

MoxieTopic: Living Through the 18-month-old Phase

Children at age 18 months are the quintessential toddlers. They are so capable and independent compared to the way they were a few months earlier, but they are still so far from any meaningful independence that the age is fraught with tension and stress for both kids and parents. It's the ultimate push-pull age, in which a barely-verbal child is desperate to have their ideas and desires understood, and parents are caught in a trap of wanting to help their kids develop new skills but needing to actually get things done to be able to make it through the day.

This stage (which really runs from about 15 months to around 21 months) is characterized for parents by physical and emotional weariness. The constant energy demands really suck it out of you. And the toddlers are so sweet and adorable, but so unpredictable and so frustrating.

The toddlers can't help having ambitions that vastly outstrip their abilities.

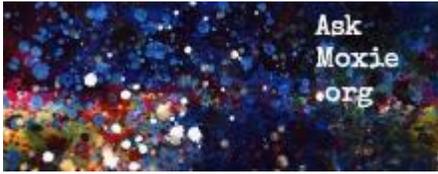
The parents can't help being frustrated and feeling trapped by this mismatch of their child's desires and their child's capabilities.

It's a recipe for stress alternating with adorableness alternating with stress.

But it's the bridge from baby to kid, and once you're through it, you have a talking person who can start being responsible for their own being. (Although they still can't be responsible for their own wellbeing yet for a lot of years.)

There are several major challenges of this age. Unsurprisingly, for every challenge your child has, you have the same challenge, just in a mirror/amplified version. This is why your child's tension points are so tough--because they cause or reflect those same tension points in you. (And if any of those tension points are things you had specific problems with as a child, it's even worse. It can feel like hitting a nerve, because it is hitting directly into a timeworn weak spot you've probably never had the chance to process.)

Know this: As you work through each challenge with your kid, you need to be kind to yourself about your reactions and stresses. And that will help you be kind to your child AND help you heal over where it feels bad to you, too.



Major challenges of this age:

Sleep disturbances. When people on the other side of it think of 18-month-olds, they usually think first of the sleep regression at this age. That's because it's so horrifying and insulting. A decent percentage of kids are sleeping through the night (defined as 5 hours in a row, remember) around 15 months, so then to be back to waking up after only a few hours is shocking and awful and can feel like a personal affront.

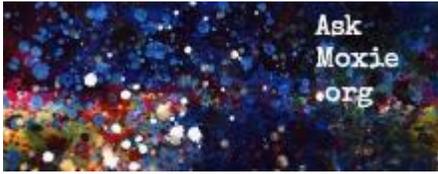
Remember that this is NOT personal at all, and it's all just about their brains developing new skills. They can't stay asleep for long because their brains are working on so much constantly. Just as we can't fall asleep or stay asleep when we're working on something or are worried about something, they can't stay asleep even when they really want to and really need to.

This can also translate into disturbed daytime sleep, and kids can do anything from going on a nap strike to shortening naps to lengthening naps to any other weird thing.

This makes you the parent have sleep problems because your kid is waking you up. And the less sleep you get, the harder it is to deal with the sleep disturbances, and to parent your child the way you'd like to in the middle of the night.

How to manage this: You can't change your child's brain during this phase, and you wouldn't want to shortcut or sidestep this development anyway. So that means it's going to be tough to get your kid to sleep through until after this developmental phase is completed. We can assume that you've determined by now how your kid reacts to crying to either release or increase tension. You can use methods you've tried in the past to get your child to sleep (based on how they react to crying) and see if they work, but don't be surprised or disappointed if they don't. With that much brain activity, methods that have worked during calmer periods just might not do anything right now.

Your time might be more efficiently spent working on your sleep problem. Remember back when you were in crisis mode during the 4-month and 9-month regressions? You probably came up with some strategies to protect your own sleep even when your child isn't sleeping. Everything from going to bed when the kid goes to bed so you can get a longer first stretch, to dividing things up with a partner (if you have one) or kind friend so one of you takes the first half and the other takes the back half so you can each get five real hours of sleep. (At this age there are even some kids who can understand when you talk about and rehearse staying quietly in bed and playing with a toy so they



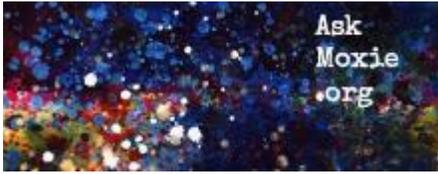
don't call for you when they wake up, so you don't have to wake up. It's not common, but it does happen, so if you have a kid with the right temperament and good receptive language, it might be worth a try.)

Language. So much is happening with language development now that it's both wonderful and horrible. Children this age often have fantastic receptive language, meaning that they can understand so many things, more than you think they understand, and can sequence and follow more elaborate instructions than you assume. But at the same time their productive language can be uneven or spotty. It's totally normal for kids to have over 100 words by 18 months (a "word" is defined as a sound that consistently means the same thing, not correct pronunciation of the real word in a specific language for that thing) but it's also normal for kids not to have many words at all. (The standard has always been "20 words at 20 months," including barking sounds for dogs, siren sounds for fire trucks, etc.)

And since kids are increasingly independent and aware of their surroundings, they have more and more to tell you and more things they want to tell you they want to do themselves. But they often can't make themselves understood, and this can be super-frustrating for both of you. This can lead to a lot of tantrums from your kid and a lot of stress for you.

Your language problem is the stress of not being completely understood by your child and not understanding your child completely. And if you're concerned about your kid's language development at all, that can increase the frustration and add on a layer of worry. Another problem is having to transition from a mode in which your baby was largely language-passive (reacting to what you said) to being aware of and actually caring about what your child is trying to tell you. Especially if you have a very task-oriented personality, it can be extremely difficult to have to start taking your kid's input into account or even just acknowledge it as valid!

It's much easier just to pick up your child and override their protests. And sometimes you still need to do that, for safety or to get vital things done. But when it's possible, it will make things easier for both of you if you can allow your child the time and space to say what they can and then acknowledge that you've heard and understand it. This can be really hard, and it's not a cultural value to acknowledge that it can be so hard to let your kids start to assert themselves. (We're all supposed to hang on every word our darlings say. Even though it's so hard to care about everything they're trying to tell us.)



How to manage this: Remember that no one has to be perfect. It's going to take your child months and months to develop a working vocabulary in your primary language. It can take you months and months to get used to your child talking to you. And you have to work together to get the message from you to your child and then from your child to you.

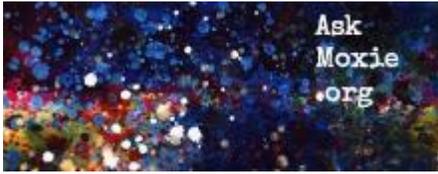
If possible, build in more time specifically for communications to your schedule. It doesn't mean that you'll need this extra time forever (someday this same kid is going to send you a bunch of quick texts that say everything perfectly), but right now in the sticky, stretchy, uncomfortable, blooming language development stage, that extra time will help both of you. (Doing signs will help, too, so if you haven't already been doing signs, start now--it won't hurt verbal language at all and will cut down on frustration.)

Control/choices. A lot of the frustration is caused by your child wanting to have more control over their own environment and actions than they have had before and than they really can yet. Kids this age are watching the world and want to do things they see adults and bigger kids doing, but their skills and capabilities often aren't there yet.

One area in which this particularly comes out is in food and eating. Since children this age have so little control over where they are and what they're doing, they assert control when they can. Food is a very common area, because they can refuse to put food in their mouths or spit it out as a way of asserting control. This is why kids this age may stop eating foods they used to enjoy or refuse to try new foods you know they would like--it's a way to control something.

Your control/choices problem is that you end up in a fight for control if you're not careful. There's no way to win when you're fighting for control with a child--even if you win the battle you're going to lose in the long run, and even just engaging in the first place steals your energy and balance. The constant back and forth control struggle is exhausting, and can make you feel like you're failing as a parent. It also just makes parenting not a lot of fun, which can be disappointing and make you worry that it's never going to get better.

Bear in mind that this is a huge, important stage of development and it's all about change and tension and growth. This means that everything's different, and you have



to look a little bit ahead to make sure you're keeping up with where your kid is going instead of parenting the kid you had last week.

To manage this: Think of this stage as being for your child all about learning to exercise control by making choices. And your job is to give your kid as much practice making choices and exerting as much control as they can in a way that's safe and lets you keep your balance and sanity.

To avoid getting into a struggle over control, you control the conditions and then let the kid have control inside the conditions. It's the classic setup for teaching choices: You give 2 or 3 choices, all of which are acceptable to you. The child gets complete leeway within those 2 or 3 choices, and you've controlled the situation so anything that happens is ok with you.

Green shirt or red shirt.

Brush teeth before a book or brush teeth after a book.

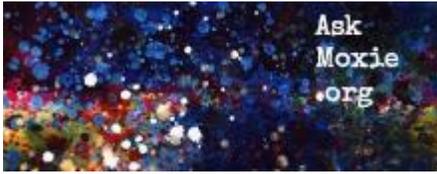
Walk or ride a trike.

Carrots or apple pieces.

Do this in absolutely every single situation you can think of and that you can stomach. Choices choices constantly, and let your kid get practice making these decisions and feeling like they're really controlling their lives. Yes, it takes some time and a little thinking ahead. Yes, it's exhausting, but it's far less exhausting than a constant power struggle, because at least you're limiting the amount of struggle that can happen.

It will help you stay calm and sane if you can specifically pay attention to how your child approaches making choices, and how they're developing and become more sophisticated at choices and exercising control. Seeing that they are growing and learning can take the sting out of all the energy this stage requires from you.

Identity. This is the first time that your child is really starting to understand that they are not you, and that they are a separate, independent being. That is exciting but also terrifying for them, and can cause some reactions to situations that previously elicited no real reaction from them. They may be super-clingy and upset in situations and with people that they never had problems with. Or they could be more independent than they should be, running away from you in public or engaging with strangers.



In addition, just the stress of trying to figure out who they are and separating from you is tiring and confusing to them, so it can contribute to frustration and crankiness.

Your problem with identity is in absorbing and responding to your child's conflict about identity. You get the clinginess and crying, as well as being pushed away. Additionally, you are going through a transition yourself from parenting a baby to parenting a toddler, and that can cause some identity questions for you. The combination of having to deal with your child's tension and conflict and changes, along with your own tension and conflict and changes can be stressful. Compared to the largely physical tasks of the rest of parenting, this stress seems like it shouldn't affect you much, but it does. It's ok (good, even) to acknowledge that.

To manage this: Understand that this is a stage that is going to continue happening. Part of the normal disequilibrium phase of the half-year (for most kids) is turmoil about identity. It's going to happen again at 2.5 and at 3.5 and at 4.5 (and it happens to us as adults, too, although not always on the half-year anymore). If you can allot space for that identity exploration and turmoil--both for your kid and for you--and know that that's mostly going to happen in a limited space of time, you will be able to deal with it more easily.

Also, lots of conversations and talk about how you (and other family members, including pets) and your child are alike but different (listing each of you separately and talking about things you like, characteristics you have in common, preferences, etc.) can help with this, too.

You will come through this stage with your child more easily if you can remember that the chaotic things they do have nothing to do with you and aren't things you've caused, and that they're healthy because they mean your child is developing appropriately. Also, you can't "fix" these things, but you can help your child move through them to the new developmental stage and skills. Your child's actions at this age aren't a reflection of your parenting. Your reactions to your child at this stage give you the chance to work through your own uncertainty with the challenges of this stage.

Courage.