



REVIEW ARTICLE

The Terrible Twos Syndrome (T2S): Myths and Facts

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ABSTRACT

Terrible Twos Syndrome (T2S) is a developmental phase commonly observed in toddlers aged 18 to 36 months, characterized by heightened emotional volatility, oppositional behavior, and frequent temper tantrums. This short paper provides a comprehensive overview of T2S, delineating its key traits such as stubbornness, mood swings, and increased independence-seeking behaviors. The underlying causes of T2S are explored, emphasizing the interplay between neurological development, emotional growth, and environmental influences. Common myths and misconceptions about T2S are addressed, clarifying the distinction between normal developmental challenges and behavioral disorders. The theoretical framework of Margaret Mahler's separation-individuation process is employed to deepen the understanding of T2S, highlighting the significance of this phase in a child's quest for autonomy and self-identity. Practical strategies for managing T2S are also discussed, offering parents and caregivers evidence-based approaches to support toddlers through this critical developmental stage.

Keywords: Behavior management, Emotional regulation, Terrible Twos Syndrome, Toddler development, Separation-individuation theory

1. INTRODUCTION

The term 'terrible twos' (also known as 'terrible twos syndrome' or T2S for short) is a term commonly used to describe a developmental stage in toddlers, typically around the age of two. This period is

characterized by a surge in independence, strong emotions, and a tendency to assert autonomy, often leading to challenging behaviors (Gill et al., 2012; Rosemond, 2013). The traits of the terrible twos include the following:

1. Tantrums (Einon & Potegal, 2003): Frequent emotional outbursts, including crying, screaming, and sometimes physical behaviors like hitting or throwing objects.
2. Defiance (Baillargeon et al., 2012): A marked increase in saying 'no' to requests and instructions from caregivers.
3. Mood swings (Albi et al., 2010): Rapid and intense changes in mood, from happy and playful to angry and frustrated.
4. Desire for independence (Rosemond, 2013): Strong efforts to do things on their own, often accompanied by frustration when they cannot.
5. Frustration (Gill et al., 2012): Easily becoming frustrated when things do not go as they wish, often due to limited language and coping skills.

As mentioned earlier above, the term T2S is used because these behaviors commonly manifest around the age of two. This period can be challenging for both children and their caregivers, but it is also a normal part of development as children begin to explore their independence and learn to navigate their emotions and social interactions (Reynolds et al., 2016).

In this paper, the authors want to share with the readers, especially parents and early childhood educators, in a user-friendly approach with helpful tips and highlighted pointers to help them know and understand this behavioral condition better so that they can strategize how to cope or manage such a challenging child whenever the T2S outburst occurs.

2. UNDERLYING CAUSES OF T2S

The T2S is characterized by increased independence and a higher frequency of temper tantrums and challenging behaviors. Understanding these underlying causes can help parents and other caregivers (e.g., childcare teachers) respond more effectively to the T2S challenges and support their child's development through this difficult phase. The key causes of the T2S condition include:

- (1) Development of independence (Rosemond, 2013): At this stage, children begin to assert their independence and test boundaries, which can lead to frustration when they cannot do things on their own or when they are restricted.
- (2) Language development (Bowers & Huisingh, 2021): Children's language skills are rapidly developing, but they may still struggle to communicate their needs and feelings effectively, leading to frustration and tantrums.
- (3) Emotional regulation (Stifter & Wiggins, 2004): Young children are still learning how to regulate their emotions. They may become easily overwhelmed by strong feelings like anger, frustration, or excitement, leading to outbursts.
- (4) Cognitive development (Rosemond, 2013): Children's cognitive skills are advancing, which means they are more curious and want to explore more. However, their understanding of the world is still limited, which can lead to misunderstandings and frustration.

(5) Physical growth (Albi et al., 2010; Hughes et al., 2020): As children grow, they gain more physical abilities and want to test them out, sometimes in ways that are not safe or appropriate, leading to conflicts with caregivers.

(6) Desire for control (Gill et al., 2012; Hughes et al., 2020): Two-year-olds often have a strong desire to control their environment and make choices for themselves, which can result in power struggles with parents and caregivers.

3. THE MYTHS ABOUT T2S

The T2S is described a developmental stage in toddlers that is often characterized by challenging behaviors such as tantrums, defiance, and mood swings. The authors of this paper have identified several myths (see Hupp & Jewell, 2015) surrounding this 'unfortunate' developmental stage, contributing to misunderstandings about what it entails and how to handle it (see Table 1).

Table 1. Issues of Contention concerning the T2S Myths

Issue of Contention	Myth	Reality
(1) The 'Terrible Twos' is a universal experience	Every child will go through a phase of extreme tantrums and defiance exactly at age two.	While many children experience increased independence and emotional expression around this age, not all children exhibit these behaviors, and some may go through similar phases earlier or later.
(2) Behavior at two is indicative of future personality	The challenging behaviors seen at age two will persist into later childhood and adulthood.	The behaviors often associated with the 'terrible twos' are typically a normal part of development as children learn to express their needs and emotions. These behaviors are not necessarily indicative of long-term personality traits.
(3) Only two-year-olds experience these behaviors	Difficult behaviors like tantrums and defiance are exclusive to two-year-olds.	Such behaviors can occur at various stages of early childhood, not just at age two. The intensity and frequency of these behaviors can vary widely among children.
(4) Tantrums are a sign of bad parenting	Frequent tantrums mean that parents are not managing their child well.	Tantrums are a normal part of child development and a way for young children to express frustration and assert independence. Effective parenting strategies can help manage and reduce the frequency of tantrums, but their presence is not necessarily a reflection of poor parenting.
(5) Terrible twos can be avoided with proper discipline	Consistent discipline can entirely prevent the T2S.	While consistent and appropriate discipline can help manage behaviors, the developmental drive for independence and the struggle to communicate effectively are natural parts of a child's growth. Therefore, some degree of challenging behavior is often unavoidable.

Why the abovementioned five issues of contention are considered myths, the authors of this paper have these to say:

(1) Developmental variability: Child development is highly individual. What one child experiences at two years old, another might experience at three, or not at all.

(2) Normal developmental stage: The behaviors often labeled as 'terrible' are actually typical developmental milestones where children assert independence and develop communication skills.

(3) Misinterpretation of behaviors: Parents and caregivers might misinterpret normal developmental behaviors as problematic or abnormal due to societal expectations or misconceptions.

(4) Cultural differences: Expectations and norms regarding child behavior can vary significantly across different cultures, influencing how behaviors are perceived and managed.

Therefore, a better understanding these myths (see Hupp & Jewell, 2015, for more detail) can help parents and caregivers approach this developmental stage with realistic expectations and effective strategies, recognizing that these behaviors are a normal part of growth and learning.

4. THE FACTS ABOUT T2S

The T2S will be the abbreviation used throughout this paper to describe a developmental stage in young children, typically around the age of two, characterized by challenging behaviors. Parents and early childhood educators need to know and understand the following key facts about this unique phenomenon often noted during this developmental stage (Reynolds et al., 2016) as listed by the authors below:

(a) Age range: The ‘terrible twos’ usually start around the age of two but can begin as early as 18 months and extend to three or four years old.

(b) Developmental milestone: This stage is a normal part of child development where toddlers begin to assert their independence and test boundaries. It is marked by significant cognitive, emotional, and social growth.

(c) Common behaviors: Behaviors associated with the terrible twos include frequent tantrums, defiance, mood swings, and difficulty with transitions. Children may also exhibit increased use of the word ‘no’ and show frustration when they cannot express their desires or emotions adequately.

(d) Causes: The behaviors seen during the terrible twos are primarily due to the child’s growing desire for independence, combined with their limited ability to communicate and control emotions. This can lead to frustration and acting out.

(e) Coping strategies: There are five key guiding principles that parents and early childhood educators should take note when dealing with young children with T2S (see Table 2).

Table 2. Coping Strategies for T2S

Strategy	Description
i. Consistency & routine	Maintaining a consistent daily routine helps provide a sense of security and predictability.
ii. Positive reinforcement	Encouraging and rewarding good behavior can be more effective than punishing bad behavior.
iii. Clear boundaries	Setting clear and consistent rules helps children understand expectations.
iv. Patience & understanding	Responding to tantrums with calmness and empathy rather than anger can help to de-escalate situations.
v. Offering choices	Giving toddlers limited choices can help them feel a sense of control.

(f) Communication development: Encouraging language development through reading, talking, and interactive play can help toddlers express themselves better, potentially reducing frustration and tantrums.

(g) Health and environment factors: Ensuring the child gets enough sleep, has a balanced diet, and gets regular physical activity can positively influence behavior.

(h) Parental support: Support from caregivers, including understanding the normalcy of this stage and seeking advice or help when needed, is crucial for managing this period effectively.

Hence, understanding that the T2S is nothing more than a normal part of development (Goldson & Reynolds, 2006) can help caregivers like parents and early childhood educators navigate this challenging stage with more patience and effective strategies.

5. UNDERSTANDING T2S FROM MARGARET MAHLER'S THEORY

Margaret Mahler's theory (see Mahler, 1963, for detail), particularly her concept of the separation-individuation process (Lapsley & Stey, 2010; Mahler, 1971; Mahler & La Perriere, 1965), provides a framework for understanding the T2S as a critical developmental phase (Edward et al., 1993). According to Margaret Mahler (b.1897-d.1985), an Austrian-American psychiatrist, psychoanalyst, and pediatrician, the process of separation-individuation consists of several subphases through which a child gradually becomes an individual separate from their primary caregiver, usually the mother (Bahn, 2021). This process is key to the child's development of a distinct sense of self (Mahler, 1963, 1967).

According to Mahler, the separation-individuation process (Lapsley & Stey, 2010) is divided into the following subphases:

a. Normal Autistic Phase (0-1 month): The infant is focused inwardly, primarily concerned with basic needs and lacks awareness of the external world (Mahler & La Perriere, 1965).

b. Normal Symbiotic Phase (1-5 months): The infant begins to be aware of the mother but sees themselves and the mother as a single entity (Mahler, 1967, 2015).

c. Separation-Individuation Phase (5-24+ months): This is further divided into subphases (Mahler, 1986):

i. Differentiation (5-10 months): The infant starts to differentiate themselves from the mother, showing increased interest in the external environment (Mahler, 1986).

ii. Practicing (10-16 months): The child begins to explore the world actively, leading to a sense of exhilaration and omnipotence due to their new abilities, often leading to periods of separation anxiety (Mahler, 1986).

iii. Rapprochement (16-24 months): The child becomes aware of their separateness and often experiences conflicting emotions (Mahler, 2017/1972, 1986). They seek independence but also return frequently to the mother for reassurance. This period is marked by ambivalence and mood swings, which can manifest as the 'terrible twos'. The child may exhibit stubbornness, tantrums, and a desire for autonomy while simultaneously needing comfort and reassurance.

iv. Object Constancy (24+ months): The child achieves a more stable sense of self and understanding that the mother continues to exist even when not in sight, leading to more stable relationships (Blum, 2004; Lapsley & Stey, 2010; Mahler, 2017/1972).

During the period of T2S, which aligns with the rapprochement subphase (see Mahler, 2017/1972, 1986, for detail), young children struggle with their emerging independence and the anxiety that comes with it. They are learning to assert themselves as separate individuals, but this newfound autonomy also leads to frustration and conflict as they balance the desire for independence with the need for parental support.

Interestingly, Mahler's separation-individuation theory explains that the behaviors commonly seen during the 'terrible twos' period are part of the natural developmental process of separation and individuation (Lapsley & Stey, 2010; Mahler, M. S., & Furer, 1963). These challenging behaviors are expressions of the young child's efforts to navigate their evolving identity and autonomy while still needing the emotional safety provided by their parents, early childhood educators and/or other significant caregivers. Understanding this phase as part of a young child's growth can help their caregivers respond with patience and support, facilitating a smoother transition through this challenging but crucial developmental stage.

6. STRATEGIES FOR MANAGING TERRIBLE TWOS

The authors have suggested and presented several behavioral management strategies for parents and early childhood educators to cope with young children with terrible twos syndrome (see Table 3 below).

Table 3. Behavioral Management Strategies for T2S

Strategy	Objective	Description
Strategy #1: Consistent routine	Provide a sense of security and predictability.	Establishing a daily routine helps children know what to expect, reducing anxiety and outbursts. Consistency in meal times, nap times, and play times can help children feel more in control and less prone to tantrums.
Strategy #2: Positive reinforcement	Encourage desired behaviors through rewards and praise.	Acknowledge and praise children when they display good behavior. Use rewards such as stickers, extra playtime, or verbal praise to reinforce positive actions, making it more likely they will repeat these behaviors.
Strategy #3: Clear and simple communication	Improve understanding and reduce frustration.	Use simple and clear language to communicate with children. Break down instructions into small, manageable steps. This helps children understand what is expected of them and reduces frustration that can lead to tantrums.
Strategy #4: Time-outs	Provide a break to calm down and reflect.	Implement a brief, calm time-out for inappropriate behavior. This gives children a chance to cool down and think about their actions. Make sure the time-out area is safe and free from distractions.
Strategy #5: Offer choices	Foster independence and reduce power struggles.	Allow children to make simple choices to give them a sense of control. For example, let them choose between two outfits or select a snack from two healthy options. This reduces resistance and empowers children.
Strategy #6: Redirect attention	Prevent escalation of undesirable behaviors.	When a child begins to show signs of frustration or is about to engage in a negative behavior, redirect their attention to a different activity or toy. This can help diffuse the situation before it turns into a full-blown tantrum.
Strategy #7: Model calm behavior	Teach self-regulation through example.	Children learn by observing adults. Stay calm and composed during challenging situations to model appropriate behavior. Show children how to handle frustration and stress in a healthy way, promoting emotional regulation skills.

Implementing these seven strategies can help to create a supportive environment that helps manage and mitigate the challenging behaviors associated with the T2S.

7. CONCLUSION

The 'terrible twos' or T2S is a developmental phase marked by a surge in autonomy and independence in toddlers, often leading to challenging behaviors such as tantrums, defiance, and mood swings. For parents and early childhood educators, understanding that these behaviors are a normal part of development is crucial. This period, typically occurring around age two, signifies important cognitive and emotional growth as children begin to assert their individuality and test boundaries.

For parents, managing the terrible twos involves consistent routines, clear boundaries, and patient communication. Positive reinforcement and offering choices can help mitigate conflicts and promote cooperative behavior. It is essential for parents to remain calm and empathetic, acknowledging their child's feelings while guiding them towards appropriate behavior.

Early childhood educators play a pivotal role in supporting both children and parents during this stage. They can provide a structured yet flexible environment that accommodates the child's need for independence while ensuring safety and order. Educators can also model positive behavior management strategies, offer resources, and foster a collaborative approach with parents to ensure consistency between home and school.

Finally, overall, the terrible twos are a transient but significant phase that requires patience, understanding, and strategic approaches to support children's growth and development effectively.

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