the whole point! The role of the sleeping bag (summer and winter) is to replace the blankets for the mobile baby and make sure they are warm wherever they end up sleeping in the cot (since they won't stay tucked in anymore), to prevent their legs getting stuck through the bars of the cot and as a bonus it makes it a little harder for them to stand up in the cot and stimulate themselves. When your toddler realizes that it is a cue for sleep we expect them to protest sometimes if they don't believe they are ready for bed but that doesn't mean they don't need a sleeping bag or that they don't 'like it'.

- Getting changed on the change table. Sometimes I wonder why some parents even buy these! In so many homes I hear that they are great for storing things until the toddler empties the shelves but they are very rarely used for changing the baby. When your baby becomes mobile rolling and crawling they often want to exercise this ability whenever they can. Many parents report how surprised they are at how strong their baby is and they don't want to risk fighting them to get changed on the change table, this then turns to chasing the baby all over the floor and then the lounge room just to get them dressed. I suggest dressing and undressing as quickly as possible, placing a hand on the baby/toddlers tummy and saying "be still, nearly finished" and persisting with the activity. The child is only fighting because they hope for a chance of escape onto the floor! Any whinging/tantrums that are rewarded with moving to the floor encourage more of the same behaviour next time.

From these examples I wanted to show you situations where you needed cooperation from your baby/toddler and they fought you and you needed to make a decision whether to have peace at any price and give in to the screaming/whinging or whether to stand firm on your guidelines. I appreciate that this process of putting your guidelines in place can be very challenging and a little heartbreaking, but you have the choice how you wish to parent your child now and also consider the future ramifications of your parenting. As the child gets older it is harder to get tougher and change established household rules and guidelines.

A great example I use is this: Mum and dad are struggling to gain cooperation on lots of daily activities with their 15 month old daughter. They are choosing at the moment to have 'peace at any price' and give in to her tantrums because they "don't want to upset her". However they are getting increasingly frustrated and feel powerless, their daughter is the boss and they wonder how they got into this situation. So I put this scenario to them.

...When your daughter is 15 years old and ready to go out dressed in nearly nothing, lots of makeup on and high heels, the newly qualified "P" plate boyfriend is beeping his horn out the front and hasn't even bothered to come in and introduce himself....will you let her go out?.... or will you insist that she dress more appropriately and you at least meet the boyfriend or maybe she cannot go at all?....If you insist on your rules then she won't like it at all and may "hate" you...but you would probably put your foot down and remain firm with her.

If you don't start now to set acceptable rules for behaviour and not rewarding tantrums you will not have any control at 5, 10 or 15 years.

- Remember to positively encourage the acceptable behaviour. Catch them being good and thank them, they will love it!
- Don't give in, stand firm and enjoy the benefits of cooperation. Your children will thank you. Children who receive limits and boundaries feel more loved and secure than those without them.

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