

Copycat Kids

Your toddler imitates everything he sees and hears. Catch him before he picks up any bad habits.

BY KATHLEEN M. REILLY

Two-year-old Barrett McCain was sitting on his mother's lap, about to play on a children's Website. "The home page was taking a while to load," says his mom, Honor. "Suddenly, he grabbed the mouse, wiggled it around, and shouted, 'Come on! Come on! COME ON!' It was a perfect Mommy impression."

Think your kid isn't paying attention or is much too young to pick up on other people's habits and mannerisms? Think again. "Toddlers are amazing observers—they watch and hear everything," says Richard Marotta, Ph.D., the headmaster at Garden School, in Jackson Heights, New York. "And if they find something intriguing, they'll copy it. It's how they learn language and behavior." No one's exempt from a child's watchful eyes. He'll imitate friends, store clerks, cartoon television characters—and, of course, you.

Sure, you can use his tendency to imitate as a tool to teach some good habits, but there's also the flip side. So how do you make sure your toddler doesn't copy the wrong behavior? Follow these tips on managing the most common slipups.

TODDLER SEES You yell at your sister over the phone.

TODDLER DOES She screams when a friend takes her toy.

FAST FIX Okay, it happens: You messed up and lost your cool in front of your kid. When you catch her following your lead, point out your own lapse and how you fixed it. Tell her, "I know that Mommy lost her temper and you heard me yelling at Aunt Laurie. But I was wrong, so I called her back and told her I was sorry." Then ask her to apologize to her friend.

LONG-TERM SOLUTION Teach your child ways to deal with frustration by modeling self-control. "Whenever you find yourself about to blow, say out loud, 'I'm going to take a deep breath and



Why not teach your little mimic to parrot good behavior?

then use a gentle voice," says Eileen Kennedy-Moore, Ph.D., author of *What About Me? 12 Ways to Get Your Parents' Attention Without Hitting Your Sister*. You can count to ten or ask your child to do something calming with you ("Let's turn on some music and dance so I can simmer down"). And when you notice that she's about to lose her temper, say, "Hey, sounds like you need a break. Let's go out for a walk."

TODDLER SEES Two cartoon critters battling it out.

TODDLER DOES He bops his brother on the head.

THE FAST FIX Try not to react with anger, but make it clear that hitting is never okay. Tell him, "Hitting hurts. The cats on TV aren't upset because they're not real, but your brother is crying." Then try to figure out why he hit, and teach him to use words instead—"I'm mad," "Please move," or "Let's play."

LONG-TERM SOLUTION Limit television time. When young kids witness a lot of aggression, even between cartoon characters, you can bet they'll be doing more smacking. In addition, during playtime show your child how to take turns and share, and point out how happy it makes his brother feel. It takes time for a toddler to learn social skills, but with gentle encouragement, yours will become a more compassionate kid.

