What to say when your toddler refuses to put shoes on

"Every morning my two-year-old screams "No shoes!" and I end up forcing them on while we're both upset. What can I say instead?"

TAKE 1 · THE INSTINCT

"Put your shoes on. Now. I'm not asking again."

"Put your shoes on now" is a reasonable demand, and at two it invites the one power a toddler has: no. Forcing the shoes on wins the morning and sets up the same fight tomorrow.

What the research says

A meta-analysis pooled 41 studies of choice with children and adults. Being given a choice was linked with more intrinsic motivation, more effort and better performance, and the effect was stronger for children than for adults. Small choices that did not change the task itself, and offering a few choices rather than one or many, showed some of the larger effects. Most of the studies were about tasks and activities, not toddlers and shoes, so this is a direction, not a promise.

TAKE 2 · TRY THIS INSTEAD

"Shoes go on before we go out. Red ones or blue ones? You choose."

Researchers writing from self-determination theory describe "autonomy support" in parenting as taking the child's point of view, offering choice within clear structure, and explaining the reasons for rules. Structure is part of the definition, not the opposite of it.

The American Academy of Pediatrics says the same for young children: let them choose among options you can accept, redirect, and set sensible limits.

What the words do

"Shoes go on before we go out" is the limit, and it doesn't move. "Red ones or blue ones?" is the real choice, inside it. Both options are fine with you, so whichever she picks, you are done. If she refuses to choose, choosing for her calmly is still part of the offer, not a defeat.

If you live in two homes

Routines may differ between homes, and the choices you offer can too. What helps is that the limit in your home is clear and the choice is real. If your child says "At Mum's I don't have to," you can answer calmly: "That's how it works there. Here, it happens. You choose how."

In the UK

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 (England and Wales, 0808 800 2222) is free and confidential. Nothing on this page is legal advice.

Sources

1. Patall, E. A., Cooper, H., & Robinson, J. C. (2008). The effects of choice on intrinsic motivation and related outcomes: A meta-analysis of research findings. Psychological Bulletin, 134(2), 270–300.
2. Joussemet, M., Landry, R., & Koestner, R. (2008). A self-determination theory perspective on parenting. Canadian Psychology, 49(3), 194–200.
3. American Academy of Pediatrics, HealthyChildren.org (2018). What's the best way to discipline my child?
4. Cafcass (n.d.). About us. Retrieved November 9, 2026.
5. UK Parliament (2014). Children and Families Act 2014, section 12: Child arrangements orders.
6. Department for Education (2014). The Children and Families Act 2014 (Transitional Provisions) Order 2014, SI 2014/1042, article 6.
7. Welsh Government (n.d.). Cafcass Cymru. Retrieved November 9, 2026.
8. Coram Family Lives (n.d.). Confidential helpline. Retrieved November 9, 2026.

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.