

Preschoolers behaving badly? It's completely normal, says clinical counsellor

Don't force naughty tots to say 'I'm sorry', and other tips from a clinical counsellor's new book on parenting

By Gavin Fisher, [CBC News](#) Posted: May 04, 2016 7:41 PM PT Last Updated: May 04, 2016 7:41 PM PT

Toddlers have a reputation for temper tantrums and other trying behaviour — but the reason parents get frustrated is because they believe their children should be able to behave a certain way that, in fact, they really aren't capable of doing.

That's according to Deborah MacNamara, a clinical counsellor in Vancouver and the author of the new book *Rest, Play, Grow: Making Sense of Preschoolers (Or Anyone Who Acts Like One)*.

"If we first assume that a child should behave better, because we assume that there's maturity there, we're going to have problems with our expectations," MacNamara told guest host Jason Proctor on [B.C. Almanac](#).

"Do we make room for immaturity? They don't move as fast as us. They don't multitask. A lot of times our perceptions about how they should behave is what frustrates us."

MacNamara is on Faculty at the Neufeld Institute and presents, teaches, and writes on all facets of child and adolescent development based on the relational-developmental approach of Vancouver-based psychologist and author Gordon Neufeld.

Preschoolers' brains are still developing

MacNamara said parents need to understand that toddlers are "nothing like us, in terms of their brain."

"It takes five to seven years to develop a brain that should resemble ours, so as a result we have a period of maturity that extends for at least five years, and so we look at them through our adult psychology and we try to make sense of them this way, but they're not like us."

Rather than thinking of parenting as a set of skills, instructions or discipline techniques, MacNamara said parents need to give their children the space to develop and mature.

She said parents should expect that they will see "the most immature behaviour out of them, that they are impulsive, they are egocentric, getting along is overrated for them, [and] it's all about them at this age."

"It's not a deficit in them. It's actually what is required for strong development," she said.

Importance of building relationships

MacNamara said that rather than forcing children to say "I'm sorry" or using discipline techniques such as time-outs, she said parents should focus on building relationships with their child.

Discipline is what we do with the chaos from immaturity, but we have gotten to thinking that this is what grows them up, and so then we never focus on what they need to grow," she said.

"They grow when they're at rest in their relationships and they grow when they're at play.

"They don't grow when you discipline them."

She said parents can't force children to feel remorse and apologize after they've done something wrong because they only have one emotion at a time.

"Consequences actually don't work for preschoolers, and the reason they don't work is they don't think twice. It's not like when they're sitting there about to throw a train at your head they say, 'Hmm, maybe I should think about this. Maybe I should use my words. Instead, they just throw the train.'"

"Your moments of growth with a child are when you provide relational rest. It's when you go back at night and say, 'You were frustrated. You threw a train at your brother. What was going on? Why were you frustrated? Can you tell me about that? Could you say your words next time?'"

With files from CBC's [B.C. Almanac](#)

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