

Weird and Wacky Habits

Children this age behave in some pretty strange ways. What's going on?

By Karen J. Bannan

At bedtime, my 3-year-old daughter, Katelyn, often calls out, "Mommy, I have a secret to tell you." As soon as I lean in to hear it, she whispers a lot of gibberish, smiles, and rolls over. I smile too, but I was initially puzzled by this odd habit.

Some parts of the toddler years are predictable: the tantrums, the rebelliousness, the endless "but why?" questions. Few parents, however, are prepared for the odd quirks kids tend to develop at this stage. Not that there's anything wrong with most of them—in fact, a toddler's bizarre behavior is often an important part of her development. I learned, for example, that my daughter's gibberish is simply her attempt to mimic adults and experiment with language. Many other seemingly nonsensical toddler habits also have simple explanations—and there are easy ways to cope with the craziness.

The Pack Rat

Ann Miller's 2-year-old son, Vincent, stashes her keys, his toys, and his baby sister's hair clips in the back of his favorite ride-on toys. "He does this every day!" she says.

Why they do it: If your child has just turned 2, this quirk is probably about something called "object permanence." Toddlers are still learning that just because an item is out of sight,

it doesn't mean it's gone forever. When your child hides something and knows that it'll be there when he comes back, he feels like he's gaining power and control.

How to deal: Let kids hide their stuff, but yours should be off-limits, says Lawrence E. Shapiro, Ph.D., author of *The Secret Language of Children*. "Say, 'My keys are important because I need them to drive the car. Please don't take them.'" Then you can suggest he hide something else, like his crayons. Be consistent—you can't entertain him with your keys in the supermarket one day and tell him he can't play with them the next.

The Trash Collector

Karrie Quay's 2-year-old daughter, Lillian, loves picking up rocks, leaves, and gum wrappers she finds on the ground. "I tell her to put them down because they're dirty, but she refuses and insists on putting them in her toy box," says the mom from Shepherd, Michigan.



As long as your toddler's behavior isn't harmful or inappropriate, you can indulge her quirks most of the time.

2-3 years

Why they do it: Hunting and exploring are an important part of toddlerhood, says Brian Orr, M.D., coauthor of *The Everything Guide to Raising a Two-Year-Old*. Kids this age love to examine and touch everything, junk included. It's how they learn about texture, size, and shape.

How to deal: Let your child analyze her finds as long as they aren't dangerous and she's not putting things in her mouth. Dr. Orr suggests giving your child a bag for her treasures before you go out and putting a limit on how many things she can bring home. "If you tell her that she can only keep five things, then she has to be picky about what she takes," he says. "This helps teach kids what's valuable to them."

The Identity-Shifter

Mary Lebeau, of West Deptford, New Jersey, says her 3-year-old daughter, Libby, often insists that she's really Minnie Mouse, Curious George, or Cindy-Lou Who: "Each day her teacher asks me who came to school today, because my daughter won't answer to 'Libby.'"

Why they do it: Kids under 4 don't have a strong sense of reality, says Dr. Shapiro. They're not sure what's real and what's make-believe, so pretending to be someone else helps them get a handle on the difference.

How to deal: Imagination is wonderful, but if it turns into a tedious drama—your child insists he's Curious George and will only eat bananas for dinner—you need to set limits, says Dr. Shapiro. Say, "I'm glad you like pretending, but this isn't the time to play—it's time to eat. You can make believe you're Curious George after you're done."

The Stubborn Fashionista

Kaitlin Erickson, 3, of Point Lookout, New York, lived in the same shirt every day last summer, even after she outgrew it.

Why they do it: Toddlers tend to cling to a particular outfit for many reasons. They like the way the fabric feels, they want to exert some control, they're looking for attention—or even all of the above.

How to deal: Gently explain that she can't wear the same thing all the time. Lay out a couple of fashion choices the night before so she can choose one the next morning, suggests Dr. Orr. Say, "You can decide what to wear, but your favorite red shirt is dirty. You can choose between these two shirts." She'll likely protest at first, but she'll soon move on to another quirky obsession. Don't worry: That one won't last long either.

Kids' Craziest Quirks Some children's odd habits seem totally inexplicable!

My daughter, Bella, always carries a wallet with her. If she misplaces it for even a second, she freaks out. She even sleeps with it!

Jen Romero; Queens Creek, Ariz.

I have to tackle my son to put clothes on him when we go out because he can't stand being dressed. He knows how to undress himself, so he strips the minute we get home.

Kristin Gregor; Clifton Park, N.Y.

My son can't resist a clean basket of laundry. He nuzzles in it and seems deliriously happy. He never became attached to a comfort object like a blanket or bear—I guess this is it!

Jennifer Hetrick; North Wales, Pa.



→ Sanity-Saving Tips

Is your child's wacky behavior driving you nuts? Stay cool with these tips from Linda Sonna, Ph.D., a psychologist and the author of *The Everything Toddler Book*.

1 Decide in advance what's important, and **let your child know what you expect from him.** Don't wait until he's stuffed ten acorns into his pocket to tell him that he can bring only one home.

2 Remember that your child isn't trying to be difficult when he does unusual things. **He's just practicing being independent** and making his own decisions.

3 **Don't back down.** While it might seem easier to give in when he won't take off his Batman cape, it's better in the long run to set limits. Tell him you know he likes it, but he still can't wear it to church.