

Outwitting Toddlers

The Parent's Guide to Getting Your One-to-Four-Year-Old
To Do What You Want Without Bribes, Threats or Tears

by Bill Adler, Jr. and Peggy Robin

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OVERVIEW

Here's the problem with toddlers: They're just old enough to have formed a separate identity from their parents, and just strong enough to begin to exercise that identity by doing the opposite of what their parents want. So the parents, who until now might have thought they had a sweet, good-natured and relatively helpless baby on their hands, are suddenly faced with a small but determined adversary whose main word seems to be "NO!"—and who can run and kick and throw things.

Parents, once they get over the shock of their first-time confrontation with their headstrong toddler, quickly realize they need to take action, before the situation gets out of hand. So what do they do? If they're of the old school of parenting, they use their authority, issuing orders and punishing disobedience. However, most of today's childcare experts warn against that approach, telling parents that too many rules and punishments will squelch children's spirits and make them feel put down, unimportant, afraid to try new things.

The standard parenting guides these days tell you to *explain* things to your toddler, try to get them to understand *why* they can't take their pants off at the grocery store or

stay up until two in the morning. That sounds good in theory, but parents quickly discover that logic and reasoning will only take you so far with a twenty-month-old who is lying on the floor and screaming at the top of his lungs, “NO DOCTOR!”—when the appointment for his check-up is in fifteen minutes.

There are those parents who decide not to challenge their toddler’s contrariness; they just give in to every demand—and usually end up with children so spoiled that even after the toddler years are long past, they’re still behaving like two-year-olds.

If it’s wrong to force obedience, if it’s useless to reason with them, and it’s dangerous to surrender to them, what can a parent do? *Outwit them!* Use your superior brain and adult resourcefulness to come up with a way to get your child to go along with what you want. The trick is to make your child believe that this is what he or she really wants, anyway. If you can get your toddler to cooperate without threats, punishments, or tears, you will give your toddler a sense of accomplishment and pride in what he or she does. You will reinforce your toddler’s budding spirit, not crush it—and without spoiling your child by giving in.

But *how* do you outwit them? They may have little experience of the world, but they *are* smart. And inventive. And very unpredictable. That’s why parents need *Outwitting Toddlers*. In this guide parents will learn a whole range of clever stratagems, tricks and techniques to try when their little ones test their limits. *Outwitting Toddlers* recognizes that toddlers are not all alike, and that what works well to solve a problem with one type of toddler may backfire with a different sort of child. For this reason the book will offer two, and sometimes three or four different possibilities for the parents to

try out as solutions for each of the problems discussed. *Outwitting Toddlers* also understands that not every parent is suited to the use of every type of technique, and so the book considers how various styles of parenting match up with the different *Outwitting* techniques described. For example, a parent who is normally strict might get better results with a technique that requires the child to act promptly, while a normally permissive parent might be better off trying a solution that allows the child to do the required action at a later time, or in a more interesting and more fun way.

What makes *Outwitting Toddlers* so useful—and so different from nearly all the other childrearing advice books on the market today—is that it is so result-oriented. Other books start out with a particular slant on things. Books by child psychologists focus on the author’s particular psychological theory of why children behave the way they do (and so many of them blame the mom for whatever goes wrong). Books by social critics tend to focus on some fault in the structure of society: Feminists blame the patriarchal system; anti-feminists blame working mothers; moralists point to a decline in social values; and so on and so on. Because these experts focus on the big picture, they have little advice of value for the day-to-day problems of parents and toddlers.

Outwitting Toddlers doesn’t start out with theories and so doesn’t restrict its solutions to what goes along with any ideological position. This book tells parents, “Here are some possibilities, try them out, one at a time, and see what works *for you*.” It’s practical, real-world, hands-on advice, not abstract theorizing from “experts” who haven’t had toddlers themselves in a decade or two—or longer.

Outwitting Toddlers, if it has any ideology at all, is based on the notion that parenting should be *fun*—at least much of the time. The advice given is light, not ponderous; practical, not prescriptive. In addition to problem-solving for many different parental dilemmas, there will be some funny stories about toddlers who simply could not be out-manuevered. There will be boxed tips, sidebars, bullet lists and other graphic features that make the book eye-catching and appealing to busy parents in need of quick and workable answers.

Finally, *Outwitting Toddlers* understands that everything is outgrown eventually, and so toddler troubles should never be allowed to get you down for long. Because it is written to the needs of today's parents of toddlers, by parents with recent experience dealing with everything it covers, *Outwitting Toddlers* will be the book that really makes a difference, the one parents will tell other parents about. As long as there are parents asking the question, "How do I get my toddler to?" we believe *Outwitting Toddlers* will be in demand.

THE COMPETITION

There is certainly no shortage of books in the stores today intended to help parents with toddler problems. However, parents keep looking for new and different books, because they try the advice in the books they buy, and they *still* have problems. Take the example of the child who wants a candy bar for breakfast. Let's see what the authors of the best-seller *What to Expect the Toddler Years*, Arlene Eisenberg, Heidi E. Murkoff, and Sandee E. Hathaway, have to say about this problem: "You can...share decision-making," they counsel. "Would you like cereal and bananas, or toast and peanut butter for breakfast?" (p.414). We doubt there's a three-year-old alive who would fall for that one. We know what a real child would say: "I don't want *any* of that stuff! I WANT MY CANDY BAR!" Now what?

Outwitting Toddlers takes up where the other books leave off. *Outwitting Toddlers* presents three or four different techniques for handling the problem, not one or two. And the book presents these choices without moralizing about which one is best, or scolding parents for letting the situation develop in the first place.

The nonjudgmental tone is an important thing that distinguishes *Outwitting Toddlers* from its competition. Dr. Spock, Dr. T. Berry Brazelton, Dr. William Sears, Penelope Leach, and Arlene Eisenberg, Heidi E. Murkoff and Sandee E. Hathaway (the authors of *What to Expect the Toddler Years*) all put forward a strong point of view about what's right and what's wrong with various parental practices. Dr. Spock devotes several sections of *Baby and Child Care* to lecturing parents on the evil of violence in our

society, putting much of the blame on parents who allow their children to watch too much television or buy them toy guns. The *What to Expect* authors are unforgiving of any parent who does not insist upon a balanced diet with plenty of fruits, vegetables, and whole grains, and they are even stricter on the subject of weaning to a cup (in the very first chapter they express their horror at the idea of toddlers who still drink from bottles or from the breast). Dr. William Sears, on the other hand, in over a dozen popular books on childrearing, tells mothers they should breastfeed for two full years, at least, so that their children will fully bond with them as well as get the health benefits from breastmilk. His reproving tone is also directed toward those parents who would force a small child to sleep alone in a crib in a separate room, instead of letting the child sleep peacefully in the parents' bed. Penelope Leach is a great believer in explaining everything to children and a strong opponent of the phrase, "Because I said so" (as evidenced by the twelve pages she devotes to this view in *Your Baby and Child from Birth to Age Five*.) Parents who follow Leach's recommendations must always offer the child choices, never imposing on the child's free will, never ever issuing orders. T. Berry Brazelton, in *Touchpoints*, expounds on the primacy of the parents as caregivers and expresses his disdain for most daycare centers and preschools (which, in his view, should have no more than six to eight children per teacher for three-year-olds—a standard that only a few, very expensive nursery schools can meet).

So what happens when a parent consults one of these famous author's works for help with a child who: is too aggressive; won't eat anything but junk food; won't give up the bottle; has trouble falling asleep at night; takes a hour deciding which clothes to wear;

or balks at going to nursery school? The answer is, in a word, blame; the parent is told, in effect, it's too late—you've already botched things by letting the gunplay start (Spock), by allowing junk food to enter the home and failing to take away the bottle at one year (the *What to Expect* authors), by inducing separation anxiety at nighttime by means of a separate crib for your baby (Sears), by failing to respect your child's sense of personal autonomy (Leach), and by enrolling your child in a preschool in the first place (Brazelton).

When parents have *Outwitting Toddlers* to turn to, instead of lectures they will find:

- ◆ things to say and do to put an end to toddler's slaps, kicks, and bites
- ◆ lists of snacks and treats that toddlers *will* accept in place of chips, candy and other junk foods
- ◆ a step-by-step plan from moving your highly resistant child from bottle to cup (and a backup plan for use if the first plan doesn't work)
- ◆ a sensible, parent-friendly approach to your child's nighttime sleep problems
- ◆ tips to get your dawdler out the door fast—and dressed right for the weather
- ◆ ways to discourage clinginess at daycare or preschool.

The book that comes closest to *Outwitting Toddlers* is *What to Expect the Toddler Years*. Its popularity among parents of toddlers is well deserved, despite its occasionally judgmental tone, because it covers development so thoroughly, telling what's normal and what's not, and when you should call the doctor. *What to Expect the Toddler Years*

contains a wealth of medical advice about treating toddler ailments, including what to expect at checkups, and how to respond to common childhood emergencies. *Outwitting Toddlers*, however, is not intended to be such an all-purpose guide. It is strictly about solving problems, and because of its narrower focus, when it comes to giving answers to questions like “How do I get my child to give up the bottle?” parents will find *Outwitting Toddlers* to be the more helpful book to have on hand.

Other books that appeal to the same market are Dell’s series of age-specific guides, *Your One Year Old*, *Your Two Year Old*, *Your Three Year Old*, *Your Four Year Old*, by Louise Bates Ames (and varying co-authors). These slim volumes cover many of same problems that will be dealt with in *Outwitting Toddlers*. Parents may find it makes more sense to buy a single book covering the questions that concern them when their children are between ages one to four, rather than buy four separate books. Also, the Dell series of books is a general developmental guide and is not designed to solve parents’ specific problems with their toddlers.

Bruce and Vicky Lansky’s multitude of books about life with small children are perhaps closest in tone and areas of coverage to *Outwitting Toddlers*. In books such as *Practical Parenting Tips* (Simon & Schuster) and *Feed Me, I’m Yours*, the Lanskys offer useful advice delivered with their light-hearted, enjoy-yourself attitude. Still, these practical-minded parent-authors don’t usually give more than one answer for each toddler problem they take on.

Most of the other parent-toddler guides we found on the bookstore shelves focused on some specific aspect of toddlerhood. At our nearest Borders bookstore we found 27

books about discipline alone. There were two whole shelves of books about what and how to feed young children. There were books devoted exclusively to sleep problems, to playtime, to early childhood education, to potty training (8 on that sole topic!), to choosing caregivers, and an incredible array of other subjects—some as specific as *How to Cut Your Child's Hair*.

Common sense tells us that when parents wonder how they're doing as parents, they tend to have more than a single issue on their minds. When they look to a book for help—and when they find it—they want something they can go back to the next time, and the next, and still find reliable answers. *Outwitting Toddlers* will be that book.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Bill Adler, Jr. is the president of Adler & Robin Books, Inc. a literary agency and book packaging company. He is the author of over a dozen books including *Outwitting Squirrels: 101 Cunning Stratagems to Reduce Dramatically the Egregious Misappropriation of Seed From Your Bird Feeder by Squirrels* (Chicago Review Press), *The Home Remodeler's Combat Manual* (HarperCollins), *Ask Me Something I Don't Know* (Avon), *The Weather Sourcebook* (Globe Pequot), and *The Non-Smoker's Bill of Rights* (William Morrow, with Steve Allen), *Baby-English: A Dictionary for Interpreting the Secret Language of Infants* (Pocket Books, with Karen Adler, age two), *Tell Me a Fairy Tale* (Dutton), *Outwitting Critters*, (HarperCollins), and *Outwitting the Neighbors* (Fireside). *Outwitting Critters* was a Literary Guild selection and a Book of the Month Club, Gardening selection.

Of all his books, Adler's favorite is *Outwitting Squirrels*, not just because it was a treat to write but because it became such a success even after twenty publishers turned the proposal down. While reviewing this book *USA Today* called Adler, "A trendspotter." *The Wall Street Journal* called the book "A masterpiece." The book was twice enthusiastically reviewed in *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*. *Outwitting Squirrels* is not only a testament to the cunning and perseverance of squirrels, it is a testament to Bill Adler's creative insight into the book business. The book has gone into printing after printing, and now over 150,000 copies have been sold.

Regardie's magazine had this to say about the book: “Adler still feeds the birds, but now he also squirrels away royalties.”

Here are what some reviewers have said about some of Adler's books:

Outwitting Squirrels

Bill Adler, Jr. is my hero. I love this book. Go buy this book. —Rosie O’Donnell

What the birdfeeders of America long have needed is a guru...I'm pleased to announce there's a new voice on the front lines of birdfeeding. His name is Bill Adler, Jr. ...Adler assembled his findings into a nifty volume entitled *Outwitting Squirrels*.
—*Minneapolis Star Tribune*

Outwitting Squirrels...ingenious tricks to keep squirrels from eating all the seed when the feeders fail. —*The Washington Post*

Bill Adler, Jr., a writer in Washington, has just published a treatise titled, *Outwitting Squirrels*...[His stratagems are] particularly appealing. —*The New York Times*

At last! A book that addresses life's really important issue, or in any case, the issue most crucial to people who like to feed birds. —*The Detroit Free Press*

A masterpiece of squirrel stratagems. —*The Wall Street Journal*

An excellent book...both entertainingly witty and extremely helpful.
A must. —*The Ottawa Citizen*

Now, for the first time, the sum of human knowledge about squirrels and the strategies to defeat them are available in one place. —*Booklist*

Impeccable Birdfeeding

The author of “Outwitting Squirrels” strikes again. —*The Milwaukee Journal*

The most entertaining backyard birding book we know! Bill Adler, Jr., author of “Outwitting Squirrels,” needs no introduction to bird lovers. He's simply the funniest, most practical writer on birdfeeding. —The Nature Company

Perspective makes this book different: Mr. Adler puts the needs of the hobbyist before those of the birds. —*The Dallas Morning News*

The advice he delivers is supremely practical, his style spare and straightforward and his sense of humor is enlivening throughout the book. This is an eminently readable book, perhaps the only one the amateur bird-feeding hobbyist needs on his shelf.
—*The Washington Post*

This book will add greatly to a person's enjoyment of birdfeeding. —*The St. Louis Post-Dispatch*

Outwitting Critters

Adler tells engaging stories, many bordering on suburban legend. *Outwitting Critters* surfeits with interesting facts and horse-sense hints. —*The Village Voice*

Adler has the answers, and they are creative as well as nontoxic. —*Chicago Tribune*

He offers...comprehensive treatment of the subject, and provides recommendations that are grounded in common sense. —*Library Journal*

Outwitting the Neighbors

“A witty paperback.”—*Indianapolis Star*

“Worth reading.” —*Arizona Republic*

Adler has appeared on *The Rosie O'Donnell Show*, *Rolanda*, *The Maury Povich Show*, *Hard Copy*, *A Current Affair*, *The Gordon Elliot Show*, NPR, and several network news programs.

He lives in Washington, D.C. with his wife and sometime co-author, Peggy Robin. Their daughter, Karen Adler, had her first book, *Baby-English: A Dictionary for Interpreting the Secret Language of Infants*, published by Simon & Schuster before she turned three. Their second daughter, Claire, has not yet written a book.

Peggy Robin has written books on diverse topics, including having a baby despite medical problems (*How to Be a Successful Fertility Patient*, William Morrow & Company, 1993) and how to feed a baby despite problems with breastfeeding (*Bottlefeeding without Guilt: A Reassuring Guide for Loving Parents*, Prima Publishing, 1996). The bottlefeeding guide was recently updated and retitled for the second edition, *When Breastfeeding Is Not an Option*. The Preservation Press, an imprint of John Wiley & Sons, is the publisher of her 1990 handbook on neighborhood preservation, *Saving the Neighborhood: You Can Fight Developers and Win!*

Robin has appeared on *The Today Show*, *The Maury Povich Show*, and *The Diane Rehm Show*, as well as numerous local TV and radio shows.

Here are what some reviewers have said about some of Peggy Robin's books:

How to Be a Successful Fertility Patient

Excellent ... chock full of information I haven't seen anywhere else.

—Susan Cooper, author of *The Long-Awaited Stork*

The extensive interviews with dozens of male and female infertility patients in this helpful book represent virtually every etiology of infertility and appropriate means of treatment available today.... Accurate and realistic.

—*Fertility News*

Important and supportive information to help infertile couples through the fertility treatment process....an excellent work.

—Sharon N. Covington, Director of Counseling,
The Shady Grove Fertility Center

*Bottlefeeding Without Guilt:
A Reassuring Guide for Loving Parents*

Bottlefeeding Without Guilt provides affirmation and support for new moms who choose not to breastfeed.

—*Florida Times-Union*

Robin articulates a phenomenon that many women who can't or choose not to breastfeed have noticed in recent years; With breastfeeding endorsed by health organizations as the best source of nutrition for infants, parents of formula-fed infants are sometimes second-guessed or even berated for bottlefeeding.

—*The Los Angeles Times*

Bottlefeeding Without Guilt comes to the aid of all those parents who, whether by choice, circumstances, or by default are relying on the bottle.

—*Parents at Home*

Saving the Neighborhood: You Can Fight Developers and Win!

A pragmatic activist handbook ... demystifies the planning and zoning process ... and provides 'nitty-gritty' advice.

—*Library Journal*

Old hands will find this book a good reference, and beginners can use it to learn the process, from talking to politicians to preservation ordinances, to what to do after you win.... Robin maintains it's a war... Her book helps with strategy.

—*Booklist*

This just might be the best \$16.95 investment you can make.

—*Small Town Magazine*

Attractively designed, well-written, thoughtful, comprehensive, and to the point.

—*Planning Magazine*

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction - Why Do Toddlers Need to Be Outwitted?

Explains what we mean when we speak of “outwitting” your toddler and considers other methods of dealing with toddler problems (such as using threats, punishments, or bribes), and then tells why outwitting works best. For each toddler problem in the book there will be several possible parent responses described. Because toddlers are not all alike and parents are not equally suited to employing each technique, the Introduction will offer some guidance as to which techniques tend to work best with the various toddler personality types and with different parenting styles. Because *Outwitting Toddlers* presents solutions without any ideological slant, it respects parents’ personal decisions about the basics of childrearing (whether you work outside the home or are a stay-at-home parent, whether you believe in spanking or not, and so on). The point is for you and your child to be comfortable, rather than miserable, with your day-to-day life. If someone’s screaming all the time, we think something’s wrong. If something is wrong, then coming up with ideas that might work to set things right, and trying those ideas out in practice, is what parents should be doing. That, in a nutshell, is what *Outwitting Toddlers* is all about.

[The following are just some of the problems that will be considered in each chapter]

Chapter One - Getting Some Sleep

I can't get my child to nap • She won't go to bed on time • He's still waking up three times a night • She can only go to sleep in my bed • The bedtime ritual takes over an hour

Chapter Two - Getting Them to Eat—But Something Other Than Junk Food

Mealtimes are so messy • My child only eats one food • My child never stops eating • She believes that the three major food groups are candy, chips, and soda • How do I convince my kids that vegetables aren't poison?

Chapter Three - The Nightmare of the New Situation

She clings to my leg and screams "Don't go!" every morning since I've started work • He won't accept a new sitter • She hides when she sees her grandparents coming • He cries for the first hour and a half at preschool/daycare

Chapter Four - Giving Things Up

He won't give up the bottle • She's four and she still needs her "passy" • He can't go anywhere without his teddy (but the preschool he'll be attending says he has to leave it at home) • She's addicted to television

Chapter Five - Getting Them Out of Diapers

He doesn't *want* to be a "big boy" • She's scared of the toilet noise • She doesn't seem to mind being wet or poopy • He's closing in on *five* and we're still not getting anywhere • She's been out of diapers for half a year but still has lots of accidents

Chapter Six - The Trouble with Travel

She always wants to be carried • She hates her carseat • Vacations are miserable because she can't stand being anywhere but home • The flight lasts seven hours—how will we survive?

Chapter Seven - Clothing Wars and Other Battles over Appearances

It's below zero out there and he won't put on a jacket • She only wants to wear one dress (which is now three sizes too small for her) • I feel like his valet (he won't even *try* to learn to dress himself) • She won't take a bath • He has to be dragged into the

barber's every time he needs a haircut • Whenever I brush her hair she acts like I'm running a torture chamber

Chapter Eight - Why Can't You Behave?

He has tantrums (especially in public places) • She bites! • The other parents don't want him in the sandbox because he grabs all the toys • My two boys are always fighting • My child delights in pulling the cat's tail • Her normal tone of voice is a whine • He's learned how to lie, and he's proud of it • She says just what's on her mind, including, "You're ugly!" • He's already learned all the four-letter words—and he uses them

Chapter Nine - Errands and Outings

Grocery shopping with my child always takes twice as long and costs half again as much • Shoe shopping (or clothes shopping) is impossible when she comes along • She hates birthday parties—unless it's her own • He's a terror at restaurants • Our childless friends have lots of antiques and no toddler-proofing—will we ever be able to visit them?

Chapter Ten - For Health and Safety's Sake

I can't get her to take her medicine, no matter what I do • He hides under the bed when it's time to see the doctor • I'd like to bandage her boo-boo's but she won't let me get

near them • I keep thinking I've toddler-proofed the house, but my little Houdini has managed to break any lock and get around any barrier • Walkers, jumpers, and swings: Should we or shouldn't we?

Chapter Eleven - Maintaining Parental Sanity

With three children five and under, will I ever have peace and quiet? • Can we (should we) travel without our small children? • It's been raining all week and we're running out of things to do • I'm so sick of "The Farmer in the Dell" tape I could scream! Isn't there any music that both kids and adults will like?

Resource Guide

Index

MANUSCRIPT DETAILS

Manuscript length:	60,000 to 80,000 words
Features:	Sidebars, checklists, boxed tips, parents' true stories
Illustrations:	5-10 line drawings, to show what a product looks like or how to do a particular maneuver, such as "the flip" (a simple method for teaching a toddler to put on a coat without adult assistance)
Time to completion:	Eight months

SAMPLE MATERIAL

Tracy, my three-and-a-half-year-old, won't walk along with me when I take my six-month-old baby out in the stroller. After only a few blocks she starts whining that she is tired and wants to be carried. I'd buy a double stroller, but I think she'd only outgrow it in a few months. Any suggestions?

The first thing to try is asking Tracy to help you push the stroller. Having a job to do will make her feel important and bring her some positive attention for her contribution to the stroll (which, she should quickly discover, is far better than the type of attention she can get for whining and obstructing the effort to get where you're going). The key words here are “*help push.*” Don't let her take over the pushing entirely or you will be worse off than you were before. Putting a three-year-old in complete charge of a stroller will result in a walk that is painfully slow or convoluted or hazardous—or all three. If she discovers that you are steadying the stroller or giving it some forward momentum, and she starts crying that she wants to push all by herself, be firm: For safety's sake a grown-up should always keep a guiding hand somewhere on the stroller.

Now let's say you try the “*help push*” strategy and it works—for all of three or four blocks. What do you do later, when the thrill of being the stroller-pusher has worn off, and you've still got ten blocks to go? Try making your child the navigator. If you think she knows the way home (or the way to the supermarket, or the playground or whatever your destination may be), let her tell you how to go. If she's about to turn left

when she should turn right, gently offer a course correction: “Try going the other direction ... yes, that way.”

It also may help to involve her in the question of distance. Before she has a chance to start whining about how long the walk has been or how tired she’s become, have her guess how many more blocks there are to go. Instead of telling her the answer (assuming you know, that is), have her count off each block as you pass it. Or have her look out for certain landmarks that you know you will see along the way. Animal sightings are particularly good for keeping up a three-year-old’s interest: She can keep an eye out for a neighbor’s cat that can usually be found sunning itself in a certain spot, or look for the tree that has a squirrel’s nest inside a hollowed out part of the trunk, or when passing a yard with a flower garden, stop to look for butterflies or check whether the flowers have a fragrance. Your walk may take longer than if you had not allowed these mini-stops and explorations along the way, but then again, maybe not, since it is also time-consuming to have a child stopping every few steps, whining to be picked up.

On the other hand, some walks are simply too long for some children’s little legs. If, after everything you can think of to make the walk enjoyable, your three year old is still giving out and balking midway through one of your longer excursions, then it’s time to find another means of getting there. It may be worth your while to buy a pedometer and measure just how far you can go before your child starts complaining. Then drive, or take the bus, subway, or taxi, for all distances beyond your child’s usual level of endurance.

Last (and maybe best) suggestion: Go ahead and buy that double stroller. You may be able to get a cheap one at a yard sale, which, while it may be outgrown within six months, may still make those six months much easier on all of you. Or you may want to buy a double stroller specifically designed to carry an older child and a baby. The “Sit’n’Stand” stroller features a platform in the back for the older child to stand on, making it no wider than a single stroller, and only slightly longer. If you can’t find the “Sit’n’Stand” in a baby products store, you can order one through one of the big baby product catalogs, such as The Right Start or One Step Ahead (see Resource Guide at the back of this book for toll-free numbers).

After every meal my kitchen looks like a splatter painting by some Expressionist artist. Is there any way to get a toddler to eat more neatly?

The short answer is no. The long answer is yes, you should start working now on teaching simple concepts like “Food goes in your mouth, not on the floor” and “That’s applesauce, not fingerprint”—but don’t start expecting these lessons to sink in for at least another year or two. Sometime before the start of kindergarten your child will learn to make the majority of whatever’s on the plate end up inside her stomach (as opposed to, say, in her hair.)

In the meantime, however, you need to make things easier on yourself in terms of clean-up. The following are some ideas designed to shorten the amount of time you spend mopping, wiping up, and otherwise capturing bits of toddler meals that somehow went astray.

First, protect your floor. Some like to put down a plastic protective mat; others say, “What’s the point, since you just have to clean the mat each time?” One trick we’ve seen for quick and easy clean-ups is the use of a round, plastic wading pool. Place the high-chair in the middle and let it catch everything that falls. At the end of the day, if it’s really grungy, just take it outside and hose it off. Otherwise, you can give it a quick sweeping-out with a broom or a hand-held cordless vacuum, or simply shake out all the debris over a large trash can.

Next, try reducing the “drop zone”—the amount of free space surrounding the eating surface within your toddler’s reach. One way to accomplish this is to have the

child eat right at the table, instead of in a high-chair. Place the child on a booster (one that has a secure seat belt) on top of one of your regular dining or kitchen chairs and pull that chair up as tight to the table as it will go. Use a wipe-clean vinyl tablecloth on the table, or use an extra-large plastic placemat. Not only will you reduce the gap between your child and the eating surface, but you will also have your child seated more like the other members of the family, and that should help your child to learn to copy others as they enjoy their meal together. Children set apart in their high chairs are more apt to become bored with their meals and start playing with their food as a way to amuse themselves.

Coupled with this strategy, you will also want to release your child from the booster (or high chair) as soon as the child's interest in eating appears to be waning. Most toddlers have very short attention spans, as well as limited-capacity stomachs. When they stop being interested in opening their mouths to let food in and start looking around for other places to put it, take that as a sign that the mealtime is over for them, and let them go on to something else. If the rest of your family is still eating, a playpen stocked with toys may provide the toddler with safe entertainment for the next ten or fifteen minutes. With small children, parents almost never get a chance to linger pleasantly at the table. For active toddlers who are not the playpen-accepting type, the best thing is usually to let the toddler have a nearby, gated-off, baby-safe area to run around in (an adjacent family room, if you have one, or perhaps just a part of the kitchen fenced off with a removable pressure-mounted barrier), while the rest of you finish off your meal in a relatively civilized fashion.

For those who, for scheduling convenience, prefer to feed the toddler separately, it's useful to have a high chair with a super-sized, close-fitting tray. You may not want to bother to use plates or utensils at all. Just cut all food into toddler-sized bits and put it directly on the tray for your child to self-feed. You'll save yourself countless hours that would otherwise be spent holding the fork up, saying inane things like "Open wiiiide, and let the melons come inside." With all foods made graspable, your child will eat what he wants and ignore what he wouldn't eat anyway. (For parents who are afraid that their child won't be getting enough nutrition, given so much freedom, be sure to read the question and answer about picky eaters immediately following.) Once you realize that your child isn't eating something you've put out, you can whisk it away before your child gets the idea to make it disappear to the floor, or find out what it would look like if flung against the kitchen wall.

Now for what *never* works: Those suction-to-the-tray plates and bowls you can buy at baby-product stores. We had them in many different makes and models when our two girls were at the high-chair stage of dining. We never found one that a determined toddler of average strength could not dislodge within twenty seconds. Perhaps if you used Krazy Glue[®] to bond them to the tray-top, they'd stay ... but then you'd have a clean-up problem of a different sort.

Another thing you mustn't count on to prevent messes is the bib. Do food spills *ever* go right where the bib is? There are basically two ways of dealing with the food-on-the-clothing problem, and they're complete opposites. One is the Don't-Worry-Be-Happy approach. Just buy cheap, easily washable clothing, and try to wash out what

washes out, and put up with the stains that don't. With most brightly patterned prints, no one will ever notice. The other way is Total Prevention. Have your child wear a terrycloth beach cover-up or a painter's smock during meals. Or throw an adult-sized T-shirt over your child. You may want to clip it at the back with a large alligator clip (the kind you use to clip an eighty-page report together) to make it tighter-fitting around the neck. Or you can try to find one of those super-sized bibs that cover the whole front. One mom we know used to cut a head-sized hole in her old towels and drape them over her messy eater before each meal.

Even with all these efforts and more, however, eating with the average two-year-old is never going to be an experience in fine dining. In our fantasies of a perfect world we'd like to see a national restaurant franchise that would promise to take the mess out of feeding your toddler for once and for all. It would go like this: You take the family out to this specially-designed restaurant that is divided into two sections, one for those members of the family who can appreciate fine cuisine served on tables nicely set with tablecloths and china, the other where everything is plastic and disposable and the menu is just pizza, chicken nuggets, spaghetti, and rice crackers. On the messy-eater side the waiters and waitresses all double as babysitters, bottle-holders and spoon-feeders; on the fine dining side they're trained in elegant, European-style service. There is a partition in between the two sides of the restaurant made of one-way mirrored glass (so that the adults can see in, but the kids can't see out), and the kids' side is totally soundproofed. When the kids are done on their side, they're ushered out into a cleaning-off area, where they're hosed down rather like cars passing through a carwash, and then on to the blow-

drying, hair-combing, and clothes-straightening room, after which they may enter the waiting room to be picked up by their parents and taken home—all well fed, neat, and happy—parents and children alike.