

# Second child tests limits to establish her place in the family

**Yvette:**

I have two children with very different personalities. The oldest, 5, was easy to discipline. She was so sensitive that all we had to do was look at her funny and she broke down. My youngest, 3, however, is strong-willed and seems to have no sense of boundaries. She is a huge challenge for me to discipline. She's missing the sensitivity gene. She doesn't seem to care when she's crossed the line and gone too far with something she's doing or saying. She doesn't sense when she's pushed me over the line from laughing to just plain mad. Time-outs do not work because she will not stay in one place. She thinks that it's a game or a joke. Spanking doesn't work. She'll either laugh or cry for a brief second and then resume whatever behavior I was trying to stop! She usually laughs, though. It's always a joke to her, and she doesn't know when to stop.

I'm not sure if it's her personality, the terrible 2's or the beginning of something medical or behavioral such as ADD. She does not care enough about any one toy or activity so that I can bribe her with that or take it away. Her attention span is very short, so taking away a toy or an activity doesn't work either. Any suggestions?

**Kelly**

**Kelly:**

Firstborn children are often very different than their siblings. My husband and I joke that our first child was false advertising. Younger children often like to test the limits. It's part of establishing their place in the family. The behavior that you describe is common for 3-year-olds. You say that she doesn't know when she has gone too far from "making you laugh to just plain mad." Are there behaviors that you laugh at initially, because it is cute, and then attempt to discipline her when she has "taken it too

**Families are encouraged to send their parenting questions concerning their children's challenging or difficult behavioral issues to Brown at [columbusparent@thisweeknews.com](mailto:columbusparent@thisweeknews.com) or Columbus Parent, 670 Lakeview Plaza Blvd., Suite F, Worthington, OH 43085.**

far?" At 3, she does not have the intellectual capacity to judge when a behavior has gone too far. If she is doing something and getting laughs and attention, she will do it more.

The goal is for you to be clear with her about the behavior as it is occurring. That means giving her focused attention on the behavior you want to change every time that it occurs. Get down to her level, look her into her eyes, explain to her — without anger — why her behavior is inappropriate, and tell her exactly what you want her to do to correct it. Give her simple instructions that are consistent with her ability to understand.

It's important not to give in to tears and to be consistent by enforcing discipline each and every time. Right now, she knows that if she is in time-out, she will have your attention because you will stay at the door to make sure she doesn't come out. Do not reinforce this kind of control for her. Place her in her room and insist that she stay there for the designated time-out, which should at first be brief. Each time that she comes out, send her back and walk away. Part of the behavior is your daughter trying to assert her independence. Ask yourself if you're sending her unconscious messages. For example, does she overhear you saying that she's a handful? Does she hear you talking about how she is missing the "sensitivity" gene? All children love attention, and if her way of getting attention is to be disruptive, she will continue to do so.

Don't worry about attention-deficit

disorder at this point. Her behavior is very much in line with her age. People often refer to the terrible 2's ... but I really think it's the terrible 3's. You can do this. Firm, fair and consistent wins the day.

Her spirited personality is something to value and appreciate. This spirit is what makes her unique and will serve her well as she matures. The goal is not to squash her spirit or enthusiasm but simply to help her exercise her spirit in a socially appropriate manner. Many highly successful people were spirited children who learned to channel their energy into positive pursuits.

**Yvette**

**Yvette:**

My son is 4 years old. He's a lot of fun but very high-strung. Since he was a baby, he's been very hyper. He has tantrums, screams and is just plain out-of-control for the first 20 or so minutes of something or when he hasn't gotten his way. When we go somewhere, or if someone comes to the house, he acts out uncontrollably. About 99 percent of the time, he can rein it in and calm down. Other times, he just can't get it together. He's very smart and can focus for hours at a time. (He played with his new Legos for six hours without stopping.) The other day, two men were working on the house, and he was being very loud. He was running in a circle, smacking into a wall and falling down. After he got it out of his system, he sat down and drew pictures. His doctor has never mentioned anything being "wrong"

with him. I do know he's definitely a strong-willed child!!

**Cynthia**

**Cynthia:**

I referred your question to Dr. Nancy Cunningham, clinical director for Columbus Children's Hospital Behavioral Health.

"He may be a strong-willed child, but this is not typical behavior," explained Dr. Cunningham. "While no clear diagnostic presentation is screaming from this description, the fact that his out-of-control behavior occurs regularly and cannot always be redirected is of concern."

Dr. Cunningham is also concerned about his "smacking into the wall." Depending on the intensity and frequency of this behavior, it could be a behavioral disorder or your son could be a very bright child who is easily stimulated and frustrated by his environment or a combination of the two. A more-focused assessment should occur.

Do other adults in social settings outside of the family see the same behavior from your son? How does he relate to other children? Does he have the ability to manage his emotions with other children? Is he able to participate in activities with other children?

Please consult your pediatrician. As school approaches, the anxiety around the need for classroom work and focused attention may heighten some of his behavioral issues. At the very least, a good evaluation can provide you with the tools to effectively manage his behaviors.

**Yvette**



**Yvette McGee Brown** is a former Domestic Relations/Juvenile Court Judge. She is currently the president of the Center for Child and Family Advocacy at Columbus Children's Hospital.