emoGlow · Scripts

When it's time to leave and your child protests · Ages 2–4

What to say when your toddler won't leave the playground

"Every time we leave the playground my two-year-old screams and goes limp. I keep saying "five more minutes." What do I say instead?"

TAKE 1 · THE INSTINCT

"Five more minutes… okay, five more. Okay, last one. I mean it this time."

TAKE 2 · TRY THIS INSTEAD

"Two more slides, then shoes." Then: "That was the last one. You're sad to go. You can walk or I'll carry you."

"Five more minutes" is the most common sentence in any playground, and it rarely ends the visit. Each extension tells a two-year-old that protest buys time. The research on toddlers and transitions is small, but it points the same way.

What is known, and at what age

A study in an early childhood setting compared two common ways to help toddlers move from one activity to the next: a warning two minutes before, and letting them carry a toy through the change. Neither worked on its own. Compliance improved for all the children only when the strategies were combined with what behaviour researchers call extinction: the adults followed through, so protest no longer kept the activity going.

A second study looked at two preschoolers whose tantrums came at transitions. For one, the tantrums kept going because they won more time with the activity. Advance notice of the change did not help either child; what did was consistent follow-through, with attention for the times they did not tantrum. These are very small studies of a handful of children, so read them as a pattern, not proof.

The CDC's advice for parents of toddlers is to make sure your child is paying attention, to give one clear direction at a time and to praise them when they follow it.

What the words do

Take 1 negotiates with a two-year-old, and every "okay, five more" rewards the protest. Take 2 gives one warning she can count ("two more slides"), names the feeling when the moment comes, and offers a small choice inside the leaving: walk, or be carried. Then leave, kindly and certainly, crying and all.

If you live in two homes

Leaving can be hardest at a changeover, when "time to go" also means going to the other home. Keep the same words and the same follow-through, and keep your own feelings about the changeover out of the leaving. Pediatricians' guidance on separation says to let a child spend time with the other parent without feeling guilty.

In the UK

The NHS temper tantrums page says giving in will not help in the long term, and that changing your mind teaches a child that tantrums work. If you are seriously concerned about your child's behaviour, talk to your health visitor or GP. In England and Wales, a child arrangements order may set out who a child lives with and when they spend time with each parent (older orders say "residence" and "contact"). Cafcass in England (Cafcass Cymru in Wales) advises the family court about what is safe for children; for everyday parenting questions, Coram Family Lives (0808 800 2222) is a free, confidential helpline. Nothing on this page is legal advice.

Sources

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This is general information drawn from published research and pediatric guidance. It is not medical, psychological or legal advice. If you are worried about your child, talk to your doctor.